Distinguishing Between Language Difference and Language Deficit for English Language Learners

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1. Fundamental Issue: Separating language difference from language impairment (LI)

2. Characteristics of LI
   
   reduced underlying language ability
   
   slowed rate of language learning
   
   reduced pre-literacy and literacy skills
   
   reduced ability to tell stories
   
   increased variability

3. Step one: Identify students who are experiencing educational difficulties. This involves a descriptive analysis: Is the child an effective communicator in the context of interest?

Potential language/literacy problems:

   difficulty producing language
   
   difficulty formulating sentences
   
   making grammatical errors
   
   difficulty following instruction
   
   difficulty answering questions
   
   difficulty with literacy tasks
   
   limited vocabulary, both in comprehension and production
Potential socioemotional problems:

may be distractible
may be reticent
may be socially isolated
may occasionally disruptive

4. Step two: Why is the student having problems?

Possibilities:
second language acquisition (not enough exposure, etc.)
cultural/environmental
language impairment
some mixture of the above

5. Explanatory clues

Was the child assessed in the stronger language?

Does the child do better in one language than the other?

Is the child’s performance explained by processes typical of second language learning?

Is rate of acquisition appropriate?

How does the child interact during testing or while being interviewed?

How does the child interact with peers?

Does the child have sufficient exposure to English?

Is there any evidence of cross-cultural interference or related cultural phenomena?

Does the child perform inconsistently in different contexts?

Does the child perform inconsistently with different persons?
Selected References


