

EDSP 250 CONTEXT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION
Spring 2009
Language Development, Differences, and Disabilities

Case Study #3: English Language Learners and Learning Disabilities

The third case study focuses on the challenge of determining whether a student's learning differences are based on being an English Language Learner or if a specific learning disability is present. Cases such as this make us think about the limits of labeling as well as being sure that students are provided with the help that they need.

This case study is based on an action research project by Sharon and Alexis Schoen. As you read the case study, complete the four sections of the analysis of Andy who is a 10 year old boy from Korea. You may use the ideas that the authors used as well as add your own strategies for intervention. Use the information from the following sources for additional ideas:

- Handout: Schema on for Understanding ELL & LD
- NY Times article, Where Education and Assimilation Collide by Ginger Thompson
- Webinar – ELL and LD
- Educational Leadership article – Linked to Prior Learning by Yu Ren Dong

Complete the four sections of the analysis as preparation for holding a Child Study Meeting. Then write notes for a script for your child study meeting using the guidelines attached. We will be using the format that we used earlier in the semester

I. Developmental Analysis

This section demonstrates your ability to distinguish between receptive and expressive language as well as the components of language including the form (phonology, morphology, syntax), the meaning (semantics), the function (pragmatics), and the fluency (discourse). Your analysis should show that you understand the distinction between speech articulation and other more complex language differences.

Phonology (receptive and expressive)

Phonology is the study of sounds in language. Individual sounds within language are called phonemes, of which there are forty-four within the English language. Receptive language related to phonology involves being able to distinguish between different sounds and also being able to comprehend the combined sounds as whole words. Expressive language related to phonology involves the ability to articulate words and sounds together to communicate effectively. According to this case study, Andy is a 10-year old fourth grader from Korea who struggles with phonics in the English language. When writing, he frequently misspells words and seemingly does so because he does not understand the true pronunciation of the word. For example, Andy wrote in one of his writing samples, "She pok the hos," meaning to say, "She poked the holes." Clearly, Andy is having difficulty distinguishing letter sounds when writing, however, the case study says that his pronunciation is much better when reading. This means Andy has much better receptive skills than expressive skill when it comes to phonology.

Morphology (receptive and expressive)

Morphology is the study of morphemes, or word parts, that make up a whole word. A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning within a language-sometimes one syllable words- that can change the meaning or tense of a word when added or taken away. Morphology is utilized in the understanding of tenses, suffixes, prefixes, plurals, and compound words. It is common for English-language learners to have difficulty with morphology because of the differences between English and their first language. For Andy, his trouble with spelling can be attributed to the fact that, in the Korean language, there are no plurals and no subject-verb agreement. This difference between the two languages is bound to cause confusion when writing and most likely gets in the way of Andy's comprehension at times.

Syntax (receptive and expressive)

Syntax involves grammar and word order within sentences. Without proper understanding of syntax, students may have difficulties with receptive language because they might not understand why something is worded a certain way. On the other hand, students may have difficulties with expressive language because they have not yet grasped the rules of grammar in their writing or speech. Students who are learning English as a second language specifically encounter obstacles when it comes to syntax because they are learning a language with grammatical rules that may be entirely different from those of their native language. In Andy's case, he tends to write using incorrect word order so that the sentence does not make sense grammatically. In addition, the Korean language does not contain any pronouns, which causes confusion for Andy when writing and speaking in English.

Semantics (receptive and expressive)

Semantics is vocabulary, or word meaning. According to this case study, Andy does not have a significant amount of trouble understanding the content of what he is being taught but has great difficulty expressing himself through writing. When writing and speaking in the classroom, Andy exhibits poor vocabulary skills and poor sight word skills, which means he has a great deal of trouble naming or labeling things. This shows that Andy's receptive language skills regarding semantics are much stronger than his expressive language skills. The case study also mentions that Andy has a tendency to lose focus at times during a lesson. It is possible that this can happen at times because he is confused by word meanings in what he is listening to.

Pragmatics (receptive and expressive)

Pragmatics is the purpose, goal, and intent of communication. Pragmatics regarding expressive language entails asking questions, expressing wants and needs, using persuasion, and teaching information. Andy may have a completely different manner of asking questions and making requests in his native language from the way he would need to using the English language. Also, social relationships in his native culture are likely to be completely different so that mannerisms and habits regarding communication are likely to be different and hard to get used to for students like Andy.

On the other hand, pragmatics regarding receptive language involves understanding what sort of answers questions are looking for, learning new information, and being able to make connections between information. It is important to take into account that the culture Andy was born into and the culture in his family life may be very different to that of the school environment. The manner by

which individuals are addressed or questions are asked can be very different across languages. Similarly, the wording of questions and requests can also be completely different across languages.

Discourse & Fluency (receptive and expressive)

Discourse involves the way in which sentences are organized into paragraphs, stories, ideas, and other bodies of written information. According to this case study, Andy's expressive language skills involving discourse are very poor. The article describes his writing skills as expressed in writing samples as very poor and confusing. This difficulty reflects Andy's problems with semantics, syntax, and morphology. Fluency involves the ability to effectively express and communicate ideas and information verbally to others. In the classroom, Andy tends to avoid answering questions in front of the rest of the class and often asks for questions to be repeated. This shows that Andy struggles with expressive language skills and receptive language skills in the area of fluency.

II. Cultural or Experiential Factors

The impact of cultural or experiential factors can be complex and subject to personal bias and interpretation. The section emphasizes the importance of posing questions and hypotheses that lead you to culturally sensitive responses as an instructional planner.

It is a teacher's responsibility to make sure that the classroom environment is safe and conducive to learning for all students. Every student in this classroom walks through the door with different cultural backgrounds, experiences, abilities, and prior knowledge that all can have a large impact on their learning. There is a decent chance for all teachers that they may have at least one student in their classroom learning English as a second language which poses an additional challenge for both the student and teacher. When a teacher has such a student in his or her classroom, it is necessary that the student's previous level of schooling, parents' English-speaking skills, and socioeconomic status are all taken into account. In many cases, a child having difficulty with the English language is placed into special education but this action is not always the right one. It is extremely important for teachers to pay close attention to the student's abilities and strengths. Some students learning English as a second language come from families who have knowledge of the English language and resources available to the child, while others do not. Teachers need to take this into consideration but not make any assumptions based on the child or family.

III. Impact on Learning

Learning differences or disabilities in receptive and expressive language can impact academic and social/emotional development. In this section, you should make inferences based on your readings of the texts and journal articles. Academic areas can include reading, writing, mathematics, or other language based subject areas. Social/emotional development can include interactions with peers, teachers, and family members. It can also impact the ability of a student with exceptional learning needs to express one's needs and feelings and thus influence his/her behavior.

When a child has a learning disability and/or is learning English as a second language, his or her education in all classrooms as well as social and emotional development can be adversely affected. The level of language acquisition that the child is at has an effect of the child's ability to understand and express information within the classroom. All courses that are the most language-based pose the biggest threat to the success of the student but other courses such as mathematics can be a challenge as well. Although the student will be able to understand the numbers, he or she will

possibly have trouble with the names of procedures as well as terms in topics like geometry. Socially, students can become shy and embarrassed because of their difficulties speaking or writing clearly. This can cause the students to keep quiet in class instead of participating and can also cause them to have trouble developing social relationships with peers and also the teacher. Emotionally, students having difficulty with the language barrier are likely to be very frustrated and impatient which can lead to the student having tantrums in the classroom. When a student is having a substantial amount of trouble, their motivation can be severely decreased and a cycle may be started.

IV. Strategies for Intervention

In this section, you should specify strategies that teachers, other professionals, paraprofessionals, and family members can use to strengthen language development through direct instruction or support the student through the use of accommodations/ modifications that can enhance language abilities.

There are strategies that teachers and other professionals can utilize within the classroom and also strategies that families can use to support a child who is learning English as a second language. When a teacher learns that he or she is going to have a student who is learning English, it would be helpful to research the native language and culture of the student so that a better understanding can be reached of the student's behavior, habits, or potential difficulties. Students who are learning the language will be likely to need time to process questions and formulate oral responses so it is important for teachers to allow them time to think. When a student supplies an answer but makes a mistake with the grammar, it can be helpful for the teacher to repeat the answer but with the corrections so that the student can hear or see what was said wrong. In the mathematics classroom, it can be extremely helpful for students if they are given a table or picture glossary that describes the meaning of certain terms with pictures and different languages, (Dong, 2009). It can also be helpful for teachers, tutors, or other professionals to frequently allow the student to work in pairs or groups so that he or she is able to practice listening to and speaking the language as much as possible.

At home, it can be a great help to the child if a language tutor is able to meet with him or her at least a couple of days per week to practice outside of the classroom setting, (Schoen, 2002). If possible, it would be very helpful for the student to practice using the language as much as he or she can with others or with an educational game or video. It could also help the child if he or she wrote in a journal in English that would be shared with only the teacher in which he or she can practice writing in English or can express concerns or questions about the class.

Format of Written Script of Child Study Meetings

- 1. The teacher shares the name of the student and the background information about the student's family. Remind the team that all the information is confidential and only those staff members who have a "need to know" should have this privileged information.**

- Andy, age 10, grade 4
- Lives with both parents
- Born of Korean decent, Korean is his first language
- Pulled out of first grade, placed into Kindergarten based on academic ability
- Based on testing, decided that Andy is likely to be moderately retarded
- Placed in life skills classroom where behavior problems increased
- Third grade, placed into learning support classroom for students with learning disabilities
- This information is confidential and is "need-to-know" only

- 2. The teacher describes the student's strengths, interests, and ways in which the student is "smart" so that the other teachers understand how best to find an entry point for the student's learning. The teacher shares cultural and experiential background that is relevant to the child's progress in the classroom.**

- Sense of humor, enjoys reading funny stories and telling jokes
- Favorite color is green
- Loves Disney channel, playing with LEGOS
- Very good receptive language skills
- Native language is Korean

- 3. The teacher describes the most important characteristics of the student's exceptional learning needs at this time.**

- Needs questions to be repeated
- Labeled moderately retarded, then learning-disabled (trouble with identification)
- Trouble with vocabulary, word order, grammar, and verbal fluency
- Largest problem is with expressing thoughts through writing

- 4. The teacher describes the impact of the learning difference on learning in the general curriculum.**

- Drifts off, loses focus (needs eye contact, physical activity to maintain focus)
- Hesitation in answering questions verbally
- Trouble writing clearly which causes problems in all classes
- Placement changes at younger ages may have effects still
- Sight word identification is poorly developed

- 5. The teacher shares research *4-5 strategies* based on research that teachers can use in their classrooms to enhance the learning of the student and include the student in the general curriculum. Include two more ideas on ideas that the teacher might suggest that the family uses at home (seven all together).**
 - Supply Andy with visuals during lessons (somehow incorporate humor and color green)
 - Allow Andy time to silently reflect before verbally answering questions
 - Incorporate physical activity into lessons so that Andy's attention is maintained
 - Allow Andy to work in groups and pairs often to practice the language
 - Give Andy's parents the opportunity to hire a language tutor
 - Suggest that Andy keep a journal at home that can be used to communicate with teacher
- 6. The teacher invites discussion from other team members and ensures that everyone participates in the discussion. [We will role play this in class.]**
- 7. The teacher summarizes the decisions, concludes the meeting, and thanks everyone for participating. [We will role play this part in class.]**