Identifying Special Education Needs in ESOL Students:  
Is it a Language Issue or a Disability?  
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Abstract  
Why do some English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students advance through their ESOL studies at a much slower rate than their peers?  This action research study investigates special education needs as a possible answer to this question.  Background information on special education identification, the screening process, and eligibility criteria was gathered from school-based personnel, specialists in the field of special education, and literature sources.  Data was collected from classroom observations, teacher narratives, and questionnaires completed by school personnel and students.  Suggestions for properly identifying and addressing the needs of ESOL/special education students are presented through five case studies.

Introduction  
There are certain students that have made me think to myself, “There’s something going on with this kid.”  During my three years teaching ESOL in public high school, I have had some exceptional students that made me question whether or not other services (such as special education) would be helpful.  Writing detentions, referrals, and disciplinary measures were ineffective.  Learning seemed difficult for them, but not their peers.  Their grades were poor to failing, and sometimes they repeated ESOL instructional levels.  Often their other teachers, including general education, had similar observations of these students and faced the same frustrations.  Based on my interactions with these exceptional students, I decided to pursue this study of identifying special education needs in ESOL students.

Student History  
Student M, a native Spanish-speaker, began public high school as an “LA” A1 proficiency level student with little formal education in his native country and semi-literate in Spanish.  According to the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) High School Department Chair Handbook, the LA proficiency level stands for “literacy level” and designates “beginning ESOL students who have little or interrupted formal schooling before arriving in FCPS.  They need intensive English instruction, particularly instruction that addresses the basic concepts, background knowledge, and language needed to participate in the general education program (FCPS Department of Instructional Services, 2003).”  His lack of prior education would seem to explain some of Student M’s lack of academic progress and limited English, but it did not explain his irregular behaviors.  He was exceptional because he was unable to pick up on non-verbal cues, school norms and socially appropriate behaviors, but his progress in school actually
deteriorated during the course of the school year. His parent and previous school records indicated that he had never advanced beyond the fourth grade in his native country. He was referred for special education screening, but was found ineligible for services. Student M eventually landed in disciplinary trouble within his first year of public school and was permanently enrolled in an alternative placement and was unsuccessful in that environment as well. His current status is unknown.

Student F, a native Spanish-speaker, began public high school education as an A1 proficiency level student. His lack of academic progress after three years in public school resulted in his repeating of the A1 level twice and his future repetition of A2. His first year in public high school, he was informally labeled “LA” to alert teachers that his progress might be slow and he would probably have problems with reading, writing and other learning skills. Besides having poor grades, Student F would “zone out” during class and was easily distracted by his peers. He had difficulty working independently, copied all assignments from other students, and rarely turned in homework. Student F’s penmanship was so poor he had difficulty reading his own writing. His oral communication improved over the three years, as well as his reading scores on the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) exam used to assess ESOL students in Fairfax County. His parent informed the school that Student F had experienced some emotional traumas in his native country. Student F was referred for special education screening every year of his enrollment, but was found ineligible for services by a close margin. However, a 504 plan was created to provide him with some accommodations in the ESOL and general education classroom. It was also recommended to his parent to have him tested by a physician for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). It would be possible for Student F to receive special education services under the Other Health Impaired (OHI) criteria if diagnosed ADD by his physician. This would give him access to the Work Awareness and Transition (WAT) program where he would receive hands on instruction and job skills. The parent has not followed through with this recommendation at this time.

Student P, a native Spanish-speaker, was an A1 proficiency level student with approximately six months of prior public secondary school instruction. His behavior was an issue immediately. Student P was chronically tardy, disruptive, unable to sit still, and very needy for attention. His grades were poor, but his teachers did not believe this reflected his ability. He rarely turned in homework, and he lacked the focus needed to complete written work thoroughly. Student P was competitive in the classroom and was quick to answer questions orally. Unfortunately, his impulsive and disruptive behaviors led to disciplinary action and an alternative placement for part of the school year. His parent revealed that Student P had similar discipline problems in his home country. (An interesting note is that he received high marks in all his classes while in the alternative placement.) It was recommended to the parent that he be tested by a physician for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and to see a therapist for emotional disorders. He is receiving counseling and will advance to the A2 proficiency level of ESOL next school year.
Student C, from a French-speaking country, was an LA A2 proficiency level student, with three years of prior ESOL instruction in public secondary school and one year of public elementary school. His behavior was an issue and he lacked academic progress after four years of ESOL instruction. Student C had poor reading comprehension skills and showed no progress on the DRP exam unless it was read aloud to him. He did have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for special education services for speech and language (SL) due to a childhood physical disability, and he was pulled out weekly for services. Even with SL services, Student C failed classes, was disruptive in class, and seemed to be in denial about his language abilities because he was very oral. He rarely completed homework and copied other students' work in class. Student C was referred for special education screening and found eligible for services under the learning disability (LD) and speech and language (SL) criteria. He was removed from the ESOL program and became successful in the special education program. Student C is proud of his success in the Work Awareness and Transition (WAT) program and was offered a summer job opportunity through WAT. Although he plans to graduate high school, Student C’s teachers have recommended more vocational training.

Student J was an American-born student raised in a Spanish-speaking household, and therefore qualified for ESOL services in a public elementary school. He continued to receive ESOL services throughout his public school experience, his teachers noted his lack of progress, and his behavior was an issue. Student J was an A3 proficiency level student in high school and was very oral, but had difficulty with reading comprehension and paying attention. He was oral in Spanish class as well, but had problems with reading and writing. Student J was referred for special education screening and was found eligible for services under the OHI criteria because his physician diagnosed him with ADHD. He was withdrawn from the ESOL program and is in self-contained special education classes including developmental reading. Student J admits to greater success in English class, but still has difficulty with mathematics. He plans to graduate high school in the future and his teachers recommend more practice with written communication and job skills.

Research

According to the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA ‘97), students are not eligible for services if their learning problems are primarily the result of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. Evaluation and placement procedures must be nondiscriminatory, and they must be conducted in the child's native language, unless it is clearly not feasible to do so (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p.13-14). This helps to ensure that students from diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds are not represented disproportionately in some special education programs (NABE & ILIAD, 2002, p.6).

There has been a history of over-representation of language minority students in special education. "English language learners, in particular, have been neglected in analyses of minority over-representation and school system
reforms (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2000).” Artiles, Rueda, et al. (2000) found that English language learners were over-represented at the state and district levels after they studied the 1998-1999 special education placement data for English language learners in several large school districts in southern California (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p.9). The most over-represented in programs for students with mental retardation, learning disabilities, and language and speech impairments were English language learners in secondary grades and those with limited language proficiency in the first and second language (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p.9).

The National Association for Bilingual Education’s (NABE) Self-Assessment Guide for Principals included data regarding the percentage of students ages 6-21 under IDEA in 1999-2000 compiled from the U.S. Department of Education. The data showed that Hispanic students had the greatest percentage of disability in hearing impairments, but were under-represented in the categories of mental retardation, autism, and developmental delay. Asian students were under-represented in most special education categories, and Black students were over-represented in the emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded categories (NABE & ILIAD, 2002, p.9-11).

The literature also addressed the problems with the evaluation process and assessment tools available. Ortiz et al. state, “The lack of appropriate assessment instruments and personnel qualified to assess English language learners exacerbates the problem of inappropriate referrals (1985).” Consequently, the data used for special education decisions cannot distinguish disabilities from linguistic and cultural differences (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p.16). In order to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education, “the limited English proficient (LEP) student should undergo psychological testing conducted by qualified bilingual/bicultural evaluators familiar with the influence of second language status on the assessment process (Nuttal, Languarnd & Goldman, 1984, p.3 ED).” Assessment results must be considered by individuals knowledgeable about the child, about assessment, and about placement alternatives (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1997, p.14)

There are two important concepts in using tests and assessments appropriately according to NABE’s Self-Assessment Guide for Principals. First, if the student is being evaluated in his or her native language, the tests or assessments should have been normed on students who are similar in language, culture, and background to the student being evaluated. Second, the manner in which the test is administered must be precise in order to produce accurate results (NABE & ILIAD, 2002, p.24). If these concepts are not followed, test results may be invalid.

Data Collection and Findings

Data was collected from a variety of sources. The progress of five students mentioned in the Student History was tracked by attending child study meetings, parent-teacher meetings, speaking with school-based personnel, and my observations as their teacher. Information was also gathered from questionnaires sent out at the end of the school year to the students’ teachers,
special education professionals. Two of the students were questioned directly. (See Appendix for questionnaires.)

The special education professionals surveyed did not notice an increase in ESOL students being referred for special education testing, and they estimated a lower percentage of ESOL students compared to general education students being referred for testing. The most common diagnosis for ESOL students referred for screening was learning disability (LD), but it was mentioned that each case is individual in nature, therefore difficult to predict which special education categories were most predominant for ESOL students. These professionals recommended that ESOL teachers gathered as much information as possible about the student prior to formal referrals such as, observations, academic experience in native country, and any interventions done in the classroom, in order to rule out language acquisition difficulties instead of special education needs.

In addition, I surveyed two A3 proficiency level ESOL classes were surveyed after being taught a lesson thought to help identify learning disabilities in ESOL students. I found the survey invalid for identifying learning disabilities for a variety of reasons. Some students did not understand the questions on the survey, and the time available for the lesson was different for the two classes. I also think it addressed learning styles more than learning disabilities. However, students were observed who presented learning difficulties in class, and they had difficulty with the crane-making lesson as well. They became lost and confused quickly, a few gave up, and a few relied on classmates to assist them.

Reflections

I became interested in this topic because out of frustration with some ESOL students’ classroom behavior and lack of academic progress. It seemed obvious that some of them exhibited learning disabilities or attention disorders. Yet, I was advised to take a “wait and see” approach to some of these cases. I decided that there must be a better way of handling these exceptional students. What I learned from this study, helped me understand the complexity of the issue, but also encouraged me to explore future solutions.

There are a multitude of reasons why an ESOL student may advance through their ESOL studies at a slower rate than their peers. Prior gaps in education, literacy in native language, time in new country, learning style, motivation, or special education needs are all reasons for slower progress. It is difficult to pinpoint special education needs in ESOL students for these reasons, and evaluation tools are not perfect (the screening methods and tests are typically normed on Caucasian, middle class American students even though they might be dual language assessments). The purpose of the case studies in the Student History was to demonstrate the variations of special education needs exhibited in my ESOL classroom and to present the variety of outcomes. It is important to uncover their special needs before students get into disciplinary trouble, lose all self-esteem, or drop out of school.
During action research study, a wealth of resources to assist in this particular area of interest was uncovered, most notably at a conference I attended on AD/HD Teen Success and a workshop on Diagnosing and Assisting The Learning Disabled ESL Student at the TESOL annual conference. The ESOL and Special Education Department Chairs were also valuable resources. They provided language-specific criteria and literature resources on this topic. Colleagues inside and outside of these departments also provided useful input. In fact, all of the resources available are too numerous to incorporate into one paper. Therefore, I listed in the useful resources instead of providing specific strategies on identifying, assessing, and teaching ESOL students with special education needs.

Implications
This action research study would benefit from continued observation of the students previously highlighted. It would also be helpful to communicate with other school systems on their approach to this population of students. Reforming the assessment tools used to identify special education needs in ESOL students would also be beneficial, including non-verbal tests. Possible improvements include a special education aide in the ESOL classroom, cross-training of special education and ESOL teachers, and making resources on this topic (literature and trained staff) more available.

Next year, I plan to apply the background information obtained by this study in my own classroom and to relay it to my colleagues. I will try to incorporate more learning and teaching strategies in my classroom to assist those students who present learning difficulties. I also connected with a special education professional who has agreed to observe my exceptional ESOL students next year and to provide assistance with strategies to use in my classroom. There is a staff resource teacher, a reading specialist, who has agreed to work with some of the LA students. I will also know what literature resources to tap including the CLiDES Handbook, the Pre-Referral Intervention Manual, the Special Education Handbook for FCPS, the Evaluation, Eligibility, and Placement Procedures for Special Education in FCPS, Practical Reading Strategies for ESOL Students with Learning Disabilities, and Teaching Teens with ADD and ADHD.

Most important, I am now aware of the myriad reasons some ESOL students may exhibit inappropriate behavior and/or limited language learning progress. I will continue to observe such students, incorporating teaching strategies for teaching students with learning disabilities in the classroom, document designed to help them, and promptly refer students that present truly special education needs.
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Appendices available upon request.