WIDA FOCUS ON

Identifying ELLs with Specific Learning Disabilities: Facts, Advice, and Resources for School Teams

In This Issue

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Introduction

Nationwide, the majority of English language learners (ELLs) who have been identified as having a disability are classified as having a language and literacy-related disability known as a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). What exactly are SLDs? As defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004, SLDs refer to a psychological processing disorder in understanding or using spoken or written language. Three of the most common (and often overlapping) SLDs are in the area of auditory processing, dyslexia, and dysgraphia (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2014).

How can school teams improve the accuracy of identification of ELLs for disabilities—especially for language and literacy-related disabilities?

IN THIS BULLETIN we provide practical advice and resources that educators can use to prepare for and conduct school team identification meetings.

Yet there are growing concerns around referrals for this category of disabilities. For several decades, researchers and practitioners in the U.S. have expressed deep concerns about the misidentification of ELLs for disabilities (Linan-Thompson, 2010; Sanchez, Parker, Akbayin, McTigue, 2010). More and more, the SLD category is being seen as one of the more subjective categories of disabilities, in particular for students from historically marginalized groups (Center for Public Education, 2009; Scott, Haeurwas, & Brown, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009).

Recent Rates for Identifying ELLs for Disabilities

In 2014, 1.2 million (or 11%) of students ages 6–21 who were identified as ELLs also were identified as having one of 13 federal categories of disabilities. This rate of identification is comparable to the 13% of the total number of public education students identified with disabilities that same year.

As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of ELLs with disabilities varies among states. When compared to the national average of 11%, several states in the Southwest (CA, NV, NM) appeared to over-identify ELLs for disabilities. In contrast, the majority of states appear to under-identify ELLs for disabilities (with identification rates of 8% or lower) (IDEA Data Center, 2015).

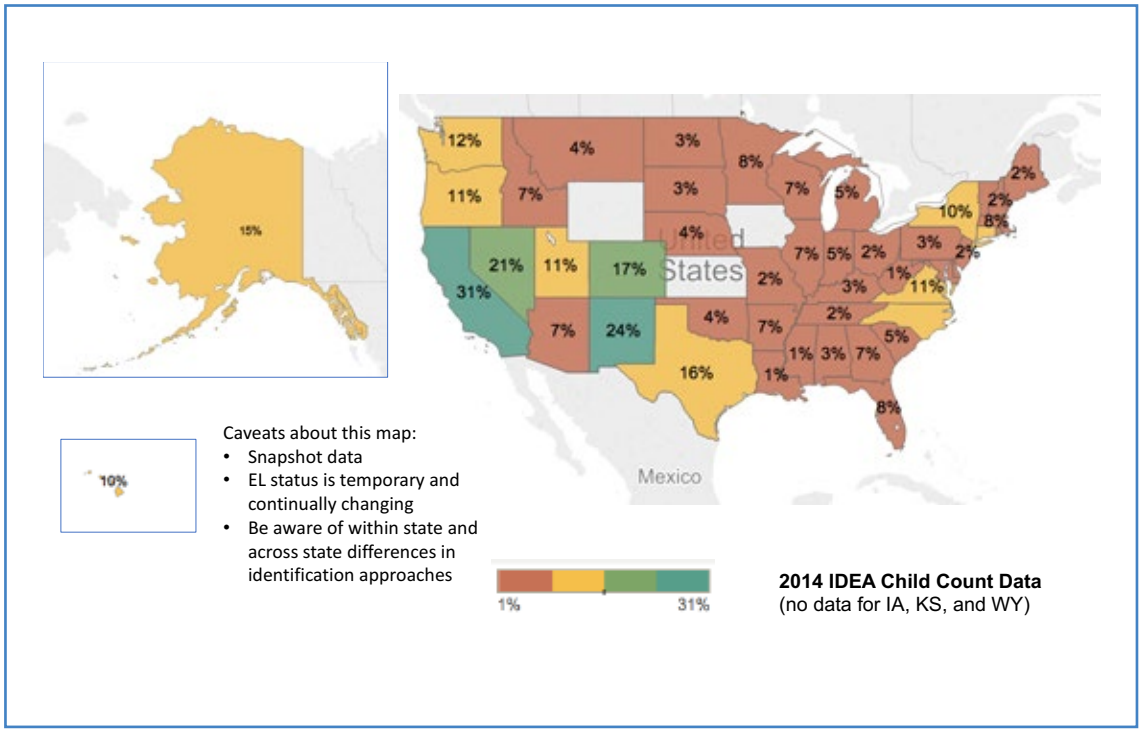


Figure 1. Snapshot of percentage of ELLs (by state) identified for disabilities in 2013–2014. No data for three states (IA, KS, and WY).

For most of the 13 categories of disabilities, ELL identification rates for 2013–2014 are roughly consistent with the rates for the general population of students. However the nationwide rate of identification of ELLs for SLDs (50%) is well above the rate for the general population of students identified as having SLD (39%) (IDEA Data Center, 2015).

In 2013–2014, the identification rates for ELLs with SLD in 33 states were far greater than the national average of 39% (see Figure 2). The highest rates of identification occurred in Nevada (71%) and Utah (65%). Only 14 states

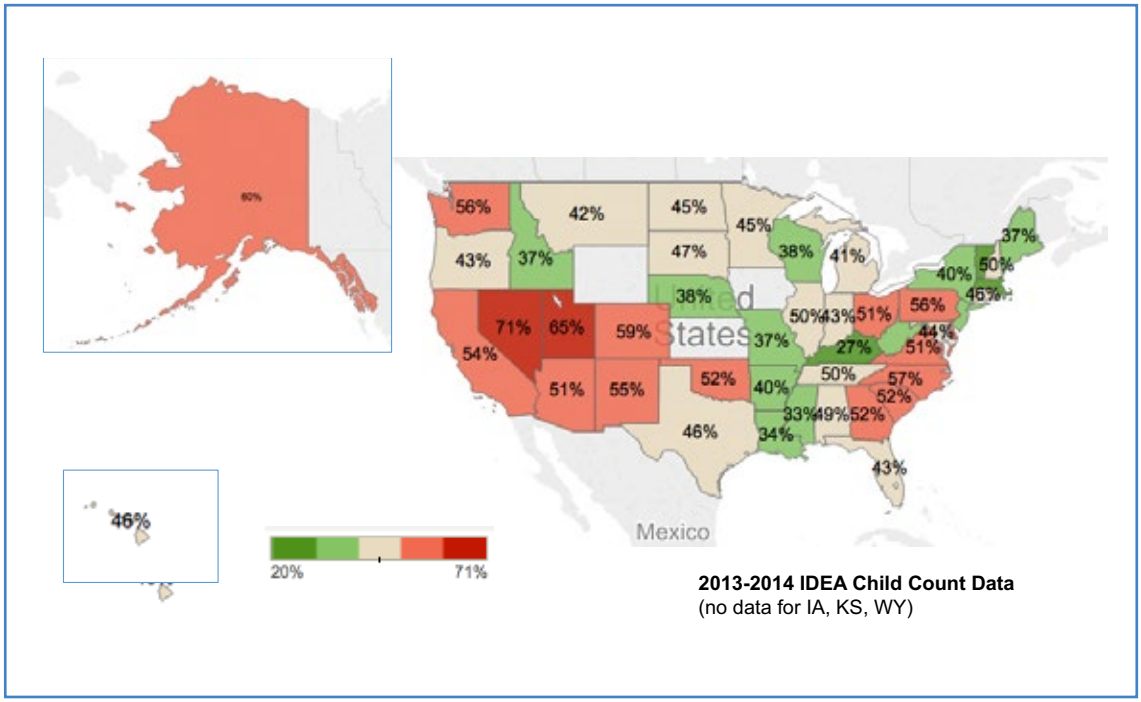


Figure 2. Snapshot of percentage of ELLs (by state) identified for Specific Learning Disabilities in 2013–2014.

identified 40% or fewer of their ELLs with disabilities as having SLD.

The wide range in identification rates across states may be due, in part, to different state policies and procedures designed to untangle whether students' language-related behaviors in the classroom are a reflection of typical trajectories of additional language acquisition or impacted by a language-based disability (Cobin, Templeton, Burner, 2011; Klingner & Artiles, 2006; Scott, Hauerwas, & Brown, 2013).

In a recent U.S. Commission on Civil Rights briefing report, Dr. Matthew Ladner indicated that it was more probable that 30% (rather than 39%) of students fit the category of SLD. He noted that, even among native English speakers, black and Hispanic students were often more likely to be classified as having SLD than their Asian and white counterparts (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009).

Misidentification of students for SLDs impacts a broad range of students from historically marginalized groups, because the cultural and linguistic resources they bring are framed as deficits rather than differences (Scott, Haeurwas, & Brown, 2013).

A NOTE ON THE IDENTIFICATION DATA PROVIDED IN THIS BULLETIN

For purposes of clarity, only one year of IDEA Child Count data from the 2013–2014 school year (IDEA, 2015) is presented in this bulletin. The snapshot of data is designed to provide a window into multi-year trends found within ELLs for disabilities identification data. Readers are reminded that the statewide data shown here are averages; ELLs with disabilities identification rates within a state may vary, with some districts within a state reporting higher identification rates and others reporting far lower rates.

Considerations for Improving School Team Processes

School teams can consider a variety of approaches as they reflect on how to best work with their ELLs.

- ✔ **Consider Environmental Factors First.** Even before developing a student profile, be sure to first consider the environment in which the student is situated. Consider whether the learning environment appropriately supports the student and his/her language needs.
- ✔ **Consider the Whole Child: Use Guiding Questions to Build a Body of Evidence.** Because every child is unique, use guiding questions to build a body of evidence around the whole child; avoid cookie-cutter checklists.
- ✔ **Consider Student Strengths During Meaningful Activities.** Build an assets-based student portrait (not just a student profile that focuses on gaps in performance); be sure to examine student language development performance during meaningful activities rather than only focusing on their use of isolated components of language. Connect with family to better understand student strengths and resources, especially during meetings.
- ✔ **Consider Student Progress in Relation to the Progress of Similar Peers.** Display and analyze student data to compare student progress in relation to their peers who are making typical progress over time; work with your district data office to develop these local, normed samples of "typical" peers.
- ✔ **Consider How to Intentionally Foster Successful Inter-Department Collaboration.** Don't underestimate the importance of having staff from both language development and disabilities backgrounds involved in school team meetings; set aside time to build these relationships over time.

Identification Toolkits for ELLs with Specific Learning Disabilities

Use these resources to gather more information about ELLs with SLDs

RTI-based SLD identification toolkit: Considerations for English language learners (Rinaldi, Ortiz, & Gamm, 2014)

Available at http://rtinetwork.org/getstarted/sld-identification-toolkit/ld-identification-toolkit-considerations-for-ell Provides information in the following five areas, and includes guidance for the instruction of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and for making valid decisions for determining special education eligibility:

1. Expertise/knowledge of team and informed parent participation
2. Effectiveness of Tier 1 core instruction
3. Effectiveness of Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions
4. Effectiveness of academic assessments and interpretation
5. Comparisons to populations and normative samples

Developing a culturally and linguistically responsive approach to response to instruction & intervention (RtI2) for English language learners: Connecting to WIDA standards, assessments, and other resources (WIDA, 2013)

Available at https://www.wida.us/get.aspx?id=601 Includes tools and resources to help states, districts, and schools address some of the unique needs of ELLs within a culturally and linguistically responsive RtI2 system. In particular, Part 3 examines how to use WIDA resources to screen, assess, and monitor the progress of ELLs' academic language development (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

English Learner Toolkit: Tools and Resources for Addressing English Learners with Disabilities
Available at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/english-learner-toolkit/chap6.pdf

This is the sixth chapter of the English Learner Toolkit, which is intended to help state and local education agencies meet their obligations to ELLs. One of the more popular components is Tool #2: Comparison of Language Differences vs. Disabilities (Chart).

Innovative Ways to Think about Student Data: Advice from a District Multicultural/Special Education Referral Team

In the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado, two members of the district multicultural/special education referral team, Sandy Rasmussen and Tracy Hibbard, found that teachers who wanted to gather a body of evidence to refer an ELL student for special education evaluation were having difficulty.

Fundamentally, Sandy and Tracy realized it was not just a problem of **over**-identification of ELLs for disabilities, but one of **mis**-identification. At times, students who needed special education services were not being identified because school teams were reluctant to make that decision when students were in the early stages of English language acquisition. They took on the challenge of improving guidance that supported teachers and teams participating in the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) decision-making process. In spring 2017, we interviewed Sandy and Tracy to hear more of what they had learned during this process.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AND THE WHOLE CHILD

Sandy: When we support our local teams, we stress the importance of first looking at the environment in which the child is situated: Has the learning environment appropriately supported the child and his/her language needs? What are the barriers to the child accessing the content and instruction? It is only after examining environmental factors and ensuring the student can access the content that the team can then look closely at individual student performance.

Sandy, the district's multicultural special education assessment

team lead and speech language pathologist, and her teammate, Tracy, a special education and linguistically diverse specialist, collaborated with their ELD and MTSS departments to organize a pre-referral guidance document that resulted in a set of Guiding Questions, which reflected three key decisions:

- They decided not to create a checklist, but because every child is unique, to use guiding questions.
- They decided to use different tools that would allow them to build a body of evidence around the *whole child.*
- They decided to create a body of evidence that would allow *comparison of the student with his or her peers* from a similar background in order confirm (or disconfirm) the presence of a potential learning disability versus *typical* second language acquisition characteristics.

Gauge Student Opportunity to Learn

Kathy Escamilla (2015) points out that, rather than viewing student challenges with schooling as a problem within the child, the problem may be due to lack of appropriate activities to facilitate the development of academic language and literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse students. Focusing only on the "problems" within individual students does not address needed systemic changes and can further perpetuate the cycle of performance "gaps" and educational inequity.

If the body of evidence indicated the possible presence of a disability, the student could then be referred to the special education team. The guiding questions document they created, shown at right, was influenced by the work of Olvera and Gomez-Cerrillo (2011), Flanagan, Ortiz, and Alfonso (2013), and Roseberry-McKibbin (2008). They also developed a version of the guiding questions that you can fill out.

STUDENT PROGRESS IN RELATION TO THE PROGRESS OF SIMILAR PEERS

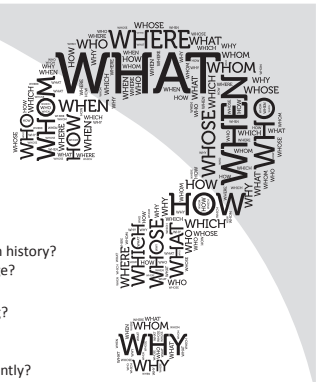
Many assessments used as district-based measures of student progress have been normed on native-English speaking students only. This poses a fundamental problem for school teams. The cultural, and linguistic loading of the assessment impacts the students score to a degree where the assessment can no longer provide a valid measure of the students' progress. We asked the team, "How might schools look through student data in a more culturally and linguistically responsive way?"

Tracy: This is an important step. We needed an innovative way for teams to look at data. We found that, by arranging the data in a T-Chart (shown on the next page), comparing the student performance with that of typical language learners, the local team could more easily analyze the body of evidence that had been gathered. This was important, because often the definitions for language development and language-related disabilities share similar characteristics. At first glance the evidence may appear to imply the student has some sort of learning disability, but it's importance to develop a clearer picture to answer two key questions: (1) Is the student's learning difference due to learning English? and (2) Is the student making progress when compared to other ELLs?

Sandy: We wanted to guide our local teams to look at student performance in terms of growth over time rather than just one point in time. We also found that dynamic assessment techniques and the student's response to that technique added valuable information to the body of evidence, such as how quickly a child learned a concept or how much scaffolding was required for a child to learn a concept. This information fit nicely in the T-Chart and provided a measure of the student's Opportunity to Learn.

Guiding Questions for English Language Development Students

Data collection and questions to consider when there are concerns



Collect background:

■ **Physical**
- Is there a significant birth, developmental or health history?
- Is the child experiencing some type of family change?
- Does the child have a medical diagnosis?
- Has the child passed a vision and hearing screening?
- Has a close vision screening been done? (district only screens for distance)
- If the child has glasses, do they wear them consistently?

■ **Language History**
- What is the first language? Home Language?
- How many years has the child been exposed to English? In what settings (i.e. school, siblings, television?)
- Is the child's acquisition of English slower than expected in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (ACCESS scores and growth percentiles)?

■ **Schooling History**
- Did the child attend school in their home country?
  - o How many years? What grades?
  - o Did the home country school have any academic concerns?
  - o Did the child receive English language instruction in the home country school?
- Did the child attend preschool? How many years? Was it in a bilingual classroom? Was it in the U.S.?
- School attendance history in U.S. for Kindergarten and above grades?
- Has the student frequently moved?
- Is attendance an issue?

■ **Parent Report**
- Are the parents concerned regarding their child's progress?
- Is this child's progress different than siblings?

Resource from the Poudre School District Integrated Services Department, available at www.tinyurl.com/WIDAsped

Tracy: Sandy and I have found that most formative and summative assessment and progress monitoring tools used with native English speakers contain a lot of bias against culturally and linguistically diverse students. Therefore, it is so important for the local referral team to include their school English Language Development specialist so that they can ask for their expertise in second language acquisition. That teacher can help answer the question: *What might typical performance [of a certain task] look like for an ELL at a certain level of English proficiency?*

Sandy: Which supports the gathering of a body of evidence rather than relying on a single assessment's results? In addition, it is so important to include the ELD specialist when gathering that body of evidence because that teacher can help answer this particular question. It is also important for teams to compare the progress of the ELL to another culturally and linguistically diverse peer, if at all possible.

INTENTIONALLY FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL INTERDEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

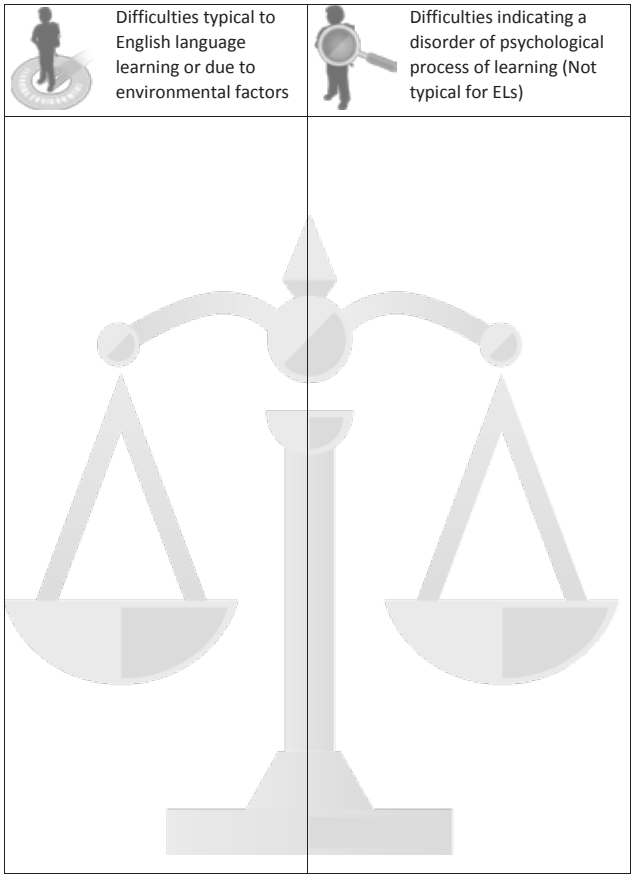
We also asked the team about how to foster successful interdepartmental collaboration. They did not start with "everyone in place" and "the perfect team." It took time to build, and to get the right people in place to collaborate and make a difference for their students.

Tracy: When I look back, I can see how we've really changed how we collaborate with school teams as well as with other district departments. We focused on building collaboration from the bottom-up. When a child becomes scattered between providers, it can be difficult to meet her needs. We set aside a lot of time supporting networking among teachers and helping identify what each specialist can offer the team. As the teams began sharing resources, they found that a collaborative approach made life easier rather than creating additional work.

Sandy: Without this willingness, interest, and motivation of all members, Tracy's and my ideas would not have gotten as much traction in the district. Now that we collaborate, I feel like we have a consistent message to school teams on how to collect and interpret a body of evidence when they have an ELL with academic concerns.

In addition, this year the group has focused on starting a process to create local norms to determine what is typical growth for ELLs on district measures for reading and math using NWEA's MAP assessments as well as DIBELS. The group has met and consulted with our district data department for guidance on how to compile the data using the district's student information system.

Sandy: We also had some in-depth discussions regarding which ELLs to include in this "typical" group and which to exclude in order to determine typical growth for ELLs, such as excluding students identified with a disability or identified as gifted or talented. The group feels that such norms can help guide school team discussions when they are analyzing the academic progress of ELLs, such as supporting their understanding that while an ELL might not be reaching benchmark goals, they are demonstrating



Resource from the Poudre School District Integrated Services Department, available at www.tinyurl.com/WIDAsped

Poudre School District Multicultural/Special Education referral team. Front row left to right: Tracy Hibbard, Sandy Rasmussen, and Colleen O'Rourke-Worman. Back row: Daniel Gallegos, Melinda Surace

expected growth when compared to other "typical" ELLs in the district.

Tracy: It has also been exciting that our collaboration has provided a model for school sites to observe the synergy of cross-department collaboration and the immense positive effects it generates for student outcomes. It is our hope that school teams will subsequently reach out to colleagues in different departments, especially during the MTSS and special education referral process.

Two other members of the team, Colleen O'Rourke Worman, an ELD program specialist and Melinda Surace, an MTSS specialist reflected on the process they had used.

Colleen and Melinda: We recognized a real need to include all specialists in the team because we, and students, benefit when all are brought to the table allowing for resources and knowledge to be pooled together. We think successful collaboration takes individuals who understand and value each other's expertise, who share a common language—and who are committed to an ongoing, long-term relationship—and will commit the time (regularly scheduled meetings) to issues around ELLs who are receiving tiered intervention due to academic difficulties. In addition, we are all willing to ask questions to learn from each others' expertise and are open to new ways to look at things. In the end, our particular success is because we all have a common goal: We're all working to serve children. Having a district team that was so collaborative has also set the groundwork for local teams to be collaborative as well and deliver a common message to district staff.

Supporting Evidence Gathering about Students: WIDA Resources and Advice

The data gathered around the whole child might be developed using a student portrait tool and by considering student performance during meaningful activities (not on isolated skills).

Use a student portrait to look closely at the assets the student brings and collect culturally responsive data.

What information is available about each student's strengths, interests, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and collaborations with other students? Several earlier WIDA Focus Bulletins provide specific guidance on how to weave learner strengths, interests, and cultural and linguistic considerations into a learner portrait:

- WIDA Focus on American Indian English Language Learners
- WIDA Focus on SLIFE: Learners with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

Below are some types of data to include in a student portrait:

- How does he/she participate in the classroom [notice this is not IF he/she participates]?
- What does he/she like to learn?
- What resources does he/she bring from home?
- How does he/she interact with others?
- With whom does he/she interact?

Paradoxically, with all the standards-related data available with school and district-based measures, this data may sometimes make it easier to develop a picture of what learners cannot do in relation to the standards, rather than what they can do. As summarized in Shafer Willner and Monroe (2016), one important technique is to write each description in the student portrait from an assets-based point of view—that is, by intentionally using assets-based wording such as "She is able to …He is enthusiastic about... She is striving to..."

During meetings with families, employ facilitation choices that expand opportunities to learn more about student strengths and resources.

In this 2016 blog post, three WIDA staff members, Lynn Shafer Willner, Mira Monroe, & Lorena Mancilla, explore how teachers' facilitation choices during family conferences can create opportunities to learn more about the strengths and resources each child brings. Family conferences are a required event when students are being considered for increased levels of academic support in Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

Parents and family members can provide educators key perspectives on their children's abilities and interests, as well as provide support at home. Using common topics that arise during meetings with families, this blog post offers models of how an educator might facilitate school conference conversations. The goal is to move away from deficit-oriented framing to lessen debate and increase family-school dialogue.

Use data that examines student language development performance during meaningful activities rather than only focusing on their use of isolated components of language.

WIDA recommends focusing on the context in which language and literacy advice is gathered. In many cases, SLDs are defined in a manner that focuses on the difficulties students face when processing smaller language parts (e.g., words/phrases and sentence level grammar) rather than examining how they use language in context for communicative purposes, especially with complex, grade-appropriate texts and activities.

Think about language development as more than the part (or sub-component) of language; frame development questions in relation to the discourse and context in which they are situated. In this way, to better support ELLs, traditional SLD definitions for auditory processing, dyslexia, and dysgraphia might be expanded by explicitly situating and teaching the parts of language in relation to larger discourse contexts and purposes for meaning.

	FROM a Traditional SLD Definition Which Focuses on Language Parts	**TO** an Expanded SLD Definition Which Focuses on Use of Language Parts in Context for Meaningful Purposes
Auditory processing disorder	A breakdown between the brain and spoken language. Students with this learning difference may have some degree of delay in reading and writing decoding as they build phonemic awareness.	A disconnect between hearing and the brain that may make it difficult for students to comprehend and participate in extended discourse like instructions, a story, descriptions, and so on. There is difficulty in receiving, remembering, understanding, and using auditory information.
Dyslexia	A cluster of symptoms that result in difficulty with specific language skills, almost exclusively with text. There is a breakdown in matching speech sounds and how letters represent those sounds.	A processing disorder that can affect reading fluency, decoding, reading comprehension, recall, writing, spelling, and sometimes speech and can exist along with other related disorders. For these students, the words and letters on a page can be very difficult to process and understand.
Dysgraphia	Difficulty with writing. There is a breakdown in the ability to visualize letters and the motor planning to form letters.	An impairment in written expression impacting writing, spelling, and organization and coherence of thoughts. Students have difficulty translating their thoughts into writing.

Excerpt from related WIDA Focus On Providing ELLs with Disabilities with Access to Complex Language.

Related ELLs with Disabilities Resources from WIDA

Using a "Can Do" Approach to Ensure Differentiated Instruction Intentionally Supports the Needs of Language Learners
In this article written for Colorín Colorado, two WIDA accessibility specialists describe a "can do" approach when it comes to designing instruction for ELLs with disabilities—in other words, building upon student strengths and abilities rather than focusing on weaknesses.

What are My Choices? Facilitating Meaningful Conversations with Families of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students during the Disabilities Referral Process
This article written for Colorín Colorado suggests some ways to communicate productively with diverse families during the special education referral process and emphasizes family and student assets and strengths, rather than deficits.

WIDA Focus Bulletin: Providing ELLs with Disabilities with Access to Complex Language
ELLs with disabilities are more likely to gain meaningful access to content area instruction when educators shift their instruction in three ways: (1) By integrating instructional support into the general design and delivery of a lesson or activity, rather than adding it on as an accommodation; (2) By providing language development instruction that focuses on using complex language in meaningful experiences, rather than only focusing on discrete parts of language; and (3) By providing explicit instruction on the genres associated with schooling. This bulletin provides examples of how these shifts can be implemented using the WIDA Key Uses of academic language. (Available on the WIDA Focus Bulletin Web page.)

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In 2015-2016, WIDA updated its accommodations framework to include accessibility principles and strategies. This bulletin is part of coordinated effort to expand support for school teams as they identify and instruct ELLs with SLDs. WIDA gratefully acknowledges the contributions to this bulletin made by the members of the Poudre School District Multicultural/Special Education Referral Team.

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