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Book review

English Language Learners: Differentiating Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities

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Book Reviewed:

Klingner, J., & Eppolito, A. M. (2014). *English Language Learners: Differentiating Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children, 117 pages, ISBN978-0-86586-478-8 (Softcover); ISBN 0-86586-478-0(ebook) \$ 34.95.

Teachers of children who speak a language than English at home, often referred in schools as English language learners (ELLs) or *emergent bilinguals* (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008), are often charged with the responsibility of referring children to eligibility committees for receiving special education services. Among their responsibilities, educators are now encouraged to use response to intervention (RTI) to replace the traditionally used IQ achievement discrepancy to identify children with learning disabilities (LD). Response to intervention, introduced within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; P.L. 108-446), is often described as a tiered process for distinguishing children who have a LD from those who do not. The process typically involves three to four tiers of intervention. The Tier 1 intervention takes place as specialized instruction provided at the general education classroom level; the Tier 2 consists on more intense secondary intervention; and the Tier 3 involves either directly moving to special education assessment processes, or providing additional pre-referral intervention. Tier 4 would be the special education assessment (Reschly, 2003). However, as Klingner and Eppolito explain in their text, differentiating between language acquisition and LDs is far from a straightforward process. According to the authors, most often, this will be a process consisting on eliminating other factors as the possible causes for the learning difficulties, such as, instruction not being as effective for this child as for others, needing more language support, the level of instruction not being a good match for the child, or the environment not being conducive to learning. While recognizing that in the field of bilingual special education there are still uncharted waters, the authors organize the existing research in identifying and working with bilingual children who might have

LDs in an accessible way. With an iterative style, the book is written to offer guiding notions for all practitioners who teach emergent bilinguals and might wonder about their learning trajectories. Furthermore, and without wasting one line, the authors offer multiple research-based practical recommendations.

The book is organized in 10 chapters. Each chapter opens up with one or two questions, which the authors then address through references to research and accessible summaries of the literature. While the book does not include full case studies, a few chapters outline concise classroom and research-to-practice examples, as well as a number of tables to organize the information and provide valuable resources. These different examples could be used in pre-service teacher courses to incite discussion around topics the student teachers find they would like to explore deeper. The authors also include a conclusion for each chapter summarizing the research presented in the previous pages. They close each segment with focus questions enticing self-reflection and criticality. Janette Klingner and Amy Eppolito have themselves made outstanding research contributions to improve the educational experience of children who speak more than one language, and thus they include their own work in this book. Specifically, Janette Klingner after 10 years of experience as a special education teacher, began what was to grow into a 20 year long research career focused on culturally and linguistically diverse students and their disproportionate representation in special education. Amy Eppolito, also a former teacher, specializes in multi-tiered educational models for emergent bilinguals and culturally responsive teaching practices. Both authors have extensively published in relation to emergent bilinguals with special needs and in distinguishing between language acquisition and LDs. Skillfully, the authors' expertise come together in this book, which integrates practical and theoretical ideas in a natural and appealing way. This engaging writing style gradually can help the reader consider the multifaceted causes of language learners' surfacing learning characteristics in the classroom.

Throughout the 10 chapters, and beginning with the introduction, the tone of the book is established as a conversation between reader and writer. This two-way conversation is established as an invitation to better understand the advantages bilingual learners have for learning, as well as to using their cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge in the classroom. Among others, the authors speak of benefits such as the effects of bilingualism on cognitive functioning beyond those related to language, language acquisition, and on delaying the effects of dementia. The opening chapter describes the increase of language learners in classrooms in the U.S. and the need for teachers to know both the process of second language acquisition and the characteristics of children who have LDs. Children who are identified with LDs are typically described as having average or above average intelligence while experiencing difficulty learning basic skills such as reading, writing and/or math; demonstrating higher level skills such as organization, time planning, abstract reasoning, long or short term memory and attention (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2015). Chapter two invites the reader to explore the characteristics of a child who is diagnosed as having an LD under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2006). This section opens up with a critical analysis of the lack of criteria for identification in the current federal government definition for LDs. After this analysis,

the chapter includes a short overview of stages of language acquisition, and then the attributes of second language acquisition versus those of LDs are compared in a chart. This chapter serves as a cautionary message to prevent referrals of emergent bilinguals who seem to be having learning difficulties to eligibility committees, without previously having considered other possible reasons for the observed difficulties. Using information from this chapter, teachers' can begin to analyze whether the difficulties students experience might actually be related to the child's knowledge of an additional language. Against the tendency in educational systems for grouping all language learners into the same general categories, Chapter 3 discusses different types of emergent bilinguals to remind the reader of the heterogeneity of these socially created categories. Implications for teaching these diverse groups of children are convened in a table. This chapter also discusses previous qualitative research by the second author on deficit perspectives in the discourse used in school-based RTI (Eppolito, 2011). Doing so, the authors invite readers to shift the tone around children's learning reinforcing the assets emergent bilinguals bring to the learning space.

Chapter 4 takes the conversations about possible paths for exploring emergent bilinguals' learning trajectories as a way of determining a child's need for special needs services to a deeper level. As Klingner and Eppolito explain, the child's difficulties in the literacy classroom might often be explained by external factors such as whether he/she has been receiving ongoing high quality opportunities for learning. The authors dedicate this chapter to summarizing three tiers of instruction within the RTI model defined under the recent additions to special education law (IDEA 2006). However, rather than taking a general approach, the authors ground their discussion in culturally relevant pedagogy and in the implementation of instructional strategies, which have been shown to be particularly effective for emergent bilinguals. While this section includes multiple tables, I found particularly revealing and useful Table 4.2, titled "Core Instruction (Tier 1) and Strategic Literacy Interventions (Tier 2) for ELLs in Grades K-3" (pp. 40-43). This table shows side-by-side comparisons of research based tier 1 level instructional recommendations, and tier 2 level interventions. The table also provides a reference to the original research sources for those instructional ideas so that the reader can extend this examination outside the text if they chose to do so. This side-by-side comparison is a useful instructional resource for teachers working with children who appear not to be making sufficient progress. I found Chapter 5 provocative. The authors challenge the reader to realize that while popular conceptions are reinforced through historical beliefs and anecdotal observations, the fields of bilingual education and second language acquisition have accumulated over the last few decades a sound body of educational research. This body of research has emerged from well-planned studies considering the multilevel factors and scenarios involved in learning bilingually. It is thus the responsibility of those involved in the education of emergent bilinguals to make sure they make decisions based on rigorous academic work, and that they keep up to date with current research, rather than continue to replicate deficit-based educational efforts. Through a well-selected list of seven popular misconceptions, the authors present the most recent findings in the fields related to bilingual learning. In discussing the misconceptions, this chapter also presents the learning curve of the field by including layers of research along a number of years.

Specifically, the authors invite discussion about the long held threshold theory Cummins proposed in 1979, which implied that there were children with limited bilingualism who did not have enough language in either of their languages. The authors also cite follow up research by MacSwan (2000) to complicate this initial idea by reflecting on the implications of Cummin's ideas in teachers' expectations for these young learners' potential. The discussion is deepened by the authors' choice to include data from a study by MacSwan and Rolstad (2006). These two researchers proved that natural language samples indicated that Spanish bilingual participants ages 6-8, had indeed acquired the language of their communities, contradicting existing data obtained administering three standardized tests. This research is convincing in showing how historically based beliefs pointing to children's lack of proficiency in any one language are actually influenced by a flawed language assessment system, which is not able to assess the full linguistic repertoire of emergent bilinguals. Information from chapter 6 complements the implications for practice, which were introduced in Chapter 3. This iterative style for arranging content helps readers construct bodies of increasingly developed ideas in relation to any one topic. In this case, the authors enumerate specific differences emergent bilinguals could experience when receiving reading instruction and how to better understand these learning differences in the context of second language learning. The authors remind readers of the importance of multiple culturally-relevant points of entry for achieving comprehension and for allowing language learners to express their knowledge and understanding. Chapter 7 moves the discussion to structures that, through leadership support, incorporate elements such as "a problem-solving approach that doesn't make the student the problem" (p. 73) or offering quality professional development for continuing learning about the most recent research in the field. Klingner and Eppolito not only enumerate these elements, but they provide research upon which these ideas were developed. For example, they explain how Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) in a study looking at the impact of instructional consultation teams, found that this practice resulted in fewer referrals to special education eligibility committees than non-collaborative structures, particularly with minority students. The main contribution of Chapter 8 is in informing readers on the critical and complex role of families in the learning and assessment process. Particularly interesting is a section titled "Turning the Tables" where the authors explain the insights of Jessica Martinez (2013 as cited in Klingner & Eppolito, 2014), Director of English Language Learners (ELLs) programs for Eagle County Schools in Colorado, as she and her family temporarily moved to Mexico so that their two children would learn Spanish. The story, narrated along four pages of the book (pp. 80-84), explains the difficulties the parents experienced in keeping up with their children's education due to lack of familiarity with the Mexican educational and cultural structures. This chapter reminds us of the importance of finding out about the literacy practices already in existence in the home and how to build on these with the help of children's families. Such processes allow teachers to uncover family knowledge and create more representative images of emergent bilinguals' resources for learning and thus can assist in the process of determining the need for special education. Chapter 9 furthers the discussion around tiered instruction already introduced in Chapter 4. This time, Klingner and Eppolito discuss the necessary steps before deciding whether or not to refer an emergent bilingual student to an evaluation for special education. These

steps include analyzing class wide student data, conducting observations across different instructional contexts, and providing effective interventions. Emphasizing a focus on individual responses to each pedagogical level, the authors remind us that determining decision rules for interpreting progress-monitoring and other assessment data is often left up to the school district. If such is the case, the authors recommend that data is carefully considered and used to challenge patterns with potentially discriminating results.

The final chapter explains ecological factors, which should be considered for data gathering. Once again, the authors acknowledge that much is unknown in reference to distinguishing language acquisition and LDs, and that there is no single test which can give us the answer to these difficult questions. They recommend using three forms of assessment: (1) Curriculum-based assessment (i.e., AIMSweb, see training workbook by Shinn and Shinn, 2002; or DIBELs by Good and Kaminski, 2002); (2) Dynamic assessments (i.e., retelling a story about a picture book when the teacher focuses on areas of difficulty and then has the student retell the story); and (3) Performance-based assessments (role-playing a story retelling, using graphic organizers to compare and contrast story elements, or building a mathematical model). Hence, they end with the recommendation of “using multiple measures”, considering the “different purposes of assessment in an RTI framework, and nonbiased interpretation of assessment information for ELLs” (p. 101). While *English Language Learners: Differentiating Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities*, is a short book with only 117 pages, the authors excel in summarizing important research related to identifying and working with bilingual children. The multiple tables through which they communicate the information serve to provide a visual summary of the information, which can then be used for future reference by teachers. Given the crucial role of teachers in identifying learning disabilities and the fact that emergent bilinguals are the fastest growing section of the U.S. student population, this book is a timely resource for those directly involved in the education of bilinguals who might be suspected of having LDs. Particularly intellectually stimulating in this book is the fact that it outlines the existing multiple layers in the body of research in bilingual education and second language acquisition. In this way, the authors do not shy away from revealing the field of bilingual special education as alive and dynamic, and from recognizing that much more needs to be done.

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