



# Considerations for English Learners with Specific Learning Disabilities

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# Agenda

- A problem of practice: differentiating between language acquisition and learning disabilities--important questions
- What is a specific learning disability?
- What instruction should look like within MTSS/RtI for culturally and linguistically diverse students
- An ecological approach to identification
  - Assessments
  - Team members
  - Comparisons
  - Family

# Questions

- What do you think is the most challenging aspect of distinguishing between language acquisition and learning disability?
- How do your English learners do in comparison to other students?

# Questions We Must Consider to Distinguish Between Language and Disability

- Compared to English, for how long has the student been speaking and exposed to the home language?
- Are the difficulties present in home language and English?
- Are concerns present in multiple settings—home and child care?
- Have appropriately explicit instruction and intervention been provided?
- Has this instruction produced improvement?

# What is SLD?

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

– (ii) Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

And students cannot be eligible if the basis is limited English proficiency.

# A Civil Rights Issue

## The Exclusionary Clause of IDEA 2004

**“A child shall not be determined to be a child with a disability if the determinant factor for such determination is (A) lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including in the essential components of reading instruction...; (B) lack of instruction in math; or (C) **limited English proficiency**” (IDEA 2004, Section 614.b.5)**

# Instructional Opportunity and Bias

- Eliminate a deficit view of bilingualism—hear these voices:

*“She really has a language problem right?”*

*“She speaks too much Spanish all day.”*

*“Her mom doesn’t speak any English.”*

*“She goes back and forth to Mexico so of course she never learns.”*

# What IS Opportunity to Learn

- Has tier 1 been high quality? Are you implementing a strong curriculum?
- Are tiered interventions of increasing intensity afforded to English learners? Do you have ways to assess intervention response?
- Is literacy instruction culturally and linguistically responsive?
- Are teachers and students producing together?
- Is language and literacy developed across the curriculum? Are lessons meaningful?
- Are teachers using conversation in their instruction?

# Dyslexia Defined

Dyslexia is a **specific learning disability** that is **neurobiological** in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent **word recognition** and by poor **spelling** and **decoding** abilities.

These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the **phonological** component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.

**Secondary consequences** may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Lyon, G.R., Shaywitz, S. E., Shaywitz, B.A. (2003).  
A definition of dyslexia. [Annals of Dyslexia](#), 53, 1-14.

# Phonological Awareness and Phonemic Awareness

- Phonological awareness in Spanish or English predicts reading achievement.
- In fact, Spanish phonological awareness may be a better predictor of English word reading than English or Spanish oral proficiency (Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993).
- A student can be given a phonological test in the home language by a speaker who is trained.

# What Do We Know?

## Dyslexia...

- is a *language-based* problem
- Is inherited (runs in families)
- does not mean seeing things backwards or making reversals
- exists across all levels of intelligence
- is not caused by a lack of motivation

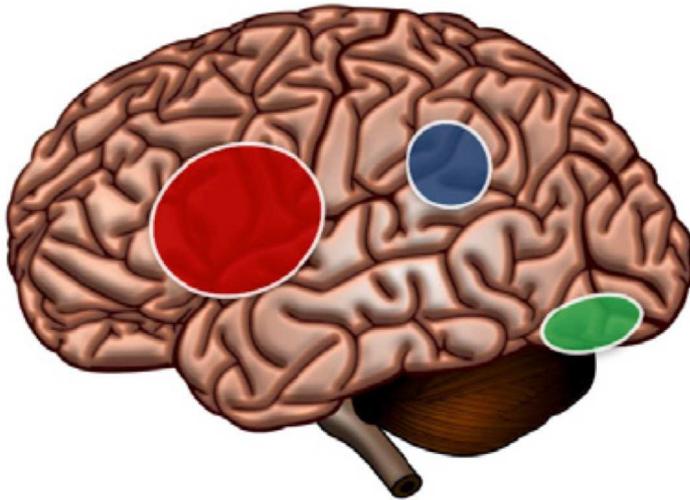


# What Else Do We Know?

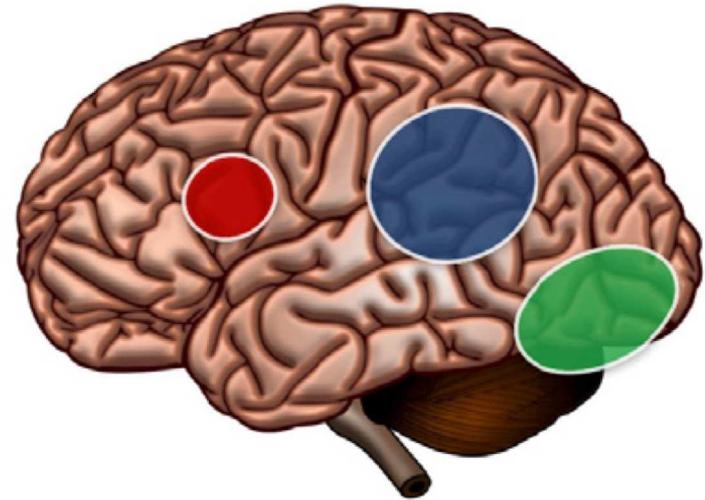
- Occurs at all socioeconomic levels and in virtually all languages
- Occurs slightly more often in boys than girls
- May develop even with optimal classroom instruction
- Often occurs with other developmental problems (e.g., ADHD, executive function, written expression)
- Can be mitigated with high-quality instruction
- Not the only type of RD (see next slide)



## BRAIN PATTERNS THAT DYSLEXIC STUDENTS MAY SHOW

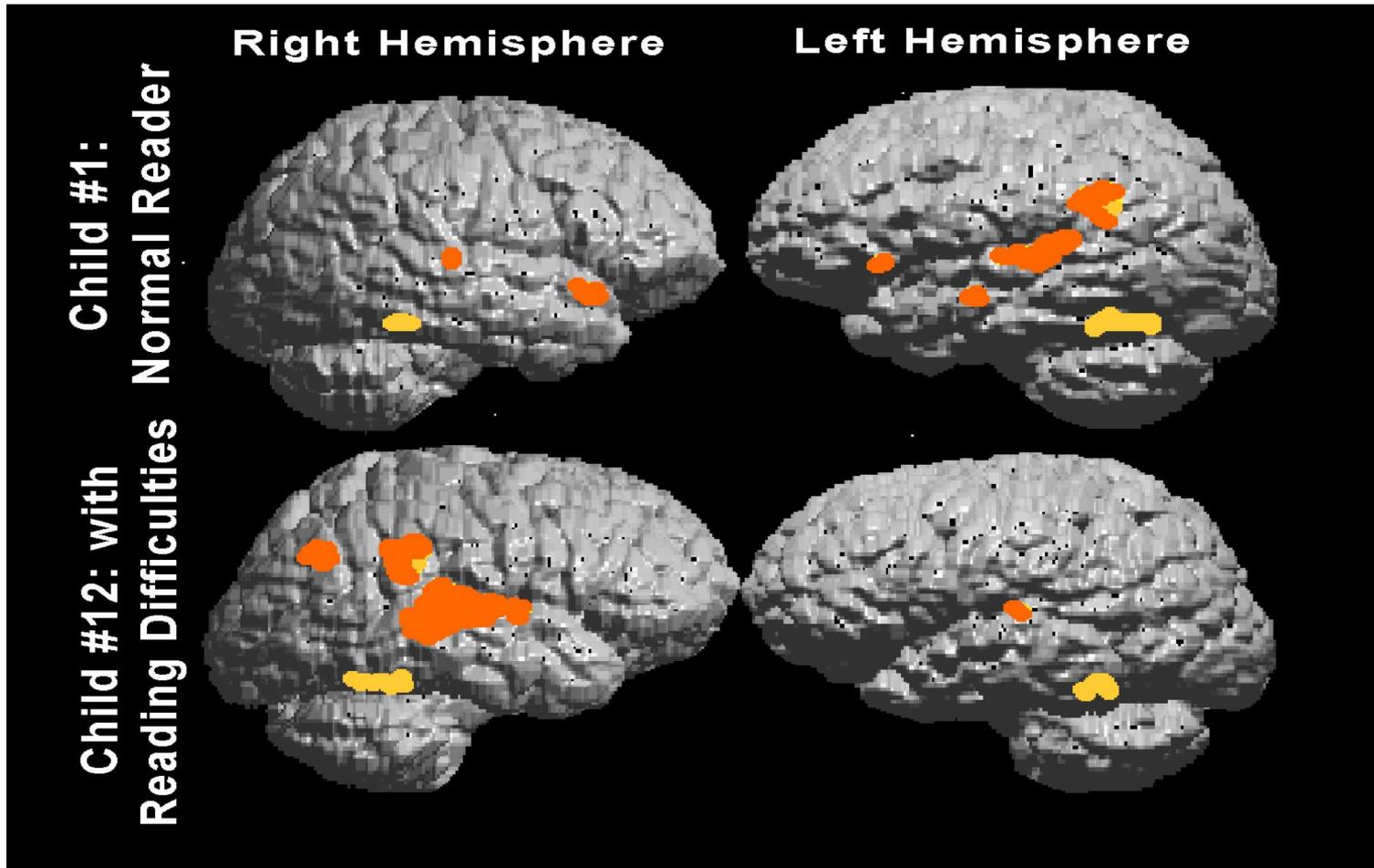


## BRAIN PATTERNS THAT NON-DYSLEXIC STUDENTS MAY SHOW

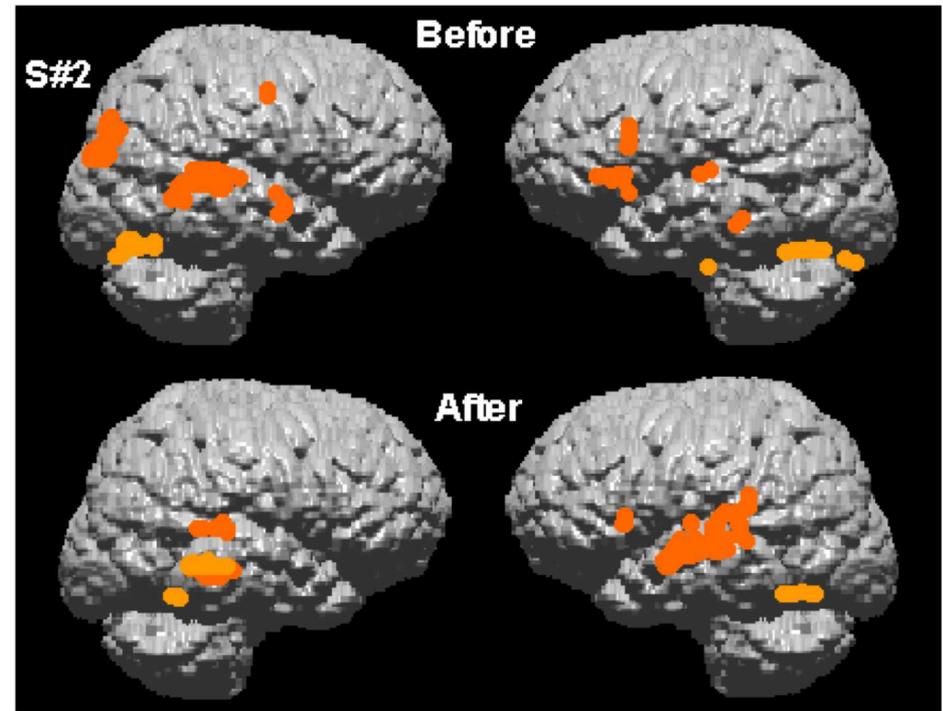
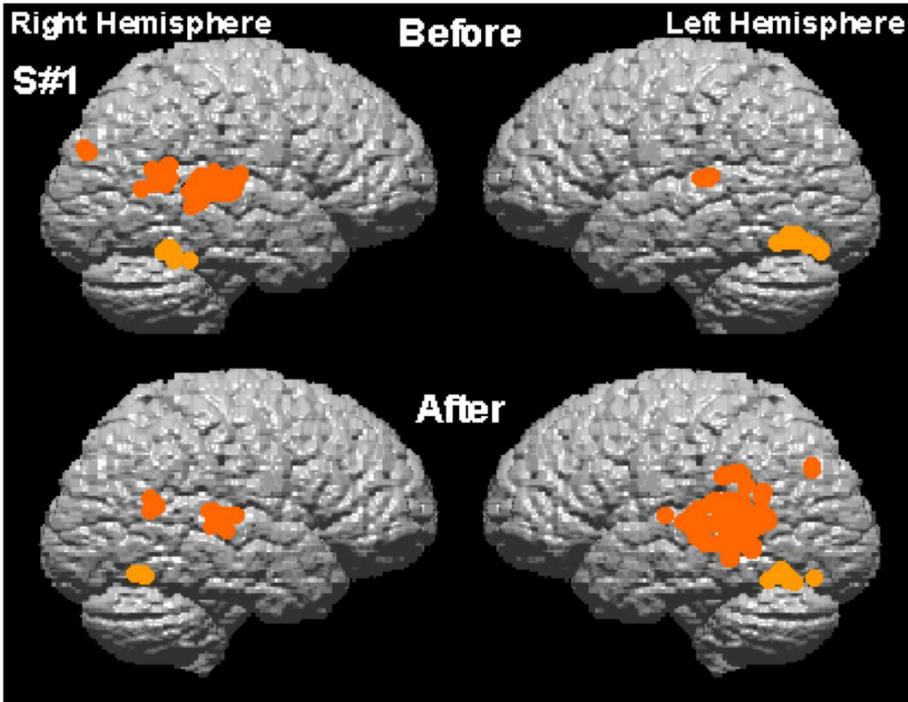


- **LEFT FRONTAL REGION:** Important for compensation
- **LEFT TEMPORO-PARIETAL REGION:** Important for phonological processing and grapheme-phoneme association
- **LEFT OCCIPITO-TEMPORAL REGION:** Important for orthographic processing

# Brain Function in Dyslexia (Simos et al., 2001; Pseudowords)



# Neural response to intervention; (Pseudoword Task; Simos et al., 2002)



# Opaque vs Transparent Orthographies

Accumulating evidence with bilingual learners of two alphabetic languages suggests that **learning in a phonologically transparent orthography (e.g., Spanish) might improve children's phonological reading skills** and increase the strength of left superior temporal activation in their phonologically-opaque language (e.g., English).

Bilingual children with dyslexia who are learning to read in a phonologically transparent orthography (Italian) have also been found to **have better phonological literacy skills in their phonologically-opaque language (English)** than their monolingual English peers with dyslexia

(Kovelman, Bisconti, & Hoeft, 2016)

# Transparent vs Opaque Orthographies

## Transparent

- Spanish, Italian, Finnish
- Consistent rules
- Usually one-to-one correspondence
- Decoding skills developed faster
- Students with dyslexia struggle more with **fluency** than accuracy (accuracy still poor compared to typical peers).

## Opaque

- English, French
- More complex spelling patterns
- Context-dependent rules
  - Read – red
- Much less one-to-one correspondence
- Decoding problems (accuracy) are more evident. Fluency also a challenge.

Adapted from Enciso, 2017

# Important Literacy Domains and Strategies

- **Oral language:** Provide opportunities for students to interact around content.
- **Word work:** Consider using familiar sounds and words when working on phonics; use words students produce themselves that can serve as the basis of phoneme segmenting, blending, syllabication, etc.
- **Fluency:** Use repeat reading, modeled and shared reading, partner reading, voice technologies.
- **Comprehension:** Build background, highlight key vocabulary, address syntax and teach specific strategies.

# Literacy Domains and Strategies continued

- **Cross-language connections:** Note similarities and differences between home language to English, understand the literacy skills students bring from L.1; build on cognates
- **Writing:** Create functional writing opportunities, modeling and interactive writing
- **Connections to home and community:** Understand the practices and knowledge of the students and their families and bring that into the classroom.

# How is Learning to Read in English different for ELs than Learning to Read English for Native English Speakers

- **Phonological awareness:** 1<sup>st</sup> language may not include some of the English phonemes
- **Alphabetical principle:** Letters may look the same but represent different sounds; English has many spellings for the same sound
- **Fluency:** Opportunity to read aloud may be limited, accent may impede fluency
- **Vocabulary:** Prepositions, pronouns, multiple meaning words, idioms, false cognates present challenges
- **Comprehension:** Syntax, strategies, variations in text structure are potential challenges

# Language Acquisition or Learning Disability

- It is, to a large extent, a process of elimination.
- Many factors and explanations must be considered.
- No one definitive test exists
- However, screeners do exist in more than one language now (DIBELS/IDEL; FastBridge; AimsWEB Spanish reading; i\_ready)

And there is a new assessment that may be very useful...

# A new Assessment that is very interesting

Ortiz PVAT

<http://info.mhs.com/ortizpvatfreetrial>

# What ESSA says about Assessment for ELs

“A state must provide an alternate ELP assessment for each English learner covered under §200.6(a)(1)(ii)—that is, those with the most significant cognitive disabilities—who cannot participate in the general ELP assessment even with appropriate accommodations” (34 CFR § 200.6(h)(5))

And...If an “English learner has a disability that precludes assessment of the student in one or more domains of the English language proficiency (ELP) assessment such that there are no appropriate accommodations for the affected domain(s), a State must assess the student’s English proficiency based on the remaining domains in which it is possible to assess the student.” (34 CFR 200.6(h)(4))

# CASP Position Paper for AB 1369

Instruction, intervention, and assessment of students who are English learners (ELs) is no simple task. **Education of these students requires substantial knowledge of language acquisition processes and their implications for academic achievement.** This knowledge informs educators that **instructional and intervention needs of EL students differ from the needs of their monolingual English-speaking peers.** Therefore, Rtl practices intended for ELs must be tailored to their linguistic needs because traditional Rtl programs alone are not sufficient to allow them to overcome the academic challenges they face when instructed in a language different from that spoken in their home and supported by their parents (Brown & Ortiz, 2014). **Caution should be used in screening and assessing EL students for the purposes of identifying a reading disability such as dyslexia, especially when educational staff may not have specialized knowledge, training and practice for instruction and intervention with ELs.**

# An Ecological Approach

- A systematic process for examining the specific background
- Information gathered through a variety of informal and formal assessments variables of EIs (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> language)
- Examination of the appropriateness of classroom instruction and interventions
- Non discriminatory interpretation of assessment data
- Attention to intended or unintended bias

# Ecological Framework

## Factors

- Characteristics of the learner
- Appropriately challenging curriculum
- Culturally responsive instruction
- Home language
- Family educational history

## Data in BOTH Languages

- Observation, CBMs, language samples, other assessments
- Work samples
- Comparison to other students with similar characteristics and language
- Home language survey, family/care giver interview
- Home visit

# Recommended Evidence to Collect

- State standardized (alternate) achievement assessment processes
- Standardized or curriculum-based assessments used to monitor progress towards IEP goals relevant to developing English language proficiency
- Classroom observations of students' language use
- Student work samples or portfolios
- Teacher input on students' English language development progress
- Family input on students' language development and use at home
- Data related to how the student was initially identified as an EL
- Review of EL services across multiple years to ensure receipt of adequate English language development support for an extended period of time

# More Evidence (if you can get it)

- Assessments that evaluate proficiency in home/primary language
- Language samples demonstrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (or in the domains in which the student can demonstrate skills)
- Language use inventories
- Comparable peer group data (**THIS ONE IS VITAL: How are similar students, similar language backgrounds doing?**)

Appreciation to Soyoung Park, Ph.D.  
The University of Texas at Austin

# Questions?

