

Tips for Educators Working with Dual-Identified English Learners

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Abstract

General education teachers are not properly prepared to support the unique needs of dual-identified students. Dual-identified students have different needs than ELs or SPED students alone and this paper provides strategies for educators to better support the needs of these students in the classroom. Strategies will include effective collaboration between general education teachers and ESL specialists as well as special education teachers; effective communication with families of dual-identified students; culturally responsive teaching, and implementation of various accommodations and modifications.

Keywords: dual-identified students; Els; special education

Introduction

Previous research in special education has demonstrated that educators in the US K12 schools are not fully prepared to work in inclusive classrooms with dual-identified linguistically diverse students (Gonzalez, Okhremtchouk & Esposito, 2021; Esposito, Hamdan & Benitez, 2014; Park & Thomas, 2012). By definition, dual-identified students are English learners (ELs) who also have a disability (TEA, n.d.) and are thereby impacted by two conditions at the same time. Park and Thomas (2012) claim that ELs face many challenges due to their language and cultural backgrounds, but those who are dual-identified have even more challenges to overcome. ELs with special education needs (e.g., intellectual disability, hearing impairments, speech impairments, visual impairments, autism spectrum disorder, orthopedic impairments, brain injury, etc.) are struggling with multiple overlapping/intersecting threats at the same time. Their

oral language and literacy skills in English serve as a filter as they receive help and instruction for their special needs. For example, a fourth-grade child who arrived in the United States two years ago and is at the intermediate level of English proficiency has been identified as having dyslexia, but all the services have been provided only in English. Unless the instruction for special education is provided in students' first language, the quality of help they are receiving and their success for improvement are largely decided by their English language proficiency. Therefore, dual-identified students' disabilities and needs are not necessarily captured in the sum of their conditions (e.g., dyslexia and intermediate language proficiency), but take place at the complex intersection of these conditions in which one condition may perpetuate the other.

In light of the sociocultural and socioeconomic factors in the US K12 public schools as well as the recent theoretical developments in special education, I argue that a poststructural perspective is necessary to better understand the needs and challenges of dual-identified students. According to this theoretical position, the dual-identified students' needs should not be categorized in static boxes of their stand-alone conditions but should be approached as overlapping and intersecting complex conditions that require the collaboration of multiple parties such as teachers and parents. A poststructuralist approach to conceptualizing dual-identified ELs' needs opens the possibility of deconstructing the traditional and static understanding of special education and language proficiency as stand-alone and isolated categories which might sometimes occur at the same time. For example, teachers should have the opportunity to be certified to teach children who are dual-identified as ELs and with special needs. With a type of program that prepares educators to teach children who are ELs and who have special needs, they will be fully certified and prepared to support their needs as one entity versus having to seek out other specialists. These educators would not only understand how to support the students with

their disability, but also be knowledgeable in second language acquisition to better support their learning of a new language. In addition, these educators will be able to communicate with families in their L1 and avoid miscommunication as they would be certified in bilingual education. In this paper, I present tips and strategies for teachers and parents with the objective of bringing them together to help address the complex needs of dual-identified ELs.

Background to Dual-identified ELs

In recent years, the percentage of ELs in the US K12 schools increased from 4.5 million students (about twice the population of New Mexico) to 5.1 million between 2010 and 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, “ELs with disabilities were more likely to be classified as having a specific learning disability, or speech or language impairment,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). According to the Coalition of Education (2022), “792,000 ELs were identified as students with disabilities in the Fall of 2019, representing 15.5 percent of the total EL student enrollment. In comparison, students with disabilities made up 14.4 percent of the public-school enrollment in 2019-20” (p. 4).

The national statistics for ELs in K12 public schools are also mirrored in the state of Texas. According to the Texas Education Agency (2023), individualized education plans (IEPs) are created for every child aged 3-21 receiving special education services in Texas and are part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA ensures “that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for future education, employment, and independent living,” (Texas Education Agency, 2023, p. 5). By law, inclusive educators need to meet the educational needs of each individual child in their classroom. By differentiating instruction for their dual-identified students while teaching a whole

group lesson, inclusive educators can provide the opportunity for the success of everyone. For example, if a student is identified as having a vision impairment and is at an advanced level in English proficiency, the educator will need to be sure the student is able to see the book adequately by either providing an additional book for the student to use at their desk or sit close enough to see the pictures while its being read. In addition to making sure the student can see the book adequately, the educator will need to address the English proficiency level of the student by allowing them to process the information in chunks and checking for understanding by asking questions along the way.

Collaboration between General Education Teachers and ESL/SPED Specialists

When general education teachers have students who are linguistically diverse and/or have a disability, they tend to rely on and share the responsibility of these students with ESL specialists and SPED teachers to help them when designing adequate lessons for these students (Contreras-Vanegas, Uzum, & Blackwell, 2022; Jones, Buzixk & Turkan, 2016). Although ESL and SPED teachers are experts in these areas, it is beneficial for general education teachers to be prepared as well to support these students in their classrooms. Most students with disabilities and linguistically diverse students are primarily educated in mainstream classrooms (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, general education teachers are the micro-level policymakers in the classrooms and make spontaneous decisions that may impact these students' learning.

Without the collaboration between ESL/SPED specialists and general education educators, certain gaps will exist. The needs of a child who is linguistically diverse and who also has learning disabilities do not mean they have two separate needs that should be addressed independently of one another. The child's needs interact in a dynamic way that is much more complex and needs to be addressed as a whole. From a poststructuralist perspective, the identity

of an individual “... is unstable, flexible, ongoing, negotiated, and multiple,” (Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014, p 200). As children continue to progress in their English proficiency and/or content knowledge, their needs change and should be reassessed continuously. This can be accomplished by sharing intervention plans and documents between the ESL and SPED specialists and informing each other on students’ struggles in an area, response to an intervention, and progress in general. ESL and SPED specialists can create an online platform or drive where they can see each other’s plans, notes, and comments on these documents while keeping the student’s name confidential. For example, if the ESL specialist worked with a student for a short session on past tense verbs, the notes taken from that session can be shared with the general education teacher to help continue working on the same strategy during class.

Dual-identified students require special attention to their language development along with any academic challenges. General education teachers need to be aware of their student’s language proficiency level in each domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in order to effectively plan a lesson at their level and provide appropriate accommodations. As general education educators need to assess the language proficiency of their students, they will also need to be aware of the learning challenges they have and how to properly modify the content to meet their needs. Accommodations and modifications are “intended to remove barriers to students’ ability to access test items, they can be inappropriately assigned or ineffective” (Jones, et al., 2013, p 236).

Focusing on Dual-identified Students’ Needs in the Classroom

Many teacher education programs in the US include certification tracks in ESL for general education teacher candidates. In a series of courses such as multicultural education, second language acquisition, sheltered instruction, and ESL methodology, teacher candidates

learn about modifications and accommodations they can make for EL students in their future classrooms. In these courses, teacher candidates develop a theoretical background and practical skills to teach EL students language and content at the same time. That is, they learn strategies to provide language scaffolding while they are teaching content such as Math, Social Studies, and Science. These education programs often have SPED courses as well, preparing teacher candidates for SPED students in their future classrooms. While the curriculum in these teacher education programs supports the candidates to prepare for EL and SPED students, the intersectionality is not paid enough attention at the curricular or policy level. That is, these two areas often run the danger of operating in two independent silos and may not inform each other in terms of policy and curriculum, while they have many overlapping areas. Therefore, I outline how dual-identified students may have different needs than EL or SPED students alone and present tips and strategies for teachers and teacher educators to prepare for this special population.

The following are strategies inclusive educators can adopt in their teaching to better support the unique needs of their dual-identified students.

Strategies

Collaboration with Colleagues

When teaching children who are dual-identified, inclusive educators need to have open communication with parents, English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists, and special education (SPED) educators alike. Communication will be crucial to the development of appropriate identification/classification, lessons that may include modifications and IEPs in addition to any language accommodations needed to make content comprehensible for these

students. General education teachers should take advantage of the collaboration between other colleagues in the school who may specialize in specific areas such as ESL or SPED. Special education teachers have a wealth of knowledge on how to work with students who have different IEPs. If general education teachers need support on how to work effectively with their students in their IEPs, they should contact their SPED colleagues for support. If general education teachers need to know more about how to accommodate content for their student's English proficiency level, they should contact their ESL liaison or specialist.

Effective Communication Between Parents/Caretakers and Educators

There is ample research supporting the idea that a partnership between the home and school is vital for the success of students (Uzum & Contreras-Vanegas, 2020, Barger et al., 2019). Barger et al. (2019) explained there are two types of family involvement which include school-based and home-based support. Families may become involved in school-based settings by meeting teachers for a teacher-parent conference, volunteering for school events, or getting involved in a parent-teacher organization (PTO) (Barger et al., 2019). Home-based involvement may include parents helping children with their homework, providing resources to further assist children in their learning, and encouraging children in their academic goals (Barger et al., 2019).

Educators should not disregard the knowledge parents can contribute to support the education of their children (Uzum & Contreras-Vanegas, 2020; Barger, Kim, Kuncel & Pomerantz, 2019). For example, parents can help educators by recording what children can do at home and showing the video to the educator or vice versa, where the educator can demonstrate how to solve a mathematical problem and share a video with the parents to help at home. Parents may also share what expectations they have at home for their children or what their expectations are for the teacher according to their cultural and educational background.

Flexibility in Meeting Parents/Caretakers

Many times, parents with linguistically diverse backgrounds come from lower socio-economic status which may mean that they are not always available to meet during the day due to work or lack of transportation. According to the Department of Education (2016), linguistically diverse students represented 14 percent of all homeless children enrolled in public U.S. schools. For this reason, giving parents or caretakers of linguistically diverse children alternative ways to meet may help teachers accomplish their goals more effectively. To this end, it is important for educators to remain flexible and make themselves available in different ways. Teachers may offer their support by meeting over the telephone, online (Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.), in person during the day or after school, or at different locations that may be accessible for the parents/caregivers (home, community center, etc.). This is especially important for students who may have accommodation and transportation issues.

Interpreters

Effective communication also includes having an interpreter when needed so that parents can understand the information provided and ask questions freely (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). Educators can also ask for assistance when sending home flyers, and newsletters, or explaining homework assignments for them to be translated. Many schools have ESL/bilingual personnel that may help with these tasks, but schools need to provide “translation or interpretation from appropriate and competent individuals and not rely on or ask students, siblings, friends, or untrained school staff to translate or interpret for parents” (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). If schools do not have access to personnel that may help with translation, educators can advocate for the school to budget money for these materials as the relationship between school and home is crucial for the success of every student (Uzum & Contreras-

Vanegas, 2020). As educators can support the relationship with parents by having effective communication, they can also support effective learning in the classroom with their students with culturally relevant teaching.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Educators can support the educational success of all their students if they incorporate different cultures as this creates a safe learning environment for everyone. By incorporating examples from different cultures, students are better able to connect to the lessons and activate their schema (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2018), and make meaningful contributions in class discussions. Teachers can incorporate culturally relevant information in lessons by showing visuals, and videos, sharing objects from different countries, or including characters with different abilities. For example, if educators in Texas are teaching about landforms in social studies using the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) 4.A. “to identify major landforms and bodies of water, including each of the seven continents and each of the oceans, on maps and globes” (Texas Administrative Code, 2018), they can show pictures of different parts of the world that students are from. Students may also share pictures of landforms from their home country or the country in which their family members are from. During science instruction, if there is a lesson about animals, teachers can incorporate animals seen in different countries and again have students share what animals they have seen when visiting other parts of the world.

Another example is during reading instruction, teachers may choose culturally relevant textbooks in their lessons. These books may have a setting in a different country, characters speaking a different language, or characters with different ability levels. Books may be written in different languages and have English alongside them. There are books available in a bilingual/dual language copy that help students read in their first language (L1) and be able to

compare the vocabulary in their second language (L2). An example of a culturally relevant story about day of the dead written both in Spanish and English is *The spirit of tío Fernando* by Morella Fuenmayor. By including books with different languages and characters of different abilities, students can relate to them and make personal connections.

Culturally relevant teaching encapsulates the different needs dual-identified students require to be successful in the classroom. Anytime language is involved, it is critical for educators to remember that it is part of a person's cultural identity. Inclusive teachers should encourage students to use their L1 to help them while they are still learning their L2 and remind them that it is an asset and not a hindrance to knowing two or more languages.

Translanguaging in the Classroom

When writing, students should be allowed to incorporate words or phrases that are in their L1. This practice is often referred to as “translanguaging.” Wu, Garza, and Guerra, (2020) define the concept as “how language users strategically select a language, or some features of it, and incorporate them into their language practices to serve their communication needs,” (p. 25).

The reason to allow students to use L1 within their writing assignments in English (also known as a translanguaging approach) is that there may be words that do not translate well. For example, if a student is going to talk about their fifteenth birthday party it does not hold the same significance as if they were to write it in Spanish, their L1, as the following “*mi quinceañera*.” If a student were to translate this to English as “my fifteenth birthday party,” it does not hold the same significance as the word *quinceañera*. The significance of a *quinceañera* is a celebration of a young girl becoming a young lady (Socci, 2021). When students are allowed to use their L1 within their assignments, educators are taking a translanguaging approach to teaching and

allowing students to express their full thoughts and share meaningful experiences. As educators focus on incorporating the students' L1 in their writing, it is also important they include linguistic and academic accommodations or modifications.

Accommodations/Modifications

Educators need to be prepared to create both linguistic accommodations and academic modifications for their students. Linguistic accommodations include adapting lessons according to the child's English proficiency. English proficiency levels may differ according to the four domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The levels of English may vary between beginner, intermediate, advanced, and advanced high (Wu, Garza & Guerra, 2020). It is important for educators to know what level their culturally linguistic student holds in each domain before they can create accommodations for any lesson.

According to Wright, Wright, and Webb O'Connor (2017), accommodations keep the child learning the same information but may need additional time to complete the task and a modification creates a change in a test or assignment such as completing only half of the test. Linguistically diverse learners without disabilities may need accommodations to "attempt to level the playing field by teaching compensatory strategies or techniques," (Wright, Wright, & Connor, 217, p. 54) unlike students with disabilities who may need modifications. Educators with linguistically diverse learners who also have a disability will need modifications done to their assignments to be sure they are at the adequate language level and content level.

Accommodations educators use can include when teaching is providing one-on-one support, partnering students according to English proficiency level, providing extra time to complete an assignment, providing a word bank, providing sentence stems, chunking information

in more manageable sections, allowing students to use their L1, etc. (Texas Education Agency, 2009; Wright, Wright & Connor, 2017). For example, in a second-grade classroom, an educator may have students working on writing the stages of the water cycle and a beginner/intermediate EL may have sentence stems to help them write a complete sentence such as, “The first step in the water cycle is _____.”

Modifications for children with an IEP may be very specific to their needs, but some ideas may be to simplify the content to the level of understanding of the student or reduce the number of math problems that they will need to complete (Wright, Wright, & Connor, 2017). For example, a child who is in the second grade has an IEP that requires her to work on single-digit addition and subtraction word problems while her typically developing peers are working on a more complex math problem. This student can still work on word problems, but the level of complexity will match their developmental level and still work on the skill their typically developing peers are working on.

Accommodations and modifications need to be thoughtfully prepared for each student to ensure the success of their academic growth. Whether culturally linguistic students are working to improve their target language (English) or working on growing in their content knowledge, educators still need to challenge them and have high, but realistic expectations for each one of them. The balance between meeting the students where they are academically and linguistically is a balance that any teacher can do if they are well prepared for the task. Table 1 below summarizes all the strategies listed above with the possible impact they will have if applied in the classroom. Table 2 connects the different strategies with personnel working together.

Table 1

Summary of Strategies

Strategy	Summary	Who is involved	Impact
Collaboration with colleagues	Open communication with ESL specialists, SPED educators, and other educators is required to work as a team.	ESL specialists, SPED educators, and general educators.	This collaboration builds confidence to support students' success by avoiding possible educational gaps.
Effective communication between parents/caretakers and educators	Educators can help families get involved in their child's education at school and home.	ESL specialists, SPED educators, general educators, and parents/caregivers	Effective communication helps keep everyone on the same page to work towards the same goal: support students in their academic success.
Flexibility with meeting parents/caretakers	Teachers can be flexible when meeting parents/caretakers by telephone, online, in person during the day or after school, or at different locations accessible to them (home, community center, etc.). It is also important to provide interpreters when needed.	ESL specialists, SPED educators, general educators, and parents/caregivers, potential interpreters	Flexibility with meeting parents/caretakers helps build trust to better support the student at school.
Culturally responsive teaching	Incorporate different examples from different cultures by showing videos, and visuals, sharing objects from different countries, or including characters with different abilities.	ESL specialists, SPED educators, and general educators.	Culturally responsive teaching helps build a positive relationship with students and helps them connect to the information on a deeper level.
Translanguaging in the classroom	Allow students to use their L1 in the classroom.	ESL specialists, SPED educators, and general educators.	Allowing translanguaging in the classroom demonstrates educators have a full understanding of the development of a new language as students need time to transition using their new language while making connections to their first language.
Accommodations/Modifications	Linguistic accommodations: teach strategies and techniques to complete the same	ESL specialists, SPED educators, and general educators.	Applying accommodations/modifications assures equity in the students' education.

work as others. Have partners at the same English proficiency level, extra time, provide sentence stems, word bank, etc.
 Academic modifications: creating a change in a test or assignment to the level of understanding.

Table 2*Strategy Connections with Personnel*

Strategy	General Educator	ESL Specialist	SPED Teacher	Parent/Caregiver
Collaboration with colleagues	X	X	X	
Effective communication between parents/caretakers and educators	X	X	X	X
Flexibility with meeting parents/caretakers	X	X	X	X
Culturally responsive teaching	X	X	X	
Translanguaging in the classroom	X	X	X	
Accommodations/ Modifications	X	X	X	

Conclusion

Dual-identified students have many challenges they will encounter and need to overcome during their academic schooling (Park & Thomas, 2012). Educators will need to be better prepared to support ELs with special needs (e.g., hearing impairments, intellectual disability, autism spectrum, etc.) in their classrooms. Educators of dual-identified students have many strategies they can use to help meet both their academic and linguistic needs. Educators can create effective communication with the family/caregivers of dual-identified students by remaining flexible and making themselves available for parent-teacher conferences in different ways (in-person meetings, phone, etc.) and sharing information with families in a language they can understand. Educators may also include translanguaging and other culturally responsive teaching techniques in their lessons by having students share information from their background and allowing students to use their L1 within their assignments as they transition to all English. Finally, educators need to be aware of how to properly implement accommodations and modifications in their lessons according to their linguistic or academic needs. With these strategies, educators of dual-identified students will have a better opportunity to be successful in meeting the needs of this special population.

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