



English Learners: Is This Child Mislabeled?

Est. Time: 1 Hour

Objective

Learn about and discuss some of the issues related to cultural and linguistic differences, student assessment, and placement decisions.

Scenario

Serge Romanich, a third-grade student and refugee from Serbia, spoke limited English. His education had been sporadic at best and the new elementary school he was attending had tested and classified him as having a learning disability.

A week before school was scheduled to start, Harry Simms, the principal at Oakwood Elementary, was busy at his desk. The school secretary entered his office and said, “There are some people here to see you. I think they want to enroll a student.”

Harry stood up and welcomed the visitors, two women and an eight-year-old boy.

“I am Byona Romanich and this is Serge,” said one of the women. The other woman quickly added, “I am Byona’s sister-in-law, Trina. I am here to interpret for her because she speaks only French, Russian, and Spanish—very little English. She would like to enroll Serge in the school.”

Trina translated as Byona talked. “Serge was born in Serbia and his development was completely normal, just like the other little boys of the village. He was getting ready to begin school when the Serbian war began. We went to France and stayed with relatives outside Vichy. Although Serge was ready to begin school, he was unable to attend until the next school year due to my extended hospital stay. During his schooling in France, he did not speak the language very well and received no reading instruction. At that point, Serge, his sister, and I traveled to America to join my brother.”

Harry did not know how to respond. He decided simply to welcome Serge to Oakwood and assure Mrs. Romanich the school staff would help him adjust to his new environment.

Serge was placed in a third-grade class and received additional services from the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) program. He made very little progress over the next few months. Serge was essentially a nonreader and showed little aptitude in the LEP class. His teacher suggested to Mrs. Romanich that perhaps Serge had a learning disability that should be explored with testing.



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Scenario [Cont.]

Mrs. Romanich rejected that possibility, stating that she felt her son would catch up as he became more proficient in speaking the language.

By the end of the year, Serge had not caught up. He was still struggling with the language and had made very little academic progress. Mrs. Romanich reluctantly agreed to have Serge tested. When the testing was complete, she met with Serge's teachers, the principal, and the school psychologist. The school psychologist read the evaluation results. "Serge's score on the Leiter (a nonverbal intelligence test often used with non-English speakers) was 105. This score falls within the average range of intelligence. On the Woodcock-Johnson Test of Cognitive Abilities, he scored at least 2 standard deviations below the mean in the areas of auditory processing, short-term memory, comprehension knowledge, and fluid reasoning—tasks that typically measure an individual's verbal abilities. He scored in the average range in long-term processing, processing speed, and visual processing; these tasks are mostly perceptual. On the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement, Serge scored 2 standard deviations below the mean in reading, written language, and knowledge. He scored in the average range in math."

The school psychologist then turned to Mrs. Romanich and her interpreter and said, "This pattern of scores, achievement scores 2 standard deviations or more below the intelligence score, is indicative of a learning disability. In addition, the equally wide gap between Serge's verbal and nonverbal scores supports the proposition that he has a learning disability. He would benefit from individualized and small-group instruction for part of the day in a resource room." Everyone around the table nodded in agreement except Serge's mother.

Mrs. Romanich said, "I think Serge is just having trouble picking up the language. At home he does fine. He seems so intelligent to me."

"He is intelligent, Mrs. Romanich, but because of his learning disability, he is not making as much progress as he could. We can help him overcome challenges and achieve his full potential by providing more individualized instruction. He will also continue to receive services in the LEP class," the psychologist responded. Mrs. Romanich finally agreed to the placement.

Despite his new placement, Serge made limited progress the next year in fourth grade. However, fifth grade proved to be a true success story for Serge. His new resource teacher, Mrs. Evans, was in her third year of teaching. She was impressed by the range of students at the school, including a large population of children of Serbian descent. She became interested in finding out as much as she could about the culture and background of her students in order to develop a relationship with them. She developed an especially close relationship with Serge.



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Scenario [Cont.]

Mrs. Evans worked with Serge in a resource pull-out program for two hours every day. She also went into Serge's classroom three times each week for language arts in order to provide him with additional support. Serge's English speaking proficiency increased as well as his reading skills. The combination of resource room instruction and an inclusive language class proved to be effective. Serge progressed from being a nonreader to reading and speaking English at a second-grade level. His math skills were even stronger.

Mrs. Evans observed firsthand Serge's rapid academic achievement. She noted that when Serge was introduced to a new word and its definition, he was able to retain that knowledge. Although Serge was still a quiet child and hesitant to become involved in detailed English conversations, he was very comfortable when talking socially to his peers.

Because of his rapid academic growth, Mrs. Evans began to question Serge's diagnosis of a learning disability. She decided to check out his records in the school office. As she read his file, she discovered that the initial testing was done in English and Serbian, but Serbian was used only if Serge indicated that he did not understand what was being said. She thought of the gains Serge had made this year. Did he really have a learning disability, or did he simply need more time to learn and feel comfortable speaking English? Could the testing results simply be a result of poor language skills and not a learning disability per se? She continued to ponder the situation as she closed Serge's file and handed it back to the secretary.

Questions/Discussion Topics

1. Do you think Serge's skills were assessed adequately? Do you think he was correctly identified as having a learning disability. Why or why not?
2. Do you think a special education placement was appropriate for Serge? Why or why not? What kind of progress do you think he would have made in a general education setting without individualized instruction?
3. Mrs. Evans learned about the cultural background of her students. How do you think this knowledge impacted her teaching?



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★ What a STAR Sheet Is

A STAR (STrategies And Resources) Sheet provides you with a description of a well-researched strategy that can help you solve the case studies in this unit.

Discussion Points

- Language difficulties or learning disability
- Assessment of students who speak English as a second language
- Factors necessary for success of English learners (ELs)
- Importance of understanding culture

What the Research and Resources Say

- English learners often show the same difficulties with learning, attention, social skills, and behavioral and emotional balance as students with learning disabilities. (Salend & Salinas, 2003)
- Salend and Salinas (2003) make six recommendations for multidisciplinary teams (teams which look at whether students should be referred for special education) to follow when assessing English learners:
 1. Diversify the multidisciplinary team—include family and community members as well as professionals familiar with the student's language and culture.
 2. Assess students in both their native and secondary languages and compare these results.
 3. Consider the processes and factors of learning a second language. For example, was the student educated in their native language?
 4. Use a variety of alternative assessments instead of traditional standardized testing.
 5. Identify life experiences that may be impacting learning.
 6. Analyze all the data and develop an appropriate educational plan. (Salend & Salinas, 2003)
- Early intervention for English learners who are having difficulty in school needs to be implemented by general education teachers. Supportive school climates and instruction tailored to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically different students is needed if English learners are going to be successful.



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What the Research and Resources Say [Cont.]

Simply focusing on remediating students' learning and behavior problems will not result in significant academic progress (Ortiz, 2001).

- According to Ortiz, factors to the success of English learners include:
 - “A shared knowledge base among educators of effective ways to work with English language learners”
 - “Recognition of the importance of a student’s native language”
 - “Collaborative school and community relationships”
 - “Academically rich programs that integrate basic skill instruction with the teaching of higher-order skills in both the native language and in English”
 - “Use of effective instructional strategies”
- Understanding cultural differences is important not only to learn about the student but also to gain insight into why a student responds in certain ways. For example, cultural differences may impact how a student reacts to classroom rules. In addition, students from other cultures will often not have the background knowledge assumed by textbook authors (Schoen & Schoen, 2003).

Keep in Mind

- Second language learners often go through a silent period where they process what they hear but do not verbalize a reply.
- Teaching strategies known to be effective with English learners should be used before referring for special education.
- Your own cultural beliefs and expectations may differ from students who are from another culture. This may be an important consideration and may have implications for your classroom.



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Resources

- Salend, S. J., & Salinas, A. (2003). Language differences or learning difficulties: The work of the multidisciplinary team. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 35(4), 36–43.
- Schoen, S. F., & Schoen, A. A. (2003). Action research in the classroom: Assisting a linguistically different learner with special needs. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 35(3), 16–21.
- Ortiz, A. (2001). *English language learners with special needs: Effective instructional strategies*. (ERIC Digest ED469207). ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. Retrieved on December 10, 2004, from <http://www.ldonline.org/article.php?id=744&loc=51>