

Identification, Assessment, and Instruction of English Language Learners with Learning Difficulties in the Elementary and Intermediate Grades

A guide for educators in Ontario school boards (March, 2014)

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Purpose of this Guide

This guide is intended to support educators in Ontario who work with English language learners (ELLs) and/or special education students. Specifically, this guide focuses on elementary and intermediate school-age ELLs who are struggling in reading and writing. The aim of this guide is to help teachers consider whether struggling ELLs have a learning difficulty or whether they are struggling merely because they are ELLs, and to help teachers and schools address the needs of those students. The information provided can be used by teachers, School Support Teams (SSTs), and administrators.

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Background Information

Demographic Context

Many immigrants to Canada settle in Ontario, specifically in Toronto and the surrounding areas¹. The student population in Ontario comes from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in particular, serves a high number (i.e., 53%) of students who speak a language other than English at home². In Ontario as a whole, 20% of students have a home language other than English or French³.

Depending on their language proficiency, some of these students are identified as English language learners (ELLs) and given support to develop English language skills. In Ontario, 4% to 8% of students are identified as ELLs³. In the TDSB, the percentage grows to just over 15%². Additionally, 17% of elementary students and 23% of secondary students across Ontario are identified as needing special education support in a range of programs and settings³.

The number of students who fit into both groups (ELL and special education) is not known. From the statistics provided, it is clear that this number is not negligible. The needs of these students, and the processes and strategies used to best support them, are not well defined.

English Language Learners

In Ontario, students who arrive at school without sufficient English language abilities are referred to as English language learners (ELLs). These may include immigrants born in a non-English-speaking country or those born and raised in Canada in non-English speaking homes. These students are supported through English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Literacy Development (ELD) programming and services, offered through a range of service models.

Within one to two years of arrival, most immigrant ELLs acquire conversational and day-to-day language proficiency^{4,13}. However, it can take five to seven years to acquire grade and age appropriate English academic and literacy skills^{4,13}.

Although typically developing ELLs may struggle in school to some extent because their English language skills are still developing, with exposure to spoken and written English and appropriate teaching, these students can perform just as well in school as their monolingual peers⁵. As in the general population, within the ELL population there will be some students who struggle more than other ELLs, for a wide variety of reasons.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has published several excellent resources about the needs of English language learners and the strategies and techniques teachers can use to support them in our schools. These resources are listed in the *Resources* section at the end of this guide.

Struggling English Language Learners

Once students are identified as struggling, educators need to determine whether the difficulties are due to English language learning a learning difficulty, or both. Students may need to be taught differently depending on: the root cause of their difficulty⁶, considerations of developmental level, and/or prior educational history. It

can be challenging to differentiate between students who are struggling due to a lack of English development, and those who are affected by a more pervasive learning difficulty⁷.

Sometimes characteristics of typical ELLs look similar to the learning difficulties experienced by students with special education needs⁶. It is necessary to gain more information and to go through a systematic and focused process to determine the root of each student's difficulties, and the most appropriate and effective method to address his/her needs⁶. The chart below outlines some of these difficulties.

Student Difficulties Explained Through an ELL and Special Education Lens

Behaviour Observed in the Student	Reason the Difficulty may be Experienced by an ELL	Possible Special Education Explanation
Difficulty in reading and spelling words	Lack of exposure to English word reading and spelling; unfamiliarity with English words	Memory problems; phonological processing deficits; difficulties reading at the word-level (i.e., dyslexia)
Difficulty in comprehending text	Knowledge of English language skills (sentence structure, vocabulary, grammar, morphology, pragmatics) underdeveloped; lack of relevant background knowledge	Language processing problems; sequencing problems; memory problems; difficulty drawing inferences; difficulty with connectives
Poor writing skills	Develops in tandem with language; student does not have the language skills to express thinking	Organization or processing problems; memory problems; fine motor skills or motor-sequencing problems; slow processing speed; difficulty developing language skills
Easily distracted	Doesn't understand; requires more visual/concrete support; is overwhelmed & exhausted by language learning process	Auditory processing difficulty; attention problems, including ADHD; processing speed difficulty
Trouble following directions	Doesn't know the vocabulary used; needs time to comprehend an utterance in one language and translate into another.	Sequencing or memory problems; attention problems; language processing problems
Can't remember information taught	Overwhelmed with multiple demands of language learning; may do better in their native language	Memory problem; language processing problems
Adds, deletes or replaces words; paraphrases when speaking	May not yet have learned the word, lacks the grammar to use the word correctly	Memory or oral language processing difficulties; word finding difficulties
Trouble retelling a story	Unfamiliar with the vocabulary or content of the story	Organization or processing problems; long-term memory problems
Difficulty with math word problems	Lacks the vocabulary and/or cultural context to understand the problem	Language processing or abstract/fluid reasoning problems; working memory difficulties; dyscalculia
Aggressive or withdrawn behaviour	Lack of educational experience; different cultures have different behavioural norms; withdrawn behaviour may be due to a 'silent period' which is normal for language learners	Self-regulation issues; social communication concerns; language processing problems; anxiety or depression
Social and emotional problems	Stress related to moving to a new country and culture often leads to social and emotional issues	Self-regulation issues; mental health concerns; learning difficulties and related frustration

Adapted from: Hamayan, E., Marler, B., Sanchez-Lopez, C, and Damino, J. *Special Education Considerations for English language learners: Delivering a Continuum of Services*. Caslon Publishing, 2007, p. 40 and Connecticut Administrators of Programs for English language learners (CAPELL). (2011). *English language learners and Special Education: A Resource Handbook*. Connecticut State Department of Education, p. 11.

Frequently Asked Questions about English Language Learners Suspected of Having a Learning Difficulty

1. How likely is it that my ELL student has a learning disability?

ELLs are equally as likely as monolingual speakers to have a learning disability⁸. In the general population about 12% will have a learning disability¹³; whether they speak one language or several, whether they speak English or another language. However, for many reasons, the same percentage of ELLs is not necessarily *identified* as having a learning disability⁶. ELLs have been both under- and over-identified as having learning disabilities. This will be discussed further in Question 8.

A 2010 study by the TDSB looked at special education demographics and patterns within that school board². This study showed that students identified with special needs are more often than not, born in Canada. Although 53% percent of all TDSB students speak a language other than English at home, less than 40% of students identified as exceptional fit this category². This suggests that students who have recently arrived to Canada are less likely to receive special education support even though they may need it. There are no statistics available about the number of ELLs in special education or about students who are identified as needing both ESL/ELD and special education support. It is probable that ELLs who also have a learning disability are underidentified in the TDSB. This pattern is also likely applicable throughout Ontario.

Definition of a learning difficulty:

In this guide, students who are described as having a *learning difficulty* are students who are academically at-risk. Their difficulties would not come from a lack of language exposure, social/emotional concerns, or cultural differences. These students may potentially meet the criteria for a diagnosis of learning disability. The focus of this document is on ELLs who may have a learning difficulty. Students with other needs or disabilities will not be discussed in this document.



- ❖ Learning Disabilities (LD) can be expected to be evenly distributed among all students; ELLs are just as likely as other students to have a special learning need⁸.
- ❖ There are reports of both overidentification and underidentification of ELLs with LD⁶.

2. How do I know if an ELL has learning difficulties and requires special education support? How do at-risk ELLs differ from typically developing ELLs?

English language learners are, by definition, developing English proficiency and can be expected to have some difficulties in school. That said, these difficulties differ from students with learning difficulties. The general indicators of a students with learning difficulties are outlined on the next page.

Characteristics of Typically Developing ELLs vs. ELLs Who May Have a Learning Difficulty

Typically Developing ELLs	ELLs who may have a Learning Difficulty
Can be expected to make steady progress	Not making progress, or progress is uneven
Will likely lag behind peers in certain areas related to English language learning (e.g., vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral language)	Difficulties are persistent and pervasive despite consistent and targeted instruction
Should perform similarly to peers academically after a few years in school, if they begin school in English at a young age	Has not made the same progress as other students with similar backgrounds (linguistic and academic)
Can be expected to perform similarly to peers on cognitive processing tasks (e.g., memory, phonemic awareness, speed of processing)	Possible deficits in cognitive processing skills
Usually develop word-level skills (i.e., decoding and spelling) and reading fluency with adequate instruction and development	Persistent problems in word reading (decoding), reading fluency, and spelling
Can be expected to develop reading comprehension skills as oral language, knowledge of grammar and sentence structure and vocabulary grows although they will likely always lag behind peers to some extent.	Understanding of written text does not increase as general language knowledge develops. Difficulties are persistent.
Writing skills develop with oral language abilities	Writing is very challenging and is not reflective of oral language skills
Gradually develop academic language, grammatical and morphological skills observed in spoken and written work	Persistent grammatical and morphological difficulties, and limited vocabulary in spoken and written work
Steady progress in all languages spoken when academic support is provided in each	Difficulties in all languages spoken
No history of academic difficulties in home country (if applicable)	Indications of academic difficulties prior to immigration (if applicable)



- ❖ Is the student making the same progress as other students with a similar background?
- ❖ Are the areas of struggle typical for an ELL?
- ❖ Is the student responding to standard ESL instruction/intervention?

Difficulties Faced by English Language Learners

ELLs may have difficulties in a number of areas: receptive and expressive oral language, vocabulary, morpho-syntax, grammar, word reading, text reading fluency, and/or reading comprehension. They may also show delays in learning academic content and with socialization. Although these difficulties are expected and normal, they are sometimes perceived as learning difficulties and can present similarly to the needs of students with special education needs. Therein lies the issue with accurate identification.

All ELLs, even those who are typically developing, can be expected to face some degree of academic difficulty. Even though social and everyday English can develop quite quickly, research suggests that it can take an ELL at least 5 to 7 years to develop the academic and language skills of their monolingual peers⁴. Adolescent ELLs

may face more challenges in this respect and struggle with academic subjects due to lack of adequate academic language skills.

Academic language is:

- Talking, reading and writing about abstract concepts or those not related to personal experience
- Subject-specific, more sophisticated and low-frequency vocabulary
- Use of grammatical constructions not used in daily conversation
- Often referred to as the language used in school

Adapted from Supporting English language learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators, Grades 1 to 8 (2008).

Various factors can affect an ELL’s academic achievement. These include factors such as educational history (e.g., did the learner attend school on a regular basis), socio-economic status, exposure to English, age of arrival and length of time in Canada, and/or a learning disability.

With adequate and consistent instruction, ELLs tend to develop similarly to native speakers¹⁰. Specifically, similar patterns of development in ELLs can be observed in phonological awareness⁵, word and early text reading⁵, spelling⁹, and early writing skills¹¹. In contrast, particular difficulty can be observed in oral language skills such as vocabulary¹⁰—especially with regard to academic language—and listening comprehension (e.g., listening to academic language, figurative language). In these areas, ELLs may follow the same pattern of development, but experience a persistent lag behind their monolingual counterparts¹⁰.

Literacy Skill Areas: Typical ELL Development and Indicators of Learning Difficulty *Assessment tools are listed in the Resources section at the end of the guide. Assessments are in English unless otherwise noted.*

Phonological Skills: The ability to hear and manipulate the sound components of words.	
<p>What is expected of typically developing ELLs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform similarly to native speakers • Possibly to have some difficulty if native language is phonologically very different from English • Apply phonological skills to both languages 	<p>Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going weaknesses in phonological awareness (e.g., inability to match sounds to letters, hear rhymes, to replace one sound with another, break a word into sounds, blend sounds together)
<p>Can be assessed using: DIBELS; Roswell-Chall Auditory Blending Test; Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation; Test of Auditory Analysis Skills; informal phonological segmentation, matching and blending tasks; identifying rhymes in songs; using “Pig Latin”</p> <p>*Phonological awareness is considered a key predictor of difficulties with word level reading and spelling. It can be reliably tested in English with ELLs.</p>	

Word Reading Skills: Reading words or simple texts by using sight word vocabulary and/or decoding skills.

What is expected of typically developing ELLs:

- Make steady progress
- Word-level reading at par with monolingual peers (after a few years of schooling in English)
- Read words with reasonable fluency even if other language skills are still not native-like (e.g., oral language, vocabulary, grammar)

Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:

- Word reading difficulties in both languages (i.e., home language and English)
- Difficulty remembering or naming letters, sounds, and reading sight words accurately and effortlessly
- Not progressing despite targeted instruction in word reading

Can be assessed using: DRA, DIBELS, Dolch word lists, reading words out of context with accuracy, being able to sound out unfamiliar words, being able to sound out non or pseudowords, first language assessment

Spelling: The ability to spell common words using patterns, sounds, visual shape, and memory skills. English spelling is particularly difficult because of the irregularity of the the writing system; spelling doesn't always match pronunciation.

What is expected of typically developing ELLs:

- Make steady progress
- Learn from instruction
- Apply rules and patterns to new words
- Apply what is learned in reading to spelling and vice-versa
- Spell as well as native speakers with sufficient classroom instruction
- Spell correctly more complex derived words (e.g., *perform-performance; careful-carefully*)

Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:

- Persistent spelling errors
- Similar error patterns in both languages (if literate in first language)
- Unique spelling patterns not attributed to influence of the first language
- Difficulty remembering how common words are spelled
- Difficulty in spelling the morphological components

Can be assessed using: Kottmeyer Diagnostic Spelling Test, Gentry Developmental Spelling Test, Wechsler Fundamentals, assessment of student performance in spelling of simple and complex words

Vocabulary: Knowledge of the meaning of words in oral communication and written language (reading, writing, listening and speaking)

What is expected of typically developing ELLs:

- More limited vocabulary in English than native speakers when they enter school
- Gradual improvement in vocabulary knowledge
- Difficulties with academic vocabulary but still making progress
- More limited breadth and depth of vocabulary than monolingual peers
- Gradual improvement in morphological skills (inflections, derivations) – that is making new words by manipulating words parts (e.g., understanding that –ed makes a verb past tense or the understanding of how “fail” and “failure” are related to each other)

Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:

- Limited vocabulary, even in native language
- Difficulty remembering or accessing words that have been taught
- Failure to make connections between known words and new words
- Little progress over time
- Not able to make connections between words with the same root (e.g., medicine and medical)

Can be assessed using: observation, analysis of reading and/or writing, asking students to provide opposites or synonyms of common words, first language assessment

Syntactic (Grammar) Skills: The ability to understand and produce grammatically correct sentences in reading and writing, and in oral communication

What is expected of typically developing ELLs:

- Apply skills to understand what is heard and read, and in oral language and writing
- Possible struggle with more complex grammatical structures (e.g., conditionals, passive voice, complex sentences)
- Improvement over time

Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:

- Doesn't apply grammatical knowledge and context when reading to make inferences about unknown words and understand texts
- Uses unusual language patterns that differ from others from similar language background
- Poor grammatical knowledge in first language
- Little improvement over time

Can be assessed using: Error analysis of writing or reading, sentence repetition, sentence correction, paraphrasing sentences, first language assessment, or parents can provide information about first language skills

Reading Comprehension: The ability to gain understanding of a written text, by integrating grammatical, vocabulary, word reading, and background knowledge.

<p>What is expected of typically developing ELLs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggle in reading comprehension because of its connection to oral language and vocabulary knowledge • Have misunderstandings due to lack of prior knowledge (which reduce over time) • Make steady progress in reading comprehension • Match oral skills with reading comprehension; as oral language improves, so should reading comprehension 	<p>Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading comprehension skills are lower than what would be expected based on word reading skills • Failure to make steady progress and apply skills and strategies being taught • Absence of evidence of problem-solving skills such as, drawing together higher-order thinking and basic skills, drawing inferences. • Difficulties in being able to retell what was read
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Can be assessed using: DRA, Flynt-Cooter, CASI, informal assessment, observation, asking student to orally give a summary after reading

Writing: Putting ideas on paper in different genres (narratives, expository), combining spelling, vocabulary, syntax, fine motor skills and style. Writing stems from oral language and is directly related to reading.

<p>What is expected of typically developing ELLs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing reflects oral language development, ease in spelling, and in applying writing conventions (e.g., capitals, punctuation, quotation marks) • Writing is indicative of the development of language skills, including grammar (e.g., different kinds of simple and complex sentences), vocabulary (e.g., use of synonyms), cohesion (e.g., use of conjunctions, pronouns); familiarity with different genres (e.g., fictional stories, newspaper) • Performance could be at the same level as monolingual peers, for students who had most of their schooling in English and who first learned to read and write in English • Application of script conventions (e.g., “once upon a time...”, format of a letter) 	<p>Indicators of a possible learning difficulty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to apply skills used in oral language and reading to writing (e.g., use of verb tenses, sentence structure) • Struggles to get ideas on the page or pieces of writing do not increase in length over time • Difficulties organizing thoughts • Difficulties in spelling (e.g., same word spelled differently) • No or minimal improvement on skills taught • Sentences are not increasing in complexity • Does not develop understanding of writing conventions (e.g., periods, capitals) • Is not able to use simple vocabulary or simple spelling when writing • Script conventions are missing
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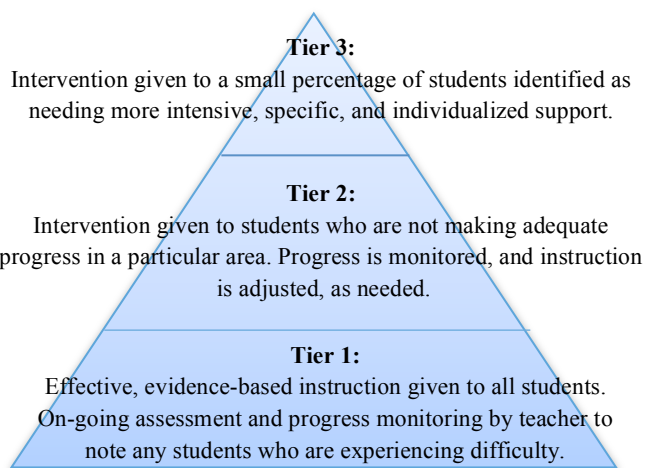
Can be assessed using: writing samples, comparison with peers’ writing, analysis of types of errors in writing

3. What do I do if I am concerned about the progress of an ELL student and suspect s/he has special education needs related to literacy development?

STEPS TO FOLLOW

As with all students, teachers should present the ELL students they are concerned about to an In-School Support Team (IST). The IST consists of school-based teachers and administrators and also may involve parents. If the student is working with an ESL teacher, s/he should be invited to offer information about assessment, instruction, and progress. Prior to the IST, teachers should speak to the student's parents or guardians to gather information about the student's background so that a profile about the student can be developed. They should also collect classroom based assessment information about what the student is able to do and areas of difficulty s/he is experiencing. The flowchart **Process to Identify ELLs as Needing Special Education Support** (p.10), followed by more detailed information, outlines the typical process to follow in order to assess and identify ELLs in need of special education support.

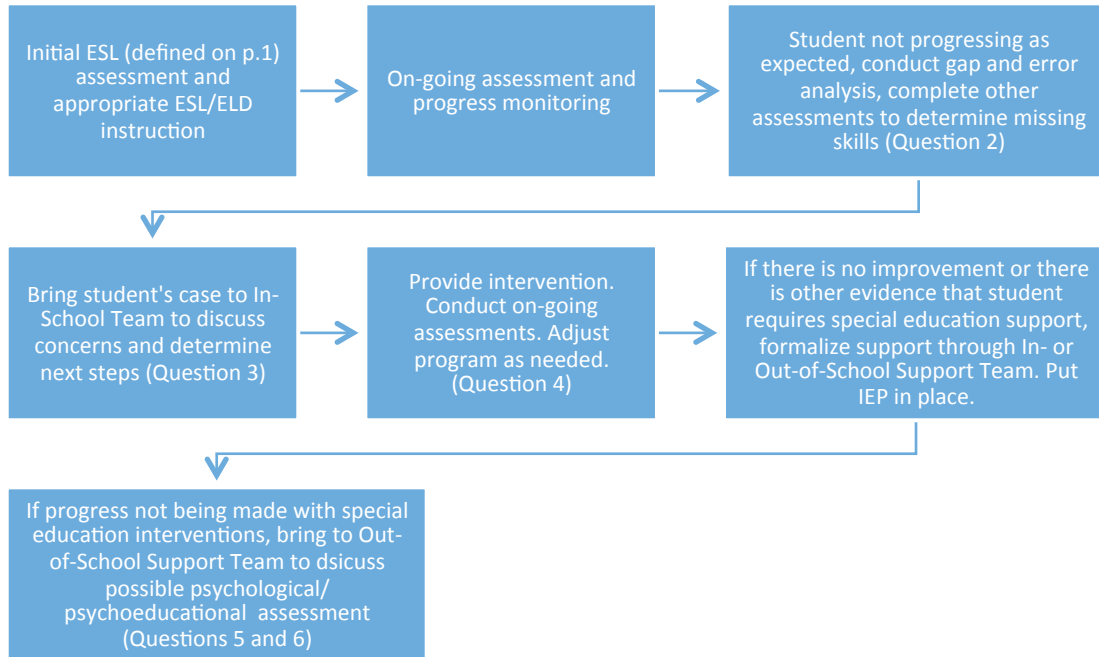
The Tiered Approach (the *Response to Intervention* model used in Ontario)



The Tiered Approach is a model for on-going assessment, monitoring, and preventative intervention for students. Through this model, students are provided with intervention as soon as the need for support is evident, and without the need to wait for a formal assessment. The approach is based on high-quality, evidence-based assessment and instructional methods; and intervention is systematic and sequential. How students respond to the intervention provided in each tier guides future decisions about the need to provide more or less support, or to use different approaches and teaching methods. Decisions regarding students' placement and movement between the tiers are made by In- and Out-of-School Support Teams. These

teams are part of a broader Continuous Assessment model, and are a vital part of the process. The Tiered Approach and the Continuous Assessment model allow for school-based decisions to be made regarding support given to students without the need for formal assessment. This process can be used to identify and provide intervention for ELLs who need special education support. See the *Education for All* and *Learning for All* documents listed in the *Resources* section at the end of the guide for a description of the Continuous Assessment model and the Tiered Approach used in Ontario.

Process to Identify ELLs as Needing Special Educational Support



Step 1 Build a Student Profile

As part of an initial intake interview with parents and/or the student in question, schools should gather background information about the student's history. This should take place for all ELLs. It may be necessary to gather more information later if concerns about a student's learning emerge. This information helps to build the student's profile. The profile is crucial to understanding the student as it may give a context for patterns or behaviours that are observed in school. This is critical in ultimately determining how to best support the student.

What can be included in a student's background profile?

- Language proficiency – languages spoken, basic communication vs. academic vocabulary, proficiency in home and school languages, academic and literacy skills in each language, student's language history can be complicated and may involve different dialects, different first and home languages and different languages spoken in different contexts or for different purposes
- School experience – years and grades attended, language of instruction, special placements, previous academic or other support, past grades, report cards or teacher comments, attendance in heritage programs
- Family history – who the student lives with, history of challenges in school or disabilities, disruptions in schooling, educational experiences of parents
- Social and emotional concerns – relationship with siblings, family or friends, concerns the parents may have, living situation at home, stressors in the home environment, how the student feels about school, history of traumatic or difficult circumstances
- Cultural considerations – any aspects of Canadian culture that may be difficult for the student, differences in schooling in Canada compared to home country, differences in relationships, especially among students and teachers

Step 2 Share Assessment Information

Before presenting a student to an IST, the teacher should collect assessment information and assemble a portfolio. This is information about the student's weaknesses but also strengths as observed formally and informally by the teacher about what the student can do and has difficulty doing.

Classroom assessments to identify deficits and inform programming can include classroom work samples, general class assessments (such as the *Developmental Reading Assessment*), informal assessment and observation, running records, educational assessment and diagnostic assessments. The same early reading screening assessments (i.e., that assess phonological skills, word reading, letter and sound recognition) used with monolingual students can be used with ELLs. These assessments need to be interpreted using other information about the student.

Step 3 Present the Student at an In-school School Team Meeting

At the IST meeting, teachers should share information about the student's progress and the reason for their concerns. A special education teacher on the team may be able to give insight into the interpretation of assessment data and offer ideas for teaching strategies. At the meeting, decisions about next steps will be made. This may include further diagnostic or educational assessment at the school-level, a request for a first language assessment, or strategies and more focused literacy support for the student. One decision might be to bring the student to the Out-of-School Support Team (SST). Like the IST, this team includes representatives from the school but may also include: other ESL and special education teachers, parents, a speech and language pathologist, a social worker, a psychologist, a special education consultant, and other school board staff or professionals who can provide suggestions for supporting the student.

Information to Share with the In-School Support Team

- ❖ Initial and current assessment results, including classroom tasks and writing samples
- ❖ Information about interventions given and accommodations and modifications used and the results
- ❖ Information from parents (or parents invited to share information)
- ❖ Information about the student's background
- ❖ Analysis of difficulties and errors in different skill areas
- ❖ First language assessment report (if available)

Step 4 Provide the Student with Literacy Interventions

If a student is struggling to acquire literacy skills, it is important that age-appropriate interventions begin as soon as possible⁶. There is no reason to wait until a specific level of English has been reached⁵. These interventions should address the identified needs as determined by the development of the student's profile, assessment information and the discussion of the IST. Interventions can be provided by an ESL/ELD teacher, a special education teacher, or a classroom teacher. Even if there is not enough information to determine the root cause of a student's difficulty, it is imperative that interventions to address difficulties begin immediately¹². How the student responds to the intervention and the progress s/he makes can provide further information.



- ❖ Teachers should share concerns about ELLs through the same processes used for all students. Students should be discussed at IST whenever teachers have concerns about their progress even if the student needs continued ESL/ELD support¹³.
- ❖ There is no need to wait until the student is proficient in English in order to begin interventions that target areas of deficit⁵. These classroom-based interventions and adaptations should be age-appropriate and given to the student as soon as possible.

4. What kind of interventions and instructional strategies can I use to promote literacy development for ELLs who are struggling?



- ❖ What is this student struggling to do?
- ❖ What can this student already do? What is his/her starting point?
- ❖ How will I know that this student is learning the skills s/he needs?

Developing an Intervention Plan

Targeted instruction should begin as soon as the deficits are identified. This may happen immediately following the IST meeting, but can also begin before. It is not necessary to continue standard ESL/ELD programming, or to give students time to improve their oral language skills, before targeting identified deficits.

Once it has been determined that an ELL is struggling (beyond what would be typical for an ELL), and needs instruction beyond ESL programming, an individualized program should be developed¹³. Decisions about programming should be based on the student's profile and assessment. As part of the assessment, it is important to determine whether the student is struggling with reading because of word level difficulties such as decoding and spelling, or if they are struggling because of problems with comprehension of factual or inferential aspects of text comprehension¹⁰. Decisions about an appropriate intervention would depend on an accurate assessment of why the student is struggling with reading.

Although there is less research on interventions for ELLs with learning difficulties¹⁰, studies that exist indicate that ELLs benefit from the same types of instruction as struggling monolingual readers⁸. A list of resources offering effective, research-based interventions and teaching strategies is listed in the *Resources* section of this guide.

Literacy intervention can be provided by the regular classroom teacher, ESL/ELD teacher, and/or a special education teacher. A student can receive ESL/ELD programming and more general literacy interventions or special education at the same time¹⁴.

Instruction should be informed by teacher assessment, which provides a baseline or starting point for instruction, and also identifies weaker areas that require intensive instruction. On-going assessment by the teacher is important to monitor progress, and to adjust instruction as needed.

Components of Literacy Instruction

Instruction for ELLs should be comprehensive and include instruction in the core areas of reading (phonological awareness, phonics, word level fluency, accuracy and fluency in text-level reading, and reading comprehension), as well as in oral language (vocabulary, grammar, use of pronouns or conjunctions, use of idioms) and writing¹⁵. It is often the case that ELLs continue to develop oral language and vocabulary skills while building core literacy skills^{9,16}.

ELLs need focused, explicit and intensive instruction in vocabulary development, since this is an area in which these students tend to lag¹⁷. This instruction should aim to build academic and common vocabulary, as well as an understanding of how words work (e.g., word parts and meanings). Teachers may assume that students already know basic or everyday words but ELLs may need these explicitly taught. In addition, they need to learn academic vocabulary (defined on p.5). Vocabulary instruction should allow for multiple exposures to new words, as well as opportunities for students to use the words orally, and in reading and writing. Explicit vocabulary instruction can improve oral language skills, listening and reading comprehension, and writing.

Individual Education Plans

For students with an on-going individualized special education program, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be developed¹⁴. For students who need to continue to develop oral language skills (e.g., vocabulary) or other areas that ELLs typically struggle in, these areas should be incorporated into the IEP¹⁴.

For more information about IEPs and modifications, accommodations, and adaptations for English language learners, see English as a Second Language/English Language Development Research Group of Ontario (ERGO), (2011, June), *English Language Learners: School-Based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment*.



- ❖ Instruction should always be based on the student's level as determined by diagnostic and educational assessment, and should target areas identified as weak^{5,17}.
- ❖ Intervention should begin as soon as difficulties are identified⁶.
- ❖ Instruction should be systematic and explicit, and should incorporate on-going assessment and progress monitoring¹⁸, and opportunities to apply new skills in authentic contexts²⁰
- ❖ Instruction should take language development into account. For ELLs, there should be a focus on different aspects of vocabulary development¹⁵.
- ❖ Learning should also be fun and motivating. Engaging, age-appropriate materials and strategies should be used (please see *Resources*).

5. When is it appropriate to do a psychological assessment on an ELL?

Pre-referral Process

Before a referral to psychological services is considered, the school should already have: (a) attempted to adapt the student's program by using the instructional guidelines outlined in Question 3 (p.9), (b) gathered information about the student's profile, and, (c) involved parents or guardians in discussions about concerns and discussed the student at an IST.

English Language Learners: School-Based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment, a guide by the English as a Second Language/English Language Development Research Group of Ontario (ERGO), provides a comprehensive model for the steps a school should follow before considering a psychological assessment. The ERGO model incorporates the Ministry of Education's current processes around identification of special needs and ELL guidelines. ERGO recommends three stages prior to referral for psychological assessment: Initial assessment and placement, program redevelopment, conference at SST¹³. The chart entitled: **English Language Learners: School-based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment** (p.15) outlines this model.

Appropriateness of Assessing ELLs

When it is appropriate to assess an ELL? There are concerns that ELLs should not be assessed while their English skills are still developing or when they have recently arrived from abroad and/or are still receiving ESL/ELD support. That said, some skills such as phonological awareness, working memory and phonological short-term memory, are strongly related to performance on word- and text-based skills, and performance on these tasks is less affected by language proficiency. It is possible to diagnose a learning disability even when English skills are still developing. It is important that information about the student's rate of learning, progress, first language skills, and instruction given past interventions, are all considered in interpreting the results of an assessment^{19,21}.

To reiterate, it is not necessary to wait until the student has achieved a native-like fluency in English or has spent a prescribed amount of time in Canada, before starting the school team process and/or requesting psychological testing for him/her⁵.

As with all students who are considered for the involvement of psychological services, the school must have already collected evidence that suggests the student may be at-risk for a learning difficulty and considered the performance of this student in comparison with other students from the same background, prior to recommending psychological assessment^{19,21}.

Purpose of a Psychological Assessment

A psychological assessment is often requested when a school wants to gain more information about a student's intellectual levels, informational processing abilities, social/emotional, or academic functioning¹⁹. An assessment can help the school put into place appropriate strategies, programming, and other resources; and can help to inform placement decisions. An assessment can also be used as part of the process to formally identify a student with an exceptionality.



English Language Learners School-Based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment Chart

Phase I – Initial Assessment and Placement

The following should be included in this process: classroom teacher(s), Special Education teachers, ELL teacher, administrators, parents/guardians, and if needed, a qualified interpreter.

A. Complete a Student Profile

Family History Considerations

- Pre migration experiences
- Post migration experiences

Educational History

- Prior schooling
(continuous/disrupted)

Medical Considerations

- Developmental milestones
- Vision, hearing, skills in
first language speaking

B. Assess Student's Stage/Level of English Proficiency based on Ministry Stages of ESL or ELD

C. Determine and Implement an Appropriate Program based on Student's ESL or ELD stage

Consider the following:

- Program Adaptations
 - Modifications (expectations appropriate to English proficiency level)
 - Accommodations (instructional strategies to support achievement)
- Appropriate Assessment (assessment for, as, and of learning)
- Provision of ESL/ELD Resource Teacher support

Phase II – Program Re-development

Initiated if English language learner is not progressing in the adapted program.

Involvement of In-School Support Team

Gather and review additional information and perform gap analysis. Make further program adaptations based on new information. Monitor student progress and provide any additional supports, and/or services as needed.

Review Student Information

- Student Profile
- Academic Gaps
- Access to nutrition and health care
- Self concept and social skills
- Learning style
- First language assessment
- Motivation/ attitudes

Collect Information from:

- Teacher(s)
 - Academic Progress
 - Behaviour/Attitude
- Student
- Parent/Guardian
 - First Language Development
 - Developmental/medical history

Consider Interpersonal Skills

- Observe social skills and acculturation in the following settings:
- Classroom
 - Peer interaction
 - Community

Consider Academic Progress

- Multiple and current work samples
- Current assessments
- Evidence of progress over time
- Progress across content areas

Phase III

English Language Learner's Progress Continues to be of Serious Concern

Conference with in-school support team and parents/guardians regarding recommendation for student to be assessed at a case conference and possibly considered for psychological assessment.

What are some considerations about using psychological assessments with ELLs?

Generally and historically, learning disabilities have been identified using a model that looks at a student's potential (based on an intelligence test scores) and academic achievement. A diagnosis is given to struggling students when there is a discrepancy between a student's observed cognitive abilities and their expected achievement, as measured by standardized psychological assessments^{18,21}. The use of this model and this type of assessment is problematic for many reasons, and for all types of students. For ELLs, it is seen to both over- and under- identify ELLs with learning disabilities^{6, 12}.

Concerns about Using Standardized Assessments

There are several factors related to standardized assessments that are problematic:

- Standardized, norm-referenced psychological assessments are not reliable and valid for use with ELLs, and their use with this population needs to be done with caution^{6,21}.
- Assessment tools have a cultural bias because they inadvertently assume some cultural/life experiences and background knowledge²¹.
- The test-taking environment itself may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar to the students, not taking into account cultural difference (e.g., interacting with strangers, interacting with members of the opposite sex, expecting students to work alone to answer questions)²².
- Assessments usually require that students use language to demonstrate their understanding or knowledge. The language structure or linguistic bias of the assessment can lead to assessments results that are not reflected of true ability⁷.
- The discrepancy model of assessing learning disabilities assumes a discrepancy between assessed intellectual functional and academic functioning^{18,21}. This model implies that disabilities are identified in a valid and reliable manner, overlooking the complexity of bilingualism and individuality of ELLs⁶. Intellectual functioning is assessed through IQ testing, which inherently has cultural and linguistic biases, even when only non-verbal assessments are used¹³.

This is not to say that standardized tests cannot be used with ELLs, but the findings should be interpreted with caution^{13,21}. It is useful to interpret performance in comparison with other, typically developing children from the same background. This comparison can highlight what may be considered normal benchmarks for students from the specific group, such as immigration history, and opportunities to learn English¹⁸. Psychological assessment should always be interpreted with consideration of background information and classroom observations^{19,21}. Measures of an ELL student's current functioning should be considered qualitatively and not be considered as necessarily predictive of any future achievement^{13,19}.

6. Is an assessment in the student's first language necessary?

Any information that can be obtained about the student's first language skills is helpful, although not essential and not always available. That said whenever possible, informal, academic and/or psychological testing in the student's first language, as well as English, should be conducted. Information about the student's abilities in both languages can discern whether there are similar difficulties in both languages; assessment of first language skills can help determine whether the student's learning issues are also present in the first language^{18,21}. A

learning disability would be evident in the first language as well any additional languages the student might learn.

In Ontario, psychological testing is rarely conducted in the student's first language for a variety of reasons, including lack of access to appropriate instruments in the first language or testers who can test in the home language. Further, it may also be that the child is not functionally fluent in the first language. What is more common is a first language/bilingual assessment. This is a test of a student's native language skills and includes speaking, reading, writing and math. It is conducted by a speaker of the student's first language¹³.

It is not always feasible to have a student assessed in the first language. Although these assessments can provide some information, **it is possible to determine a student's learning needs using only English assessments.** Assessments of phonological awareness, word reading, and memory performed in English are reliable for non-native speakers. Combined with data about a student's progress and response to intervention, these assessments can provide enough information to determine whether the student has learning difficulties that are not only rooted in language learning^{18,21}.

7. What are the concerns about misidentifying ELLs?

There are concerns about over-identifying ELLs, which results in ELLs who do not have underlying learning needs being placed in special education programs. ELLs are also sometimes under-identified. That is, ELLs who require special education support are not provided with it because their learning difficulties are attributed to their ELL status⁵. Both misidentifications can be detrimental to the future academic achievement of the student.

Over-Identification

ELLs may be over-identified as needing special education support because of the similarities between behaviours and characteristics of students with LDs and ELLs. Both students with LDs and ELLs may demonstrate poor listening or reading comprehension, difficulty following directions, errors in grammar and syntax, difficulty in task completion, poor self-esteem, poor oral skills, and low motivation⁷. The root causes of these issues are different but the presentation may be similar.

The issues with psychological assessments (explained in Question 6) also may cause ELLs to be over-identified⁶. Most standardized assessments are not normed on ELL samples, therefore the results may not be valid¹⁹. Due to developing language abilities, ELLs typically score lower on verbal tasks than on non-verbal tasks. This is problematic as this profile is also typical of many monolingual students with LDs⁶. Schools may also erroneously place ELLs in special education because they do not have other ways to offer support in a smaller group setting, especially in schools that have low numbers of ELLs and do not offer an ESL/ELD program.

Misidentification because of over-identification is concerning. It may lead to students being held to lower standards which can cause disengagement and a lack of motivation while simultaneously neglecting students who truly need special education services⁶. Inaccurate labeling may also carry a stigma. In addition, the special education classroom may not be an effective learning environment for students who need to develop English proficiency, and don't need nor benefit from special education strategies and intervention⁷.

Under-Identification

Misidentification can also lead to an under-identification of ELLs who truly needing special education support. Schools often wait to assess students to allow students to adjust to new country and learn an appropriate level of English. Since teachers are not sure of the root cause of a student’s difficulty and are concerned about labeling students incorrectly, they may hold off referring students to access special education supports. Sometimes academic issues are attributed to poor English proficiency because teachers do not know how to differentiate between ESL characteristics and special education needs^{21,22}.

Psychological testing based on an IQ/achievement discrepancy may also under-identify students. Due to ELLs’ developing English skills, verbal intelligence test scores and sometimes even non-verbal aspects may not accurately reflect their abilities and therefore not result in a discrepancy between intelligence and academic achievement that would be needed to qualify for a learning disability using a discrepancy model.

Delaying identification of students who have learning difficulties delays intervention opportunities for these students. Without explicit instruction and programming in the areas of difficulties, these students will not develop the skills they need and can fall further behind¹³.

Importance of Proper Identification and Timely Intervention

Proper identification of ELLs with learning difficulties is paramount so that these students can receive the help they need to be academically successful. The processes described in this guide aim to help schools correctly identify the needs of ELLs in a timely fashion. Following a systematic process of assessment and identification can ensure that ELLs’ needs are properly understood and that appropriate intervention is put in place as soon as it is necessary.

What to do When Considering ELLs’ Possible Special Education Needs

DO	DON'T
✦ Gather information about each individual student’s background, skills and abilities	✦ Don’t assume that students need time to develop English proficiency before assessing their learning
✦ Measure student progress to see if they are learning what is being taught to them	✦ Don’t delay intervention once it is apparent it is needed
✦ Follow a systematic process of assessment and intervention to determine and address student needs	✦ Don’t provide all ELLs with the same instruction – it should be based on their needs

Adapted from Geva, E. & Wade-Woolley, L. (2004). Issues in the Assessment of Reading Disability in Second Language Children. I. Smythe, J. Everatt, and R. Salter (Eds.) *International book of dyslexia: A cross language comparison and practice guide*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley, pp. 195-206.

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Resources

Ontario Ministry of Education Documents

ESL/ELD RESOURCES

Supporting English language learners: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 1 to 8 (2008)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/esleldprograms/guide.pdf>

This guide is written for teachers, principals, and other educators in elementary schools to support English language learners, in general. This guide contains practical techniques, research findings, and strategies for use in the classroom and in the school. It includes a section about ELLs with special education needs (p. 43).

Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English language learners in Every Classroom: A Practical Guide for Educators (2005) <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots/manyroots.pdf>

A Ministry of Education guide about supporting ELLs in the mainstream classroom. Contains and suggestions for school- and classroom- wide measures for including students and teaching strategies for students who are learning English as Second Language. Includes an annotated resource list including books and online resources.

Supporting English language learners with Limited Previous Schooling: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 3-12 (2008)

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots/ELL_LPS.pdf

A Ministry of Education guide about supporting ELLs who have not previously or continuously attended school. Includes a section on students with possible special education needs (p. 18).

SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCES

Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6 (2005)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/speded/panel/speded.pdf>

This report compiles practices for assessing students with special education needs and effective instructional practices for literacy and numeracy. It contains the framework for continuous assessment which includes the in-school and school support team which would be used to evaluate the programming needs for students with special education needs, including ELLs.

Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12 (Draft 2011)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speded/learningforall2011.pdf>

Learning for All is the follow-up to *Education for All*, expanded to include students up to grade 12. Learning for All covers assessment and planning for instruction, determining which students need special education support and making programming decisions. The tiered approach, built on the principles of response to intervention, is discussed.

Guides about ELLs with Special Needs

English language learners and Special Education: A Resource Handbook

From Connecticut Administrators of Programs for English language learners (CAPELL) (2011)

www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/curriculum/bilingual/CAPELL_SPED_resource_guide.pdf

This handbook from Connecticut aims to help schools determine whether ELLs have special education needs by providing background information and suggesting appropriate processes to assess need and support ELLs. It covers second language acquisition, issues of over- and under- identification and recommends steps to follow if a school is concerned about an ELL's learning. It contains a parent/guardian questionnaire to gather information about a student's background and checklist that can be used to determine whether a referral to special education is appropriate.

English Language Learners: School-Based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment

From ESL/ELD Research Group of Ontario (ERGO) (June 2011)

<http://216.187.93.167/downloadables/June2011ELLSpecEdconsiderations.pdf>

This guide, written by a group of ESL/ELD teachers in Ontario, provides a recommended process of assessing and addressing the needs of ELLs prior to referral for psychological testing. It contains three stages: Initial assessment and placement, program redevelopment, and ELL student's progress continues to be of serious concern. This recommended structure works within the guidelines of the Ministry of Education of Ontario, and therefore is feasible within the Toronto District School Board. This guide provides many practical suggestions and answers to frequently asked questions around the needs of ELLs who are struggling.

ESL Learners: A Guide for Classroom Teachers

From the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Special Programs Branch (1999)

<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/esl/policy/classroom.pdf>

This report, produced by the BC Teachers Federation and a committee of educators, aims to identify issues in the current practices of schools boards in British Columbia in the assessment, identification and instruction of ELLs with special needs, by offering recommendations to meeting students' needs in the context of public school education in BC.

ESL Learners with Special Needs in British Columbia: Identification, Assessment, and Programming

By Jean Fowler and Hugh R. Hooper (1998)

<http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/ESL-SpecialNeeds.pdf>

This guide from the British Columbia Teachers' Federation provides practical information to teachers of ESL and/or special education students. It contains recommendations for assessment and programming as well as guiding principles for working with students from multicultural backgrounds. Although the educational system

in BC is slightly different than in Ontario, much of this information and suggestions is very applicable in Ontario.

Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades

From the U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional, Institute for Educational Sciences (December 2007)

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/20074011.pdf

This practice guide outlines five research-based recommendations for programming for English language learners in the area of literacy development. The focus is on the development of skills for all ELLs but also includes strategies for on-going assessment and early intervention to address the needs of struggling learners. The guide contains evidence from research to support each of the five recommendations and practical steps to implement them.

Websites for Parents and Teachers

Reading Rockets

www.readingrockets.org

Reading Rockets is a website aimed at educators and parents, focusing on developing reading and literacy skills for students in kindergarten to grade 3. It offers research-based strategies and information regarding assessment, teaching and intervention for struggling readers. The website is user-friendly and includes multimedia resources, including articles, webcasts and videos. There is information that is appropriate to give to parents as well as more teacher-focused information. The following are pages that may be useful:

Struggling Readers: Target the Problem!

<http://www.readingrockets.org/helping/target/>

This online tool helps teachers and parents pinpoint the specific area of reading difficulty by offering a description of the various areas of reading, how each one may look/feel for a student, a teacher and a parent, and offering strategies to help the student.

Phonological Awareness Assessment

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/92/>

An informal assessment of phonological awareness that teachers can easily use to examine students' abilities in this area. Includes a description of the different skills assessed, example questions of how to assess and the expected grade/age that students the skill should be mastered.

Colorín Colorado

<http://www.colorincolorado.org>

Colorín Colorado is a website focusing on the reading and educational needs of ELLs, specifically Spanish-speaking students in the US. It is a bilingual (Spanish/English) website with resources for educators and parents.

There are several articles of interest to educators working with students with ESL and special education needs. There is information for parents, such as reading tip sheets, available in eleven different languages. The following links may be of particular interest:

For Educators: Special Educations and ELLs.

http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/special_education/

This page provides an overview of addressing the special education needs of ELLs, providing links to article, a webcast and highlighting resources for further investigation. It also includes resources for parents about students who need extra help.

Some Myths Regarding ELLs and Special Education

By Else V. Hamayan, Barbara Marler, Cristina Sanchez-Lopez, and Jack S. Damico (2007)

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/40714/>

This excerpt from Special Education Considerations for English Language Delivering a Continuum of Services covers three common myths regarding student who are ELL and who are being considered for special education and offers research-based, practical responses.

Reasons for the Misidentification of Special Needs among ELLs

By Else V. Hamayan, Barbara Marler, Cristina Sanchez-Lopez, and Jack S. Damico (2007)

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/40715/>

This is an excerpt from Special Education Considerations for English language learners: Delivering a Continuum of Services that details the reasons that ELLs are misidentified as having special education needs. It looks at problems with current assessment practices, the overreliance on a medical model of looking at educational difficulties and problems with special education funding. Although the book is written by educators in the US, there are similarities with educational policy and practice in Ontario.

Webcast: English language learners with Learning Disabilities

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/webcasts/disabilities/>

This webcast features Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan. It covers assessment and instruction strategies for English language learners with learning disabilities, and provides a good overview about considerations for these learners.

Literacy Instruction Resources

The Balanced Literacy Diet <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/balancedliteracydiet/Home/index.html>

The Florida Centre for Reading Research <http://www.fcrr.org/>

eWorkshop <http://eworkshop.on.ca/edu/core.cfm>

Diagnostic and Educational Assessment Resources

General Literacy Skills/Various Skills

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) <http://www.pearsoned.ca/school/LanguageArts/dra.html>

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills (DIBELS) <https://dibels.uoregon.edu/measures/>

Wechsler Fundamentals: Academic Skills <http://www.pearsonassessments.com/HAIWEB/Cultures/en-us/Productdetail.htm?Pid=015-8340-353>

Flynt-Cooter Reading Inventory for the Classroom

<http://www.abebooks.com/9780131121065/Flynt-Cooter-Reading-Inventory-Classroom-Flynt-0131121065/plp>

Comprehension Attitude Strategies Interests (CASI) <http://languagearts.nelson.com/assessment/casi.html>

Running Records

<http://eworkshop.on.ca/edu/core.cfm>

Phonological Skills

Roswell-Chall Auditory Blending Test

<http://www.pcboe.net/les/elderweb/hidden%20resources/clay%20dictation%20and%20roswellchall%20auditory%20blending.pdf>

Test of Auditory Analysis Skills

<http://courses.washington.edu/sop/Test%20of%20Auditory%20Analysis%20Skills.pdf>

Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation <http://teams.lacoe.edu/reading/assessments/yopp.html>

Spelling

Gentry Developmental Spelling Test http://www.gse.uci.edu/docs/DEVELOPMENTAL_SPELLING.pdf

Kottmeyer Diagnostic Spelling Test

<https://louisville.edu/education/ciidl/issp-training-materials-2008-2009/Informal%20Diagnostic%20Spelling%20Test.doc>

Word Reading

Dolch Word Lists

<http://www.spellingcity.com/dolch-words.html>

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