

Second Language Acquisition

Now that we have explored the characteristics of learning disabilities, consider what is involved in the process of language acquisition (see Table 2.1). *Second language acquisition* is probably the term most frequently used to refer to the process of learning a new language—“second,” even though the language might be the third, fourth, or fifth language the person is acquiring. Although linguists do not agree precisely on a second language acquisition process, it is generally accepted that ELLs pass through different stages on their way to proficiency. These five stages include some version of preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency.

Table 2.1. Characteristics of Learning Disabilities and Second Language Acquisition

Behaviors Associated With Learning Disabilities	Associated Behaviors With Acquiring a Second Language
Difficulty carrying out a series of directions, generally because of poor short-term memory or a lack of attention.	Difficulty carrying out a series of directions because <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • directions are not well understood • it can be harder to remember directions in a second language (Service, E., Simola, Metsänheimo, & Maury, 2002).
Difficulty with phonological awareness (i.e., distinguishing between or manipulating sounds auditorily), even though the student knows the sounds.	Difficulty distinguishing auditorily between unfamiliar sounds not in one’s first language, or that are in a different order than in the first language.
Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence; may seem to know letters’ sounds one day but not the next.	Confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when it is different than in one’s first language. Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in the first language.
Difficulty remembering sight words; may know word one day but not the next.	Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings are not understood or when irregular patterns are used (e.g., <i>ea</i> can have both the long e and short e sounds).

Table 2.1. (continued)

Behaviors Associated With Learning Disabilities	Associated Behaviors With Acquiring a Second Language
Difficulty retelling a story in sequence. This may be because of poor short-term memory or retrieval skills.	Difficulty retelling a story in English without the expressive skills to do so. Yet the student might understand more than he or she can convey (i.e., receptive skills in English may be stronger than expressive skills).
Confusion with figurative language, idioms, and words with multiple meanings; students with LD might be very literal.	Confusion with figurative language, idioms, pronouns, conjunctions, and words with multiple meanings.
Slow to process challenging language.	Slow to process challenging language because it is not well understood.
May have poor auditory memory and not be able to repeat a string of sounds or words accurately.	May seem to have poor auditory memory if sounds or words are unfamiliar or not well understood.
May have difficulty concentrating.	Learning in a second language is mentally exhausting; therefore, ELLs may seem to have difficulty concentrating at times.
May seem easily frustrated and/or discouraged.	Learning in a second language can be frustrating.