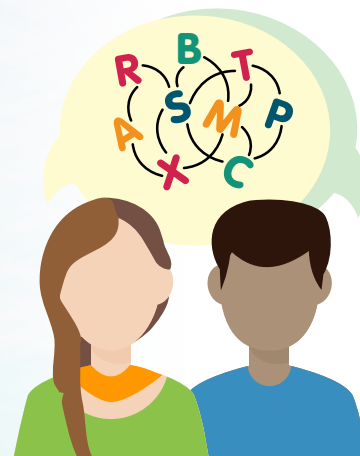


District Considerations for Universal Dyslexia Screening: Ensuring Appropriate Implementation and Instruction for English Learners



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Purpose

In light of the growing development in policy and practice that recognizes the importance of early identification of students at risk for reading difficulties and dyslexia through universal screening, districts will need to carefully consider how this may impact English learners. The purpose of this brief is to (1) share potential challenges regarding the implementation of universal dyslexia screening for English learners (ELs) and (2) highlight considerations that ensure English learners are appropriately screened given their language development trajectory and the foundational literacy instruction ELs have received. Furthermore, the brief offers considerations for the appropriate interpretation and use of screener results when districts are required to universally screen for dyslexia, including for students who have limited oral language development and little to no knowledge of English phonemes (e.g., when sound/letter correspondence differs between languages with different writing systems).

This brief focuses specifically on English learners, whose foundational literacy trajectory is different than that of English-speaking children. Although dyslexia screeners can be useful for identifying students at risk for reading difficulties in English, they may mismeasure or fail to capture English learners' pre-literacy skills, which can comprise different levels of development in English and in their home language. Considerations for reliable and valid dyslexia screening in ELs to ensure early intervention and reduce the risk of misdiagnosis may also apply to other students who have limited exposure to pre-literacy skills, limited foundational skills instruction, experience navigating unique dialects of English, or who—because of the pandemic—have had significant interruptions in schooling. There has been a long history of ELs and culturally and linguistically diverse students being disproportionately represented in disability categories. The complexity of distinguishing between (a) reasonable expectations for ELs in attaining language acquisition milestones and (b) a potential learning disability (Hoover, Baca, & Klingner, 2016), requires attention to how universal dyslexia screeners are used with culturally and linguistically diverse student groups.

Introduction

Many states have adopted universal dyslexia screening requirements, especially focused on the early grades (K-2) for purposes of timely identification of students who are at risk for reading difficulty due to dyslexia and could benefit from early intervention and support. This has implications for how school districts ensure that they continue to determine, in valid ways and using a variety of measures, what instructional supports students need to succeed in Tier I instruction. Specifically, commonly used and available dyslexia screeners are most reliable and valid for students who have acquired oral proficiency and

Universal Dyslexia State and District Policies

Forty states now mandate universal dyslexia screening. California, New York, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina are a few example states without such a mandate (Pera & Replogle, 2022). In states, and even some cities, where dyslexia screenings are not mandated, there has been recent advocacy to enact legislation mandating universal dyslexia screening (Jones, 2022). New York City is an example of a city that recently adopted a universal dyslexia screening policy (Office of the Mayor, City of New York, 2022). A common reason for screening in the early years is the importance of early detection to address reading difficulties that may negatively impact achievement and social-emotional development (Pera & Replogle, 2022).

foundational literacy skills in English. English learners, however, typically begin developing English oral language and foundational literacy skills in school. This increases the potential for misdiagnosis of dyslexia when using common dyslexia screeners, leading to instruction that is insufficiently tailored to student needs.

What is Dyslexia?

The International Dyslexia Association’s definition of dyslexia, which has been incorporated into many state education statutes, is—

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (International Dyslexia Association, 2002).

Stanley and Petscher (2017), in a brief for the National Center on Improving Literacy, note that dyslexia can impact a student’s ability to read in several ways, including—

- Inhibited ability to effectively decode letters into blended sounds to form words due to the inability to quickly and correctly hear, recognize, store, recall, and make different speech sounds;
- The need for additional time to spell words, spelling with errors, or the inability to recall words from memory to write the corresponding letters; and
- Difficulty with providing rapid visual-verbal response when asked to verbalize letters and words appearing in print.

Communicating with Families of ELs about Screening for Dyslexia

Districts need to engage EL families meaningfully as active partners in the educational process of their children, ideally using two-way communication about children’s educational learning goals and progress. EL families, in particular, need to know about language progression when learning English as a new language, the interaction of language learning with literacy development, and how to support their children in language and literacy development. District efforts to explain to families the developmental milestones of literacy and signals to ‘look for’ can support early detection of potential reading difficulties. If a screener for dyslexia is used, districts should communicate with families, in their preferred language, general information about the screening process along with explanations about why a screener is being used, how screener results will be used, and who can be contacted for more information. Effective communication with EL families might require using a multitude of formats (e.g., phone calls, videos, etc.).

Challenges in the Identification of ELs with Dyslexia

ELs need the time and opportunities to develop oral language proficiency—making meaning of what is being said—which serves as the foundation to learn how letters and the spelling of written words represent spoken words. ELs may need additional time to develop decoding skills in English depending on their prior schooling experiences and, if literate in their home language, whether this language uses an alphabetic writing system. Transferring literacy skills from languages that use logographic, syllabic, or consonantal writing systems may take longer, requiring instruction that focuses on oral language development and phonemic and phonological awareness. Similarly, native English-speaking children whose home language reflects dialectical speech patterns may require additional time to successfully decode academic English. The complexity of the literacy trajectory of ELs who are developing more than one language system poses a challenge to accurately screening for dyslexia for a number of reasons, including—

- **Lack of valid screeners for students whose home language is not English.** Screening ELs for dyslexia is complicated by the lack of standardized screeners in English that have been normed on EL student populations and the lack of screeners in various home languages spoken by ELs in U.S. schools. Even if some

screeners are available in Spanish, the language spoken by around 76 percent of all ELs in the U.S.,¹ the screener would only be appropriate for Spanish-speaking students who have been taught to read in Spanish. Additionally, due to variations between languages that influence the manifestation of dyslexia, simple translations of assessment instruments may be inappropriate (Gorman, 2009; Maunsell, 2020).

- **Insufficient opportunity for English learners (especially in the early grades) to develop oral language in English or learn foundational literacy skills.** Students new to a language may exhibit difficulty with reading for a variety of reasons other than dyslexia. For example—
 - Students learning English as a new language need to learn new sounds, vocabulary, and sentence structures. In other words, they need to develop oral language in English.
 - Students have not received foundational skills instruction in English.
- **Limited exposure to pre-literacy skills prior to school.** Not all students have exposure to pre-literacy skills prior to starting school, and some may have limited exposure to written forms of language at home.

Older English Learners (i.e., Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education)

Efforts, policies, and laws related to universal screening for dyslexia primarily focus on the early school years when children are learning to read. Because ELs enroll in significant numbers in later grades, valid and accurate screening for dyslexia in older students will also be critically important. For the accurate assessment of older students who are new to English, district processes need to ensure these students have received instruction for English language development and foundational literacy skills in English. Particularly in the case of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), older students may lack foundational literacy skills in any language.

District Considerations for Implementing Dyslexia Screening and Interpreting Results

Assessments, which include screeners, provide critical information that can be used to design instruction and make decisions to support student learning. The most valuable assessments are those that authentically gather information about students' skills and abilities, are developmentally appropriate, and are complemented by information gathered from families about an EL's educational schooling experience and learning history, including interests and learning preferences.

Specifically, valid and accurate dyslexia screening for ELs should meet the following criteria—

1. **Universal screeners have been vetted.** Districts should ensure screener instruments have been validated to identify dyslexia among diverse student groups, including ELs, and are administered when developmentally appropriate for students.
2. **The screening process includes multiple measures.** Most ELs enter school with a range of classroom and language development experiences, including in their primary language. It is important to gather multiple sources of information and assessment data to get the full range of an EL's skills and abilities with an understanding that the need for additional processing time and learning pace adaptations may be a result of English proficiency rather than a brain processing issue. If universal dyslexia screeners are required, they should be used in combination with other measures, formal and informal, to get a well-rounded understanding of students' reading abilities. We therefore recommend using multiple measures, with screener results being "one data point," to determine instructional supports and signal the need for additional evaluation.

1 National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Table 204.27. English learner (EL) students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by home language, grade, and selected student characteristics: Selected years, 2008-09 through fall 2019*. Digest of Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_204.27.asp

3. **Screening and assessment are embedded within strong Tier I instruction with culturally and linguistically responsive multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).** Districts are responsible for ensuring students receive quality and rigorous instruction that is appropriately scaffolded for linguistic and academic needs. Only when students receive this type of instruction can districts appropriately determine whether they need additional instructional services. Moreover, having a district multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework that is culturally and linguistically responsive will help ensure that measures are free of bias, valid, and reliable for the student being assessed, as well as explicit enough to provide actionable and measurable goals to address student needs during Tier I instruction supplemented by tiered supports, when necessary.²
4. **Results are carefully interpreted and applied.** Careful interpretation of all data points is particularly important for students who may have reading difficulties for several reasons other than dyslexia. For example, it is important to understand that screener results do not confirm or certify the presence of dyslexia. Rather, the results can serve as a red flag, indicating a need for early intervention or further evaluation. Careful interpretation of screener results for ELs and the subsequent determination of instruction and/or intervention is best when informed by district staff with expertise in language acquisition, literacy, reading intervention, and special education.

Sample Questions to Consider before Screening English Learners for Dyslexia

Linan-Thompson (2014) provides the following questions to consider before screening English learners for dyslexia—

- *When did the student learn English?*
- *When did the student learn to read and write in English?*
- *Did the student receive reading and writing instruction in their first language (L1)? If currently receiving foundational skills instruction in English, for how long, and what do formative assessments reveal?*
- *What are the differences and similarities between the syntactic structures of the L1 and English?*
- *What is the alphabetic structure of the L1?*
- *How consistent is the orthography of the L1?*
- *Is there any overlap in vocabulary? Are there cognates?*

These questions could be incorporated in a flowchart for district decisions regarding screening.

Overview of Dyslexia Research on English Learners

Children’s fluency in oral language and pre-literacy skills serve as a base for broader language-based skills (Brown, 2014; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). For ELs with limited exposure to English, they may have had limited opportunities to build those pre-literacy skills in English, which are crucial for understanding how print language works in English (Rinaldi & Páez, 2008). Rinaldi and Páez (2008) emphasize that students’ oral language abilities and their pre-literacy skills must be taken into consideration when assessing whether ELs have a language need or a disability and the type of interventions they need to receive. In other words, due to the unique challenges of learning English, it is important to examine whether their challenges are due to limited language learning experiences or true reading comprehension difficulties (Li et al., 2021).

The lack of appropriate instruments or measures (i.e., screeners) to determine English learners’ true reading comprehension abilities is acknowledged in the research. Moreover, not only may the instruments be inadequate for measuring comprehension in ELs (because they only measure comprehension of English), the comparison group for detecting comprehension difficulties comprises native English-speaking children rather than the true peers—other English learners.³

2 See the MTSS for ELs website for resources. The University of Texas at Austin, & The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk. (2022). *Multitiered system of supports for English learners*. <https://www.mtss4els.org>

3 Miciak, Ahmed, Capin, and Francis (2022) found that English learners, regardless of whether they are or are not reading disabled, demonstrated lower performance on linguistic comprehension measures compared to their counterparts whose first language is English.

Furthermore, language characteristics, such as the degree of consistency, opaqueness, or phonological depth associated with a language, may all contribute to variances in how dyslexia manifests and impacts reading ability, leading to different prevalence rates (Brunswick, 2010; Maunsell, 2020). Ultimately, comparing students cross-linguistically is challenging because the diagnostic methods and tools for dyslexia diagnosis are different across orthographies (Landerl et al., 2013; Maunsell, 2020; Wydell, 2012).

While an extensive body of research on dyslexia and its diagnosis exists, this is not the case for examining dyslexia specifically in ELs, especially in the early grades. Early intervention for students, including ELs, with dyslexia is vital for their educational success and schooling experience. District implementation of universal dyslexia screeners, therefore, must include a range of valid measures, including formative assessments, to properly and accurately identify the learning needs of young English learners as well as those who arrive in later grades and still require foundational skills instruction in English.

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