



ALTERNATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Case Examples of English Learners With Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Project Background

The ALTELLA project researches instructional practices, accessibility features and accommodations, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to develop an evidence-centered design approach that informs our understanding of alternate English language proficiency assessment for these students.

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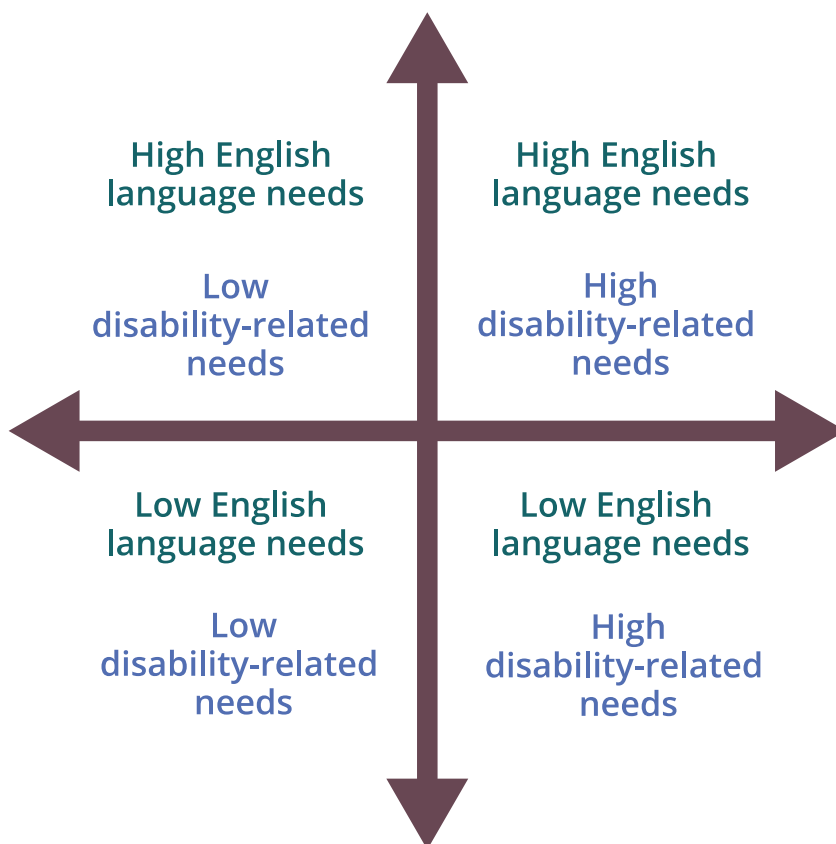
This brief provides case examples of English learners who have significant cognitive disabilities. The Alternate English Language Learning Assessment (ALTELLA) project defines these students as individuals who have one or more disabilities that significantly limit their intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as documented in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and who are progressing toward English language proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and understanding.

The five examples, Sabeen (Grade 1), Chung (Grade 2), Chue (Grade 4), Isabel (Grade 6), and Luis (Grade 10), are based on real students as described by their teachers, with identifying information changed to protect student privacy. Educators who use these examples should keep in mind that some details may be missing or incomplete, as would be expected when getting to know a new student.

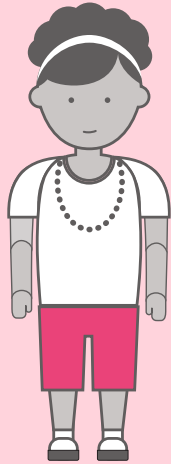
The examples are intended to be used in a variety of professional learning contexts to encourage thinking about English learners with significant cognitive disabilities; they are not designed to provide recommendations or approaches for supporting English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

Discussion questions follow the case examples. Educators can apply all of them to the case examples. Considering where these students may be placed on the language and disability needs framework may also be helpful ((Figure 1).

Figure 1: Language and Disability Needs Framework



(Source: Shyyan & Christensen, 2018)



Sabeen, Grade 1

Sabeen is a first-grader who came to the United States with her family three years ago as a refugee. Sabeen has no siblings and lives with her extended family. Her father speaks Tamil and English; her mother speaks only Tamil. Her parents report that Sabeen does not speak at home. However, their experience is that she is more receptive if spoken to in Tamil. Her parents have been very protective of Sabeen. For example, Sabeen had never been to a playground until she started school.

Sabeen is an English learner with autism who had not been diagnosed prior to coming to school. Her parents are not very accepting of her diagnosis; they believe her behaviors and lack of verbal development are due to an illness she experienced as an infant. Sabeen's mother has not come to Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, but her father has always attended. Sabeen wears a prayer necklace.

Sabeen has been a student in her current district since Kindergarten. She started in a regular Kindergarten classroom but she was brought to Molly's special education classroom the second day of school. Sabeen has been with Molly since she arrived in special education, and, over time, Molly has seen Sabeen really come out of her shell.

Sabeen has taken her state's English language proficiency assessment; however it was hard to get her to sit and focus. If the test could have been given on a Smartboard or iPad utilizing more sounds and/or real objects, Molly thinks that Sabeen may have been able to do a better job. As it was, Sabeen did not engage with the testing person at all and scored very low. In fact, Sabeen turned the test into a game by throwing the test cards.

In the classroom, to support Sabeen's learning, Molly always pairs the lesson for the day with visuals on a Smartboard. Molly avoids real objects because Sabeen tends to throw things. Sabeen is successful with the use of accommodations, both the Smartboard and an iPad. While unable to read words on paper she does quite well reading from a white board. She likes the iPad, especially the touch screen where she can manipulate images and sounds. Sabeen is very sensory seeking. Therefore the daily plan includes activities that provide or modify sensory input. A wiggle cushion and a bean bag chair are available for her use. Alternatively, to calm Sabeen if she becomes over-stimulated, Molly encourages her to use the hanging pod sensory swing.

Martina, the English learner coordinator, comes to the classroom to check in on Sabeen and consult with Molly. Sabeen does not communicate many wants or needs, and Molly reports that Martina has confided that she does not feel prepared to work with students like Sabeen.



Chung, Grade 2

Chung is an English learner with autism and has emerging verbal skills. He was diagnosed at age 2 and received in-home special education services. Chung lives with his mother, Bao, and his paternal grandparents. Chung's father passed away when Chung was a baby. Bao speaks Mandarin and English; his grandparents speak Mandarin and some English. Bao uses Mandarin when speaking to Chung; she finds that Chung seems to better understand directions in Mandarin. Bao uses simple commands and limits directions to two or three steps.

As a second-grader, Chung is in a special education classroom with his teacher, Rachel; a paraeducator, Dijon; and two other students who also have autism. All have different IEP goals. Classroom resources have included Liyun, a bilingual Mandarin/English speaking paraprofessional. Every morning for 40 minutes, Chung and his classmates go to a general education second-grade classroom where students rotate through gym, music, and media.

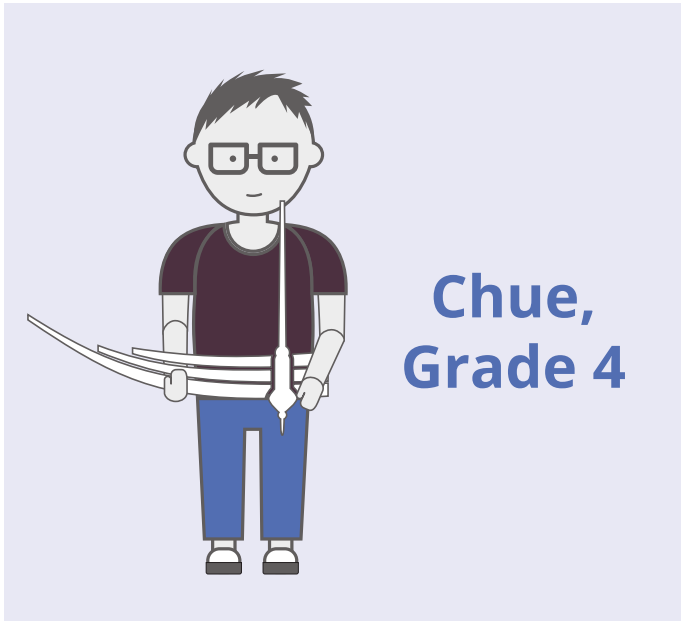
Chung has been in Rachael's classroom for three years since kindergarten. Rachael's professional development included college courses working with English learners. Chung and another student, Sofia, are both English learners. However neither student receives language services. Therefore an English language learning professional does not attend Chung's IEP meetings. Bao opted out of English language learning services for Chung because his

autism was perceived to be severe. Chung took his state's English language proficiency assessment in first grade, but he was not very successful. His answers were neither correct nor did they follow a pattern. Chung was probably guessing. This year Chung is exempt from testing.

Chung reads and writes in English; his receptive language is good. Chung is not at all confused by the use of multiple languages. In fact, he has made notable improvements in language acquisition and communication in both Mandarin (as reported by Bao) and English. Overall Chung does pretty well. He can adapt to different classroom settings quite readily. In fact, Chung has an easier time with transitions than his classmates. Chung requires moderate levels of prompting and redirection to help remain focused. He sometimes forgets what has been said to him or responds to sequential directions out of order. Therefore Rachael and Dijon always use direct and explicit instruction, frequent review, and modeling. Chung needs support organizing information; Dijon works with him using a graphic organizer to sequence and organize events in a logical format.

To support Chung's learning in the classroom, Rachael uses one book for the entire week with multiple approaches to the same content. "There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly" was one week's story/song. Rachael read the story out loud, sang the story, and then sang the story with gestures. Chung mimicked the gestures along with Rachael. Chung's ability to identify concepts is developing but he finds comprehension questions difficult to answer. Therefore Chung uses manipulatives; objects and puppets, to identify specific features and concepts in the story/song. Chung further uses these manipulatives and/or pictures to help him translate his thoughts into writing.

In the media classroom, Chung uses a desktop and mouse and is learning to type. Chung likes technology; in Kindergarten he learned how to make his own buttons for the communication program on his iPad. Since his speech is unclear, Chung uses this communication device to ask Bao to go to the store, to go swimming, or to ask for food. Chung continues to create buttons to make meaning and real life connections with words and concepts.



Chue is a vision impaired, English learner with minimal language use in English. Chue is the youngest of three children and lives with his parents, two sisters and his grandmother. Chue's parents came to the United States 12 years ago, and Chue and his sisters were born in the United States. Chue's first language is Hmong. His parents report use of both Hmong and English at home. Chue's Hmong language ability has yet to be assessed.

Chue is the only English learner in Amanda's Grade 3–5 special education classroom. To support the fourth-grader's success, Amanda works closely with James, a vision specialist, and Seng Xiong, the Hmong community liaison.

Conceptualizing objects is a challenge when a student lacks the visual ability to process objects. James has found that sensory learning is effective with Chue. Therefore Amanda uses a sensory table to expose Chue to a variety of textures, temperatures, and odors. This approach not only provides specific lessons on the physical environment, but it has motivated Chue to more thoroughly explore his world. James is preparing

Chue to learn braille by utilizing exercises that develop fine motor skills and by encouraging Chue to "scribble" on the braillewriter.

Chue is Amanda's first English learner student. He responds enthusiastically to Hmong language, songs, and music especially traditional music performed on a Qeej. In Hmong culture music is an extension of the language, and Qeej players are known as storytellers. Amanda uses this information in multiple ways when with Chue. Chue watches online videos of Qeej performers on the Hmong kids channel on YouTube. Amanda noted that the videos of Qeej performers have an engaged and responsive audience among Hmong youth. Therefore Amanda reads the audience comments to Chue for his consideration, and they discuss these comments together. Over time Chue's responses have gone from a simple "yes" or "no" to sentence fragments of 3–5 words.

Chue depends on close supervision and guidance to ensure his safety and well-being at school. Chue's lessons can sometimes feel like a flood of auditory information. Amanda has set up a quiet space with a 3-sided chair made of cushions. Here Chue relaxes and soothes himself by quietly rocking and singing.

Amanda uses total physical response with Chue to coordinate language and physical movement. Amanda is evaluating differing types of assistive technology, including a 3-D mapping software program, digital books, math software for visually impaired students, and a dictation program. Amanda will present her recommendations at the next IEP meeting.

The district test coordinator attempted to give Chue the state's English language proficiency assessment, but Chue did not respond. Chue also took the Dynamic Learning Maps assessments in English and math. While Chue was more engaged there was still a significant number of questions with "no response."



Isabel is an English learner with a moderate intellectual disability. Her family enrolled Isabel in her current school at the start of the school year after leaving Puerto Rico. Her parents report that their sixth-grader cannot read or write in Spanish. Isabel spends her school day in a self-contained special education class for students in Grades 6–8. She receives English learner services 30 minutes a day working on conversational words in spoken English. She does not receive speech services. Isabel's mother is impressed and pleased for Isabel that the school here has so many resources. The parents use the family's online Rosetta Stone language program to improve their spoken English.

To support Isabel's success in the classroom, the English learner coordinator, Marcus, works closely with the special education teacher, Yolanda. Marcus communicates in Spanish to assess Isabel's abilities in particular areas and then gives her lesson in English. Marcus works in Spanish with Isabel to help her understand classroom routines; he explains what the class is doing and provides her with simplified directions for each activity.

Yolanda draws heavily on her own materials to support the implementation of standards-based curriculum

in her classroom. To reinforce Isabel's understanding of classroom activities, Yolanda created a visual daily schedule board using Velcro activity pictures. Yolanda shares her lesson plans with Marcus, so that he can support Isabel's language needs in the classroom.

On one of Isabel's first days in school, there was a fire drill; Marcus and Yolanda soon learned that Isabel had not previously experienced this kind of school activity. Isabel's extreme reaction to the fire drill alarm was a reminder that anxiety and stress are present in the daily lives of most students with learning challenges and special education needs. Marcus now pre-teaches around any activity that Isabel might view as unexpected. These activities would also be reflected in specific pictures on Isabel's visual daily schedule. Yolanda expanded the use of visual supports with Isabel to help build emotional fluency.

Isabel practices letters but her letter sense is just forming. She can copy but she does not have strong sound letter associations. Isabel uses bilingual Spanish/English picture cards. She uses generic terms for things like plate and dog. Isabel accurately counts to 5 in English using objects. Her counting ability in Spanish mirrors her ability in English. Isabel is very good at keyboarding on a desktop computer. Yolanda does not know if she had prior exposure to technology in Puerto Rico. Isabel is very helpful in home economics and seems to enjoy herself in class. Her social interaction skills with peers are at a basic level. Marcus reports that he and Isabel do not have reciprocal conversations; her responses are primarily yes/no. However her listening skills are high. Marcus is not sure if Isabel knows she is bilingual or if she understands her speaking ability as one language whose use is situational.

Based on informal evaluation, Isabel demonstrates higher receptive skills. After Marcus got to know her better, Isabel was given the Woodcock Munoz, although it is unclear how her language and cognition abilities influenced her results. There are no plans for Isabel to participate in her state's English language proficiency assessment since she does not have the verbal skills nor the reading and writing skills to take the test.



Today was an important day for Luis. His high school was holding an Open House and his family would be attending. Luis is an 10th-grade English learner with a mild intellectual disability and the only English learner in a special education classroom.

Luis' family emigrated from Guatemala to the United States four years ago. His parents were sponsored by a local business and provided jobs in a wholesale bakery, his father as a sanitation supervisor and his mother as a bread and pastry baker. The family is in the process of gaining citizenship. Parents report that their connection to the school and staff has deepened their relationships in the community. Luis' two older sisters speak Spanish and English. His parents, who are divorced, speak Spanish and limited English. Luis spends summers with his maternal grandparents who speak Spanish but not English.

Ezra, the special education teacher, finds it helpful to consult with Luis' eldest sister, Marisol, about Luis' language abilities outside the classroom. Marisol and their father, Miguel, attend IEP meetings where Marisol serves as a translator when needed. They all agree that being bilingual has not disadvantaged Luis' language development. Luis knows more English than Spanish. Marisol thinks he knows more in Spanish than he can speak. If Luis doesn't know something, he looks to

Marisol. Most often she speaks to him in English; she also translates. Marisol rarely gives Luis words in both languages. If he is trying to respond in English she says the English word. If he is trying to respond in Spanish, she says the Spanish word. While Luis does speak more often in Spanish, he makes adjustments to English or Spanish depending on who he is talking to. Sometimes Marisol interprets for Luis with their father. For example, Luis and his father were watching a wrestling match. Marisol had to guess at some of the words based on the context. Sometimes Luis gets frustrated and so does she. He sometimes gets angry when people cannot understand him.

Luis is friendly and attentive. Ezra noted that Luis is afraid to be wrong and therefore sometimes hesitates to answer a question or offer an opinion. Luis has been excited about services for English learners. The English language development coordinator, Chloe, thought he would not do well on the English language proficiency test because the testing situation is too stressful. Therefore Chloe was unable to assess his English or his Spanish proficiency. Luis receives speech services twice a week to address his receptive and expressive language skills. Luis practices his typing skills at home. Marisol insists on this even if she has to spell everything.

"Everybody knows Luis," Ezra notes. Luis is friends with both English and Spanish speakers. As for his future, Luis wants to be independent. He has talked about being a mechanic. There is one mechanic in town that he will visit as part of a school internship. Luis will bring a bilingual paraeducator with him on this visit. Luis' father is handy with tools and does his own auto and house repairs. He envisions himself and Luis working together as mechanics. Mom, however, thinks that Luis would make a good paraeducator working with younger kids.

Discussion Questions

After reading each of the case studies, consider any or all of the following questions in relation to each student. Again, reflecting on each student's position in the language and disability needs framework may be helpful (Figure 1).

1. Imagine you were the classroom teacher for this student. What additional information would you want and why? How would you go about gathering this information?
2. What do you think is the role of the student's home language in the classroom? What is the role of the student's home language in supporting the development of communication? In supporting the development of English?
3. What do you think is the role of the student's disability in the classroom? How does the student's disability factor into supporting the student's development of communication? In supporting the development of English?
4. If you were the student's teacher, how might you incorporate the student's home language and culture into your lesson plan?
5. Identify the instructional strategies used with the student. Can you suggest other strategies that are appropriate for and supportive of bilingual/multilingual students? What about strategies that are supportive of the student's disability?
6. How might you know if a student has difficulty in the classroom because of cognitive limitations or limited English proficiency? For example, the student seems to refuse to answer questions, makes inappropriate comments, may have poor recall, and/or struggles with sequencing ideas.
7. What questions would you ask the family? How would you do this?
8. Are there barriers that may prevent educators from working closely with families of English language learners with disabilities? What can be done to eliminate these barriers?
9. If this were your student, who in your institution or community could you collaborate with?
10. As the classroom teacher, how do you approach collaborating with other professionals in your district to support your English learners with disabilities? What do you do when resource people may be unable or unprepared to assist you?

References

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