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6. Effective Instruction for English Language Learners with a Learning Disability in Higher Education in Egypt

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Abstract

There is a large number of students with learning disabilities (LD) today in many private higher education institutions in Egypt. It is fair to say that their challenges although have gained some attention from academics and researchers that they are still under-studied. Many of those students also happen to be English language learners (ELLs). This complicates matters even more not just for the student with the learning disability, but for the untrained instructor in the classroom. Research indicates that ELLs with LD are less likely to engage actively in classroom tasks and are more prone to failing. Providing an inclusive and effective educational experience for them poses a challenge for many academics. This necessitates that more awareness is raised in our academic institutions and instructors need to seek professional development that would support their understanding of the needs of ELLs with LD. This paper focuses on differentiating between ELLs who are struggling with language proficiency and ELLs with LD. It also highlights the learning priorities of ELLs with LD and how to leverage their strengths through proactive preparation, inclusive lesson plans, adapted assessment and suitable technology to support their learning process.

Finally, this article calls for action on the part of universities to ensure they promote inclusive learning environments and provide learning support that is appropriate and me

Key words: English Language Learners with Disabilities, Learning Disabilities (LD), Higher Education, Egypt.ets the needs of a diversity of learners.

I. INTRODUCTION

Few higher education institutions in Egypt fully accommodate students with learning disabilities; even fewer, are able to provide appropriate academic support that meets their
needs as learners. In many cases, the curriculum is designed with the principle that all students must learn in the same way for the sake of fairness (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). This immediately excludes English language learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities (LD). In order to achieve and progress academically, ELLs with LD require “instruction that is simultaneously responsive to their disability [and] English language status” (Garcia and Tyler, 2010, p.113).

Research (Kangas, 2017; Wanzek et al., 2016; Marom & Weintraub, 2015; Baker et al., 2014; Geishhardt & Munsch, 1996) indicates that students who have a learning disability (LD) are less likely to engage in classroom tasks. Many students with learning disabilities struggle with reading and as a result, are more prone to failing. Accordingly, being familiar with instructional approaches the will support ELLs with LD in their language development and literacy has become of great importance. The spreading of inclusive practices and the creation of safe learning environments means that instructors are responsible for providing an engaging and interactive learning experience to all students including ELLs with disabilities. It also necessitates that they seek the guidance of a number of specialists to help them better understand the challenges in the classroom and determine the type of support that could be provided.

Unfortunately in the absence of appropriate academic and social support for ELLs with LD, these students are deemed at risk. This is reflected in higher failure rates, lower retention rates and significantly lower rates of graduation by these students. Lombardi, Murray & Kowitt, 2016; Sanford et al., 2011; Hurst & Smerdon, 2000; Horn, Berktold & Bobbitt, 2009 support the view that students with LD who pursue higher education, experience difficulty in adjusting to the academic and social demands of university life. A
twenty-first century learning environment mandates that academic institutions optimize learning for all students and recognize that it is the curriculum and the learning environment which need to be modified to meet the learning needs of all learners. Strategies which improve access, success and retention are now receiving increased attention Abreu et al., (2016) by private universities in Egypt.

Higher education institutions regardless of discipline, in order to provide effective learning for all students, must recognize the importance of their programs being accessible, appropriate and inclusive. Learners with a learning disability should not be stigmatized or defined by their impairment simply because they require specialized learning support. When the abilities of ELLs with LD are undervalued or misunderstood, they do not benefit from the learning experience. It is the higher education institution that must reform its pedagogy and student support services as part of its strategic plan for teaching and learning. This shift in thinking helps academics understand that all learners can with the appropriate learning support, develop mastery of knowledge. By mastery of knowledge we mean that the instructor provides learners with multiple means of delivery, presentation of content and assessment which foster deeper understanding of concepts and give ample opportunities for all students to demonstrate their achievement. The ultimate goal of higher education for all students is a sustained engagement in learning and the management of progression of students at risk.

Academics however do face challenges when they design programs that aim to accommodate students with LD. More specifically, English language instructors often indicate that they are not well trained to write goals and objectives of learning for ELLs with LD, let alone design appropriate assessments that measure achievement and
mastery of knowledge. There is a serious lack of research and awareness on the needs and challenges of ELLs with LD in Egypt, but this is slowly changing due to the efforts of specialists, parents, and evolving university policies.

II. IDENTIFYING ELLS WITH LD

Discerning the differences between a disability and the difficulties of acquiring a new language is of vital importance. Research by Rinaldi and Samson (2008) argue that finding an appropriate method to differentiate between struggling ELLs and ELLs with LD is essential to their achievement in the education system. ELLs with low language proficiency who are assessed for English language on entry to higher education institutions can often be classified as students with a learning disability. Special needs students on the other hand, may not be easily identified if their disability is not declared on their university application. Accordingly, these students may not receive the appropriate support required to assist them in their teaching and learning process. Informal discussions with academic staff from a number of higher education institutions in Egypt indicate that their programs are not flexible enough to provide the language learning modifications required to support the learning of ELLs with LD.

A learning disability is defined as: “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, [or] spell” (Garcia & Tyler, 2010 p.115). The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (IDAO) in their report *Accommodating Students with LDs in Postsecondary Studies* (2012) highlight that learning disabilities range in severity and consistently hinder learning acquisition and the use of one or more of the following key skills:
1. oral language (listening, speaking, understanding)

2. reading (decoding, comprehension)

3. written language (spelling, written expression)

Learning disabilities may also interfere with the learner's organizational skills, social discernment and social relations. The impairment is generally life-long. The effect of the impairment may be articulated differently over time, depending on the learning environment and the learner's characteristics.

Students with LD including ELLs with LD, struggle to obtain and remember new information because of difficulties with note taking, study skills, active participation in class, working memory and long-term memory (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Graetz, 2010). Some of the signs which can be identified are:

- Limited vocabulary (even in their native tongue) (Nguyen, 2012)
- Exhibiting deficits in expressive and receptive language (Nguyen, 2012)
- Demonstrating difficulty with interpreting non-verbal language (Echevarria et al., 2008)

III. MEANINGFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR ELLS WITH LD

The role of faculty members in supporting ELLs with LD can be very influential to student achievement (Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002; Stein, 2014). Academics by default are expected to address the complex needs of students' learning and to ensure the learning
experience is meaningful and engaging for all students. Students in higher education are expected to accomplish extensive reading and writing on an academic level, often within a limited period of time. ELLs with LD may feel stressed and anxious that their usual strategies for handling reading and writing might fail them when taking an exam or writing a report with a short due date. According to Hatcher et al., (2002) a wide range of support strategies are required to meet the needs of each individual learner. Identifying instructional approaches which prove to be effective for ELLs with LD is a key area of need as stressed by McCordle et al., (2005). Students with disabilities who are ELLs often have difficulty acquiring basic knowledge. This can be due to the lack of background information, unfamiliar terminology and academic skills Francis et al., (2007). ELLs with LD have a neurological disorder that makes processing and recalling information and performing tasks challenging (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Modifications to classroom tasks means that the instructor must have a sound understanding of a wide range of factors which affect learning such being familiar with the social and cultural context of the content when teaching and learning are happening. The ability of the instructor to enact these complex understandings in the classroom ensures that the higher education institution is able to serve an increasingly diverse body of students.

IV. RESEARCH BASED STRATEGIES WHICH SUPPORT THE COGNITIVE AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF ELLS WITH A LD

A set of instructional practices are required to address the instructional needs of ELLs with LD. ELLs with LD tend to have limited vocabulary even in their native language and struggle to find the right words; they may also show a shortage in expressive and receptive language (Echevarria et al., 2008).
Academic staff, in order to support learners with their language acquisition, can resort to what Krashen and Terrell (1983) call the “Natural Approach” (p.51). Instead of focusing on error correction, this process urges instructors to embed concepts and vocabulary within comprehensible content which includes: gestures, body language and facial expressions. It also includes the use of high frequency vocabulary, simplified syntax, less pronouns, clear pronunciation, longer natural pauses, the use of high quality visuals, and increased repetition. Moreover, the use of formative feedback allows ELLs with LD to review what was required against what they actually did (Wormell, 2006). Cognitive strategies which target vocabulary and background knowledge include: summarizing, clarifying, facilitating dialogue through questions and peer interactions. Approaches such as Sheltered Instruction (Echevarria & Graves, 2007), support language acquisition for ELLs with LD. Some of the strategies include identifying students’ learning style, working with the student to identify their stronger language skill and use it to develop the other language skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking), providing checklists and peer assistance in order to reduce the amount of information which students may need to generate independently, teaching students coping strategies to support the areas which are affected by the disability and listing the day’s agenda on the board as ELLs with LD tend to get easily distracted and as a result could suffer from anxiety. Providing a familiar pattern reduces the anxiety factor and provides them with external predictability (Echevarria et al., 2008).

Consistent and predictable classroom management routines give equal opportunity for all students to demonstrate their capacity for learning. Furthermore, academic staff should consider collaboration with specialised professionals for supplementary, intensive reading
interventions provided by a reading specialist or special education teacher who is familiar with ESL adaptations (Garcia & Tyler, 2010), this feature ensures the pedagogy is student-centered and appropriate to the skill and matched to the ELLs impairment. Student centered learning or constructivist approaches to teaching and learning embed learning in real life experiences and rely heavily on hands-on activities which help ELLs with LD to comprehend abstract concepts. It is an effective method for engaging all classroom participants.

Researchers Hong (2015) and Sabornie & de Bettencourt, (2009) recommend the following steps for academic staff when developing a learning strategy for ELLs with LD:

- break down tasks to seven sequenced steps
- write down processes as ordered steps
- develop a mnemonic to help students remember each ordered step
- use interesting instructional methods to teach each step (a video, modeling, demonstrating)
- select appropriate technology to support the learner’s academic needs
- list the objectives of the day on the board to provide external predictability and reduce anxiety because ELL with LD are environmentally dependent
- modify formative assessment appropriately.

A Pre-reading Cognitive Strategy

To guide ELLs with LD in reading, instructors can use the following steps: guide students in reading the title of the reading passage, ask them to find the author’s name, give them clues to the background information and ask them to complete it. Step two: ask students to read the subheadings and the first sentence of each paragraph. Use cues to help them such as words in italic, underlined words, bold, pictures, graphs. Step three: ask students to read the concluding paragraph or last few lines. Step four: ask questions to check their
understanding about vocabulary, main ideas and information about the reading passage (Kinsella, 2002).

Reading Comprehension Strategy

Conderman et al. (2013) share another classroom reading comprehension strategy which they call BIRDS. This strategy helps students to:

- systematically organize a text
- analyze the information
- understand its meaning

B- Break reading into smaller parts
I- Identify confusing words or phrases
R- Reword or rephrase to clarify
D- Decide if it makes sense
S- Summarize in your own words

It is important to remember to allow students to use various support tools such as a thesaurus, dictionaries or computers. The support strategies will vary depending on the ELLs' learning disability and the nature of the task. It is worth noting that it is natural for the learning process to yield little progress in the first year. Oral proficiency is expected to develop between three to five years while academic proficiency may take between four to seven years (Cummins, 2000).

V. ADDRESSING DIFFERENTIATION
Academic staff working with ELLs with LD must ensure they make the necessary adaptations or modifications to the curriculum content for individual students with impairment. Adaptations may include modifications to the instructional content, teaching methods and materials, or the physical learning setting (Janney & Snell, 2000). It is also important to note that English language learners with a learning disability by the time they are in higher education, may not have necessarily mastered the skills of note taking or active listening. An inclusive classroom must ensure it reinforces these skills which require time and practice to show results (Nguyen, 2007). This may require the instructor to address the individual academic needs of the learner by inspecting their notes for organisation, pairing them up with other peers to help them compare notes and complete missing information.

Addressing differentiation in the English language classroom for ELLs with LD takes into account students' language limitations. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) and Visser (1993) support the view that addressing differentiation is a process by which “teachers meet the need for progress ... by selecting appropriate teaching methods to match the individual student's learning strategies, within a group situation” (p.15). Fahim and Khalil (2015) further reinforce this view by arguing that having prior knowledge of the students' language abilities and knowledge level through reliable and valid diagnostic assessments ensures that the learning needs of all students are met. The information yielded by the diagnostic assessments allows academic staff to tailor the curriculum and the lesson plan for an inclusive learning environment that fosters appropriate student support strategies. At the same time using classroom assessment techniques (CATs) allows the academic staff member in the English language classroom to monitor and gauge students' progress,
plan effective grouping and use relevant instructional strategies that match students’ skills, knowledge and learning disability.

*Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs)*

Classroom assessment techniques are simple, non-graded in-class activities designed to give feedback on the teaching-learning process as it is happening. This strategy advocated by Angelo and Cross (1993) is an ideal method to use not just to assess students’ achievement but to collect meaningful data that would help in effectively planning an inclusive learning environment. CATs address the following questions:

- How much is each student grasping from what is being taught?
- What am I doing that is useful for these students?
- What am I doing that is not useful for these students?
- What are their muddy areas?
- What type of intervention is required?

*Scaffolding*

Breaking down tasks into chunks based on identifying the students’ zone of proximal development (ZPD) reflects that care has been given by the academic staff member to evaluating the extent to which an ELL with LD needs assistance or scaffolding. Determining the learner’s ZPD allows the instructor or classroom peers to offer the appropriate guidance to allow the ELL with LD to accomplish academic tasks successfully. Selecting shorter passages to read or setting shorter reading time helps students with a learning disability to build confidence that they can achieve tasks and complete them like
their more capable peers. An Intermediate level student with a learning disability may need more time to complete a grammar task (fill in the blanks) and may be given fewer items to complete. At the same time, an ELL with LD in the advanced level, may be able to independently complete a gap filling exercise but struggle with the questions that start with “Why” or “How” (problem solving). Checking for understanding and verbal scaffolding include: paraphrasing and the repetition of students’ responses using slow speech. These simple strategies help ELLs with LD to process information better. It is important to keep in mind that processing information for ELLs with LD is a double cognitive task which includes: processing the question posed by the instructor in English and translating it mentally into Arabic or their first language; secondly, processing the response to the question in Arabic / first language and then translating it into English. Struggling learners can benefit at this stage from what Nguyen (2012a) calls “wait and think time” (p.143). Instructors can count to five after posing a question to allow students sufficient time to process information. When instructors scaffold for students based on their ZDP, it reduces their anxiety and enhances their confidence level as anxiety has been known to be a hindrance to the process of second language acquisition (Sultan, 2012). This encourages risk taking and reinforces their language competency.

VI. ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

Technical equipment to support the learning process of ELLs with LD can be used at different times and in variation according to the need and the disability of the student. Quite often, a student with a learning disability is able to manage his/her learning process by using assistive technology. However, assistive technology if not appropriately selected
or assigned to students at appropriate intervals of their learning can prove to be a
hindering factor. Students can be overloaded with too many facilities or if the technology
does not meet the actual need of the student or if the equipment is too complicated to be
used independently. In this case the technology becomes a barrier to the learning and
their academic achievement. Nonetheless, assistive technology has been known to play
a positive role in supporting ELLs with LD to achieve their learning goals. Below is a list
of appropriate and effective technological tools:

- Job Access with Speech (JAWS) that converts text on the screen to synthesized
  speech;
- Kurzweil 1000 digitizes books or articles, class assignments and exams into a
  format that is readable by JAWS.
- Braille printer that prints e-books, PDF and even Arabic Text into Braille.
- Braille Note Display
- Plextalk, a portable audio recording device.

VII. ASSESSMENT FOR ELLS WITH A LD

In order to effectively evaluate the academic achievement of ELLs with LD “a university
must provide methods for evaluating the achievement of the student with the [LD] as will
best ensure that the results of the evaluation represents the student’s achievement rather
than reflecting the student’s impaired sensory, manual or speaking skills” (Legal
Information Institute- Academic Adjustments, 2000). Research has often recommended
that academic staff in higher education in order to assess ELLs with LD, they resort to
alternative assessment. Formative assessment is ideal as it is mainly for planning, guiding, and evaluating instruction, it is also ongoing and diagnostic (Tomlinson, 2014). Konur 2000; Tindal and Fuchs, 2000; and Messick, 1999 believe that by making adjustments to four areas in assessment, a fair and valid assessment of ELLs with LD can be guaranteed. The recommendations include the following: adjustment to the presentation of the assessment material, adjustment to the assessment directions and the use of devices to assist and support the learner, adjustment to the response of the students and adjustment to the setting, timing and scheduling. However, Sharpe and Earle (2000), argue that “the use of alternative assessment is compensatory in nature and, as a result, ultimately threatens to subvert the equality of opportunity it aims to provide... thus violates the principles of assessment and undermines the validity of assessment in higher education” (p.191). This point is debatable and open to a number of speculations.

Adjustment to the Presentation of Assessment

It is important to note that assessment adjustments made at the end of a semester or during the semester, are merely an extension to the adjustments and accommodations made for ELLs with LD in accessing their curriculum throughout the academic year. Assessment material being available in different formats ensures that students with a learning disability in the English language classroom are accommodated.

Presentation of Material and Assessment Instructions
The way in which the assessment is presented to an ELL with LD can aid in ensuring that the student easily comprehends the requirements of the task. The content can be broken down into chunks; additionally, assessment instructions can be broken down to simple steps or simplified by highlighting key words through the use of a technological device. The invigilator can also read the instructions to the student, simplify the language, or provide the assessment prompt as a recording or use the text-to-speech presentation feature. Additionally, depending on the disability, the exam paper can be provided in large print or in Braille. Other devices related to student support can include speakers/amplifying devices, magnifying devices and speech synthesis.

Adjustment of Students’ Responses to Assessment

Students who have a learning disability whether they are English language learners or not, may need to make adjustments to the way they communicate their response in an assessment. Learners with a learning disability may not need to write down their responses, but rather dictate it to an invigilator or record it on a voice synthesizer. They may also need to use a spell checker, require wider spacing of the text, lines or margins on the examination paper or response booklet. Students with a learning disability may also need to respond in a number of formats such as taping their responses for later verbatim transcription, use a spelling dictionary, dictate their answers to a proctor, use a voice recognition system or a personal laptop.

Adjustment to the Assessment Setting
For higher education institutions to make it possible to assess students with a learning disability, they must ensure that students have been provided with the necessary training that allows them to effectively use assistive technology and that they have been sufficiently trained in assessment strategies. Students with a learning disability in the English language classroom may require adjustments to the assessment setting such as: being examined in a small group or individually, use auditory simulation, special furniture/equipment, require good lighting and possibly a sound proof room for students with an attention deficit disorder to ensure minimal distractions. Brigham & Bakken (2013) point out that those students who may need sign language interpreters or access to voice synthesis software or transcribers are better off taking their assessment in a separate room.

Adjustment to the Timing and scheduling of Assessment

ELLs with LD may require taking their assessment over several days or intervals. This may require giving the student more time, breaks or extend the deadlines for assignments. Zuriff (2000) argues that this is the most debated area of adjustment in assessment for learners with a disability. Recent studies show a clear correlation between the implications of extending assessment timing in the classroom and the academic achievement of dyslexic students. In most studies (Zuriff, 2000), the extended time assessment had positive effects for ELLs with LD. Tindal and Fuchs (2000), argue that extended time adjustment without other accommodations, may not be useful at all times for ELLs with LD, but for maximum benefit, it must be designed and implemented to meet the individual needs of the ELL with the LD as part of a whole supportive system. It is
worth noting that academics without the appropriate training in supporting ELLs with LD can implement an adjustment which can be wrongly forced on a disabled learner which would be of little to no use in measuring their academic achievement regardless of their learning disability.

Accommodation in assessments necessitates that for the purpose of validity and reliability, the assessments must follow two core principles: accommodations must not alter the construct of the test measure; changes should be based on individual needs as changes have differential effects. With a lack of appropriate assessment adjustments, the assessment results of ELLs with LD would be measuring their disability rather than their academic achievement. Such measures necessitate that changes are made based on informed decisions by the higher education institution and the welfare office support staff.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

ELLs with LD who enroll at university, may find that they need to have a psycho-educational assessment completed. Psycho-educational assessments have specific criteria and result in a clear diagnosis.

The Egyptian National Council for Human Rights, states “.....all private and public educational institutes do not discriminate among learners on the basis of gender, ethnic origin, religion, creed, social status or disabilities...” (Law No. 94 of 2003, 2010). In 2007, Egypt signed an agreement with the CRPD (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and ratified it in 2008 with the appropriate policies addressing to remove discrimination and promote equal opportunity among all individuals with a physical or a learning disability.
In light of the above, providing an all-inclusive learning environment that guarantees a rewarding experience for ELLs with LD, requires that those in the management of the establishment, direct their efforts towards optimizing the learning experience of all students. Accommodations and interventions will differ significantly from one student to the other. Each student should have an individualized academic plan which outlines how they will access material, how they will go about the teaching and learning on and off campus and the tools/resources which match the impairment to ensure equal opportunity. However, higher education institutions should ensure that introducing accommodation and modifications for an inclusive learning environment does not push them to compromise on standards and the validity of assessment. Furthermore, Abreu et al., (2016) recommend expanding locations/hours/availability of academic and support staff, inform students about the services available to them and ensure availability of specialized equipment and software.

Having a better understanding of the academic needs of ELLs with LD, requires professional development (PD). Carefully planned professional development will help academics face the classroom challenge and enable them to deliver effective instruction for struggling English language learners with a learning disability. It will also ensure that they are providing developmentally appropriate learning experiences and adaptations that are suitable and feasible. Academic staff who had received appropriate training related to the many facets of handling English language learners with a learning disability (Nguyen, 2012) should be able to:

- Identify ELLs with LD,
• understand how these students qualify for LD accommodations and modifications in the teaching, learning and assessment cycle,

• appropriately facilitate the learning objectives based on individualized lesson plans which address their learning style, learning disability and language proficiency,

• know what type of support they can reasonably offer each student on campus and off campus.

Professional development can also be supplemented with other resources available on the web or at the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) in Maadi, Cairo.

http://lrcEgypt.org/workshops/index

IX. WORKS CITED


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Dr. Khalil is a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. She holds the positions of Research Coordinator and the Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO) Coordinator. She has a track record of publications in areas related to pedagogy in higher education, transition from high school to university, assessment in flipped teaching, and students’ support in higher education as well as publications in the field of English literature. Dr. Khalil is CELTA certified and is an IELTS Examiner. She is also a trained reviewer for CEA and QAA, Wales.
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