

LIMITED BILINGUAL [LB] STUDENTS

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A limited bilingual student [LB] is a student who has not developed oral language proficiencies in his/her first language and has not developed oral language proficiencies in his/her second language. These students typically score limited or below in both Spanish and English on oral language assessments [BSM, LAS, IPT, WMLS, PPVT]

Keep in mind these basic principles.

- Go from the known to the unknown.
- Build upon the child's strengths.
- Introduce and master concepts in the first language, then reinforce in the second language.
- Develop both expressive and receptive oral language skills in both languages.

Dr. Jim Cummins discusses the LB student in his Threshold Theory. In the Threshold Theory, students with strong academic skills in their first language are most likely to succeed in academic areas in their second language. Students with minimal academic skills in their first language have a difficult time academically in their second language.

As a Bilingual Special Education Resource Teacher, I found that a large number of students referred to Special Education were LB students from Spanish speaking homes. I also found that the decision was made to place these LB students into an English speaking curriculum at the Kindergarten level.

In my conversations with Dr. Alba Ortiz, Dr. Leonard Baca, Bilingual Speech Therapists, and Bilingual Psychologists, we have discussed the need to develop first language proficiency before introducing the LB student into a second language program. Placing an LB student prematurely into an English program leads to students who remain LB students and who do not learn to read and write in either their first or their second language.

Dr. Kirathi mentioned in her workshops at several CAFE Conferences that students with learning disabilities have a "short circuit" in their brains and that we, as teachers, need to help the students "reroute" their learning processes. Placing a student with learning disabilities into a second language program with no first language support is like overloading a weak circuit.

By properly providing interventions in the child's first language, we can help the child develop a higher level of proficiency in the first language. By properly providing first language interventions, we can help the child achieve oral and literacy skills that can be transferred to the second language. With literacy in the first language, the child is ready to begin the academic developmental process.

Many teachers and administrators have expressed this sentiment at IEP meetings.

“The child does not have any language so we need to place the child in an English classroom.”

Most children that come to school in Kindergarten have at least five years of receptive language skills in their first language. If the child attended English preschool, they probably have had only one year of exposure to English.

The following is an example of an extremely LB student referred to me when I was a Bilingual Special Education Resource Teacher in Madera, California.

“Maria” was referred to Special Education by her Kindergarten teacher. Maria was in an all English classroom with a monolingual English speaking teacher and no bilingual aide. Maria came from a monolingual Spanish speaking home. No one at the school had ever heard Maria speak at all. Maria was also urinating her clothes on a regular basis.

Maria’s mother told me that Maria was a “perica” at home. She never stopped talking. Maria’s mother was concerned about Maria’s slow progress. She said Maria did not start talking until she was three years old.

Maria was in a severe stage of cultural shock at school and had become a “selective mute” only at school. The next year, she was placed in my bilingual Special Day Class. She was identified as a low functioning student using Spanish assessments. Maria became my best singer and spoke to me every day in Spanish. She never urinated her clothes at school.

When you find a LB student, consider the following suggestions.

- Test the student with several oral language proficiency measures in both languages. Remember that most oral language proficiency measures concentrate on expressive language skills.
- Test the student with receptive language measures in both languages.
- Meet with the parents to determine if there are any health issues, language delay issues, trauma, shyness, etc.
- Determine if the body language of the teacher is clashing with the culture of the child.
- Determine what languages are spoken by the adults in the home. Who speaks English fluently? Who speaks Spanish fluently?
- At what age did the child speak his/her first word, phrase, sentence in Spanish?
- At what age did the child speak his/her first word, phrase, sentence in English?
- If you discover that the dominant language of the home is not English, then provide an instructional program for the child utilizing the home language. Build upon the child’s strengths.
- Go from the “Known to the unknown.” Use the child’s first language to introduce all new concepts. Reinforce mastered concepts in the second language.
- Be careful not to create a student who cannot read or write in any language!

- Limited bilingual students are not limited to Spanish/English students. Students who speak other languages (Hmong, Khmer, Cambodian, etc) might also have the same needs.
- Assessments in the first language are critical to fully understand the child's needs and to be able to provide the most appropriate instructional program utilizing the child's native language.

In summary, limited bilingual students should have priority to services provided in their first language due to their exceptional needs. Multi-disciplinary assessments in both the first and the second language are needed to understand the scope of their needs. Instructional interventions in their first language can help prevent academic failure and loss of self esteem. Work closely with your bilingual staff and the child's parents to provide the most appropriate educational program that supports both the first and second language of the limited bilingual child.