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# An Evaluation of Writing Samples by English Learners in Special Education

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AN EVALUATION OF WRITING SAMPLES BY ENGLISH LEARNERS IN  
SPECIAL EDUCATION

BY  
BRETT PATRICK FRAYSETH

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR  
MASTER OF ARTS  
IN  
ENGLISH – TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of this project is on the placement of students learning English as a second language, often referred to as English learners (EL), into special education classes. In many schools there has been a tendency to avoid placing ELs into special education classes for fear that their academic difficulties resulting from language are being confused with the academic difficulties often resulting from cognitive delays, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, or emotional/behavioral disorders. This is a reversal of previous practice and is in response to the recognition of past overrepresentation of ELs in special education programs. The concern here is that many students may not be receiving proper services, whether they are special education or language development services, since there are cases where both are appropriate.

My interest in the topic was piqued during a clinical teaching experience, during which, I asked the cooperating teacher about the demographics of the class. The subject of this particular class was German language, but there were three students out of twenty in one class who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for learning disabilities. I was surprised by this fact and even more surprised to find out that the students with IEPs were performing at the rate of the rest of the class. I began doing research on the placement of students with identified special needs in language classes and found more research on the placement of students in special education programs in place of ESL programs. As a result of much research pointing to over-qualification of ELs in special



education for learning disabilities, however, many administrators have become overly cautious and have resisted placing ELs in special education programs.

I have also completed research in the area of special education services placement assessments for students who are non-native speakers of English. I have found in this research that there are numerous methods for making these placement decisions and that although schools were once required to use standardized psychoeducational assessment instruments, that they are now able, under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) to use more responsive measures based upon the actual curricula of the schools. However, there are very few models available for these types of assessments. One of the best models is the Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM), yet its greatest failing is in the written assessment, in that it only looks at accuracy in spelling (Englebert-Johnson, 1997), rather than any other aspects of written language production, such as grammar, syntax, morphology, structure, and so on.

Over the years, there have been trends of placing ELs in either ESL programs or special education programs, but districts seldom utilize the services of both programs for the same student. While ELs have an equal statistical probability of needing special services as other students, the actual enrollment numbers of ELs with IEPs have not reflected this fact. Initially, the trend was that a disproportionate number of students who are non-native English speakers were placed in special education programs because they were not performing apace with their peers. The language barrier was confused with a student not performing up to his or her ability. Now that this discrepancy is more widely known, administrators are very cautious of placing students into special education

programs if they come from households where English is not spoken, thus reversing the trend (Artiles, et al., 2005; Rhodes, et al., 2005). This has resulted from many federally funded programs such as the Center of Minority Research in Special Education [COMRISE], the Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources [LASER] Project, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems [NCCRESt], and the National Institute for Urban School Improvement [NIUSU] (Artiles, et al., 2005, p. 284). Nonetheless, the issue of the appropriateness of placement persists in many school districts and individual programs.

The current trend is that non-native English speakers are being placed in special education programs with less certainty than native English-speaking students, even when the EL is not performing at the rate of EL peers with the same first language and similar educational backgrounds (Artiles, et al., 2005; Rhodes, et al., 2005).

### Statement of the Problem

Previously, the problem had been disproportionately high placement of non-native English speaking students in special education programs. This trend is being reversed in many settings where districts are attempting to compensate for this issue. Administrators are wary of placing ELs in special education programs for fear that it will be perceived to be a result of the school not understanding the needs of ELs, even when the ESL teachers are convinced that such a placement is appropriate. The problem is that the tests given for ESL placement assess aspects of language use that may also be attributable to other

delays or disorders. Conversely, the tests given to receive special services contain items that are highly language dependent. This has made it difficult to ascertain whether or not ELs should receive special education services and whether they are needed instead of or in addition to ESL services.

Because the most recent IDEA guidelines were established in 2004, it would be important to determine the efficacy of non-standardized placement methods, such as CBM. Research could help to establish whether or not students placed or not placed with this method had greater or less academic success than those placed or not with standardized testing procedures. Revisions to the CBM could be proposed that address the shortcomings of the nature of the written assessment evaluation by looking at spelling. In order to do so, a study needs to be done to look at the differences in writing samples of students who are native-speakers of English not placed into special education, native-speakers of English placed in special education, English learners not placed in special education, and English learners also placed in special education, all of whom need to be deemed by the IEP teams as being “appropriately placed”, in their respective programs, in order to determine what types of markers might exist in the writing samples that would assist in placing students into special education.

The study is guided by the following research question: what patterns are there in the frequencies of errors among learners of four different categories (native-speakers of English not in special education, native-speakers of English in special education, English learners not in special education, and English learners in special education)?

### Importance of the Study

This study is very important within the context of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), since receipt of proper services – especially for ELs - has been the focus of much of the controversy surrounding the subsequent practices and procedures. It is partially as a result of this controversy that ELs were removed from special education programs and placed into ESL programs. If a more appropriate assessment were able to be used, it may reveal that, in some cases, there needs to be more emphasis placed on addressing the student's needs as it relates to a learning disability rather than on language development instead of simply assuming that since they have a background with a language other than English that an ESL program is most beneficial causing them to lose time in a Special Education setting. There may also be instances where a dove-tailed program that contains aspects of best practices in both ESL and Special Education will be most beneficial to the student. Hopefully as a result of this study, a better understanding of the students' writing in all programs will be possible, thus ensuring that placements are appropriate.

Considering the fact that the ethnic minority students, and especially ELs, are statistically more likely to be placed into special education programs, it is alarming to find that there is very little research done on how to teach ELs with learning disabilities. Much of the research that has been carried out has been on the placement and assessment process rather than on the pedagogical factors involved (Artiles, et al., 1997). Moreover, Artiles, Trent, and Kuan (1997) believe this weighting of research importance on the assessment and especially biases within assessment tools to be as a result of the

importance of standardized testing in making special education placement decisions. They also came to the conclusion that special education professionals, namely researchers, concerned themselves with culturally diverse learners only on a “special occasion basis” (pp. 89).

### Methodology and Limitations of Study

I am proposing a project to investigate placement of English learners (ELs) into special education classes. I have analyzed the tests administered for placement for special education, as well as for English as a second language (ESL) classes. Literature that reviewed these assessment tools and the various criteria for making these placement decisions was also examined. In addition, I have reviewed literature on evaluating writing for ELs, special needs learners, as well as students who are not in any special programs. While a great deal of literature has been written on this topic, very little has shed light on the complicated nature of determining correct special education programs for language learners.

The focus of this project is on an analysis of writing samples produced by English learners not in special education (EL/NSPED) and ELs who are also placed in special education classes (EL/SPED), as well as native-English speaking students in special education (NE/SPED) and a control group of mainstream native-English speaking students not in special education (NE/NSPED). All of the samples were obtained from students whom the team of teachers agreed were appropriately categorized into one of the aforementioned four groups. This analysis seeks to ascertain possible differences in the

kinds of writing errors made by these students in comparison with similar groups of students. The analysis will be qualitative, by looking at the types of errors in the writing samples, as well as quantitative, by scoring the writing samples and categorizing the mistakes made by the students to determine if there is a pattern in the types of errors made by the groups of students in the study.

This study is important to the aim of placing students into a program that will best suit their academic needs. The sample group consists of students from three different high schools, but all of the schools are located in southern Minnesota and most of the ELs are Latino, primarily of Mexican decent and the non-ELs are primarily Caucasian. This may limit the possibility of generalizing the results to a broader group, but may be the first step in a larger, more expansive study as few such have been completed as of the date of this thesis.

### Definitions of Terms

**bilingual:** an individual who is proficient in two languages

**biliterate:** an individual who is literate (including both reading and writing) in two languages

**cognitive delay:** psychiatric definition with children who experience onset of characteristics before reaching 18. These characteristics include: an IQ score below 70 and must have significant limitations in adaptive functioning in at least 2 of the following skill areas: communication, self care, home living, social/interpersonal skills, use of community resources, self direction, functional academic skills, work, leisure, or health and safety (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This is also known as mental retardation.

**developmental disability (DD):** legal definition for individuals with a severe, chronic disability, showing onset before the age of 22; which is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or a combination of those impairments; is likely to continue indefinitely; results in substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of major life activity: (i) self care, (ii) receptive and expressive language, (iii) learning, (iv) mobility, (v) self-direction, (vi) capacity for independent living, and (vii) economic self-sufficiency; and reflects the

individual's need for a combination and sequence of special, interdisciplinary, or generic services, individualized supports, or other forms of assistance that are of lifelong or extended duration and are individually planned and coordinated ([www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org)).

**emotional / behavioral disorder (EBD):** terms used interchangeably in legal, educational, and psychological arenas. Public Law 94-142 defines serious emotional disturbance (SED) as "a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance: --An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. --An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. --Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances. --A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. --A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems" (U.S. FEDERAL REGISTER, 42, August 23, 1977, pp. 42478-42479) (from <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-928/emotional.htm>).

**English as a foreign language (EFL):** program or class, in an environment where English is not the dominant language, that teaches English language to students with a native language other than English. Often the learners or EFL in given program or class all speak the same first language.



**English as a second language (ESL):** program or class, in an environment where

English is the dominant language, that teaches English language to students with a native language other than English, whether English is indeed the first, second, third, etc. language.

**English learner (EL):** a student learning English as a second language, according to

Artiles, Rueda, Salazar and Higareda (2005, p.284) the State California refers to this group of students as "English learner[s]" or as "pupil[s] of limited English proficiency," alternately. The second term was not chosen because it implies that this group is comprised only of students who have "limited" competency in the English language. Although the first term does not conform to person-first taxonomy, it is the term that has been most frequently used in the literature reviewed and is widely accepted by educators in the field and it refers to a pupil who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English or who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual the ability to meet the state's proficient level of achievement on state assessments, the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, or the opportunity to participate fully in society.

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP):** a legal document that states what services a student should and must receive. This document is required by any and all individuals receiving special education, but is not limited to only those individuals. This document is constructed by the interdisciplinary team (see below) to lay out what steps an intermediary measures are needed to best enable the student to learn.

**interdisciplinary team:** a group of individuals involved in the care and/or education of a particular student. These individuals can include, but are not limited to: parent(s), classroom teacher, psychologist/therapist, school administrators, siblings, medical professionals, para-professionals, care facility staff, legal guardian, social worker, ombudsman, etc. These individuals often help to construct an IEP (see above).

**learning disability (LD):** can be defined as any exceptionality that hampers an individual's ability to learn in a way different from individuals without this exceptionality.

**native-English speaker (NE):** a person who has grown up and/or been educated in an environment where the language used was English.

**non-native-English speaker:** a person who has grown up and/or been educated in an environment where the language used was a language other than English.

**response to intervention (RTI):** a general education model of instruction that provides a uniform, evidence-based model of instruction for all students with two additional tiers of interventions to provide learning outcomes that monitor student progress and are adjusted according to the student's response to these interventions, which can also provide data to inform placement in special education.

**special education (SPED):** broad classification for a program or class intended to provide additional academic assistance to students with any number of conditions or disabilities (e.g. learning disability cognitive delay, developmental disability, mental retardation, emotional-behavioral disorders, physical impairments) – but not linguistic deficiencies arising from simply coming from a different language background than the language majority students – that hamper their success in coursework.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Statistics in 2004 by the U. S. Department of Education (USDOE) reported that 18.8% of children aged between five and seventeen speak a language other than English at home (USDOE, 2006) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) stated that 20% of United States residents native speak a language other than English, and they project that by the year 2030, that number will double to reach 40%. What little data there are indicates that the majority (56%) of ELs with an identified special need have a learning disability (LD) with reading difficulties as the primary diagnosis. According to USDOE and NICHD data from 2003 the next most prevalent identified special need (24%) for ELs is speech–language impairment. Of those ELs in special education, 55% are in pullout programs (Klingner, et al., 2006). “General education teachers sometimes hesitate to refer ELs to special education because they cannot determine if ELs’ difficulties with learning to read are due to second language acquisition issues or LD” (Klingner, et al., 2006, p. 108). Certainly this has hampered ELs from receiving the necessary support services they need.

While the focus of researchers over the years has been on the problems caused by overrepresentation, the problem of underrepresentation of ELs in special education programs is equally detrimental to the academic success of the individual student. Either way, the student is not receiving appropriate services. An errant placement could result in the student having negative feelings toward education, as well as not receiving the proper interventions to address the academic needs of the student, since the cause of the

difficulties experienced in language acquisition are not the same as causes of a learning disability. The other side of the issue is that a student who truly has a disability may feel equally frustrated, since the disability is impeding the student's attempts to learn. "The new IDEA [Individual with Disabilities in Education Act of 2004] has strengthened requirements to track disproportionate representation patterns at the district and state levels" (Klingner, et al., 2006, p. 108). Despite this effort there is still minimal systemic support for gathering data about ELs' placements. This problem is only compounded by the fact that the means by which students are placed into special education and English as a second language (ESL) programs differs from district to district and can even vary within districts. "[U]nder IDEA 2004, states may now choose to discontinue the use of the IQ-achievement discrepancy formula and eliminate the requirement for IQ tests as part of the special education identification process" (Klingner, et al., 2006, p. 108). Students who have limited command of their first language, especially those who are not literate in their first language, seem more likely to be placed into special education programs than their biliterate counterparts. Klingner, Artiles, and Méndez Barletta (2006) point out that a greater number of ELs than native speakers of English in special education for LD (learning disabilities) may not indicate that too many ELs are placed in special education, but rather that the mainstream population may not be receiving adequate supplementary services when they are having academic difficulties.

Englebert-Johnson (1997) stated, "Shinn & Knutson (1992) found that it is difficult to measure the abilities of children who vary linguistically using the common discrepancy criteria that defines a child with a learning disability" (p. 24). When a child is literate in

his or her first language (L1), there is a greater potential for second language (L2) acquisition, especially for skills involving literacy (Englebert-Johnson, 1997; Gutierrez-Clellen, 2001; Kucer, 2005; Schleppegrell, 2004). Englebert-Johnson restated Collier's work concluding that due in part to the factors of L1 literacy on L2 learning as well as developmental factors, that students between the ages of eight and eleven learn languages more readily than those older or younger. Students in this age range take approximately two years to acquire mathematics and language arts skills of the same level as their native-English-speaking (NES) peers. Whereas in the reading, social studies, and science content areas, it can take between four and six years to acquire native-like status. Students only slightly older, from twelve to fifteen, typically would take an additional two years, putting them beyond the range of time they are enrolled in secondary school systems (Englebert-Johnson, 1997).

### Legal Background

Since the law has very strict definitions of who is in special education and is defined as an English learner, it is important to understand the distinctions in the legal aspects of each of these categories. Law suits and subsequent U.S. Supreme Court cases have resulted in frameworks for much of the policies and practices of the U.S. Department of Education as well as the individual states' departments of education (Forness & Nielsen, 1998)

*Legal Definitions*

Due to an increased public concern about the rights of minorities, much new legislation was introduced at both state and federal levels in the 1950s. “Regular Education Initiative (REI), mandated by the federal government, requires schools to provide special education support services to handicapped students within the regular special education classroom. In addition, the initiative stipulates that any child who is having educational difficulties may be entitled to participate in this service” (Hinton, 1995, p. 14). The REI also establishes the right of a student to have an individual education plan (IEP) (Hinton, 1995). This IEP sets forth a plan of action and outlines the services for the student agreed upon by an interdisciplinary team comprised of parents, teachers, and professionals and clinicians such as psychologists, medical doctors, social workers and the like. Once written, the school has a legal obligation to carry out the instructions for the education of that individual student to the best of its ability.

Public Law (PL) 94-142, also known as the Education for All Children Act, describes the term *learning disability* (LD) as “a wide range of conditions that are generally associated with neurological factors, and established eligibility for special education services by the exclusion of other handicaps (i.e. mental retardation, sensory handicaps, emotional disturbance)” (PL 94-142 as modified, USDOE, 1977, 1972, p. 65083). PL 94-142 further spells out the federal definition of LD as “a disorder of one of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself as an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write and do mathematical calculation. The term includes minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia,

and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning disabilities which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps; of mental retardation; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” (PL 94-142 as modified, USDOE, 1977, 1972, p. 65083). In 1991, learning disabilities made up approximately 40% of the students with disabilities receiving special education nationally (Hurley, 1997, p.1). Hurley clarifies that PL 94-14 requires there to be “a severe discrepancy . . . between intelligence and achievement” in order apply the label of being “learning disabled” (Hurley, 1997, p. 11).

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) defined LD as: a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to individuals presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the lifespan. Problems in self-regulation behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities, but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g. sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (e.g. cultural differences insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1988, p.1).



*Identification and Placement*

The commonality between these two definitions of the types of special education is deficits in language, reading or mathematical abilities. Some definitions refer to IQ as a means of quantifying; others refer to neurologically based issues (Hurley, 1997). Hurley cited further definitions put forth by Mercer, Forgone, and Wolking (1976) as well as Epps, Yseldyke, and Algozzine (1985) that include measures of “intelligence”, “psychological processing”, “low academic achievement”, “exclusion categories”, “neurological deficits”, “affective domains”, “ability achievement discrepancies”, and “scatter analysis” (Hurley, 1997, p. 22). Furthermore, Epps, Yseldyke, and Algozzine (1983, 1985) had found that 75-68% individual states’ legislations and administrations used some sort of academic component to define LD, including roughly 29% which assessed LD as being based upon discrepancies in grade placement and achievement (Hurley, 1997).

This requirement of an ability-achievement discrepancy for placement into special education changed within the revised IDEA. The effect has been that standardized tests are no longer needed to make placement determinations. Under IDEA 2004, what is known as a response to intervention (RTI) criteria can be used to place students in special needs programs. “With this dramatically different system, students who show signs of struggling to learn are provided with intensive early interventions. Those students who do not respond to evidence-based instruction are then considered possible candidates for special education” (Klingner, et al., 2006, p. 108).

### Methods of Placement

Because there is a clear legal definition for special education, the method of placing students in special education programs is necessarily clearly defined. As previously mentioned there are two main methods for this placement: standardized assessments or RTI criterion. Although the federal government has allowed both of the two options to aid in making placement decisions, the individual states have the ability determine that within their state that schools will use one or the other or both.

#### *Standardized Assessments*

In the original definition, there needed to be an established discrepancy between the student's ability to learn and what the student has actually achieved. The possibility of discrimination in standardized testing was first made known by special interest groups. They asserted that as a result of such discrimination, minorities were being systematically excluded from higher education. This discrimination against language minority groups in standardized testing had led to a disproportionately higher number of ELs being placed in special education classes (Artiles, et al., 2005; Hinton, 1995; Rhodes, et al., 2005). Though the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III (WISC) and the Woodcock Johnson – Revised (WJ-R) are widely used, they are adaptations of intelligence batteries for adults who speak English as a primary language. The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III is the most commonly used assessment for making placement decisions regarding special education referral (Koehn, 1998). The three goals of the WJ-R are to assess “cognitive ability, scholastic achievement, and scholastic and non-scholastic activities” (Woodcock, 1978). It has long been used to make decisions regarding

placement of students into special education programs. This test was deemed appropriate for this purpose because it can demonstrate that there is an ability-achievement discrepancy and find “cognitive defects” (Hurley, 1997, p.11). Hinton did however establish in her study that the WJ-R was not biased against Hispanic students.

In addition to the WJ-R and the WISC-III are other assessment tools that are used to establish the achievement-ability discrepancy, such as the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT), the Kaufman Functional Academic Skills Test (K-FAST), the Woodcock-McGrew-Werder Mini Battery of Achievement (MBA), and the Leiter International Performance Scale – Revised (Leiter-R). For the most part, these alternate standardized assessment instruments are utilized instead of the aforementioned WJ-R and WISC-III because they require less time to administer and are often less cumbersome to score, and can therefore be utilized in settings where there is not a full-time specialist available to administer the assessment (Flanagan, et al., 1997). Although the WJ-R was not shown to introduce bias against Hispanic test-takers, the language abilities of the students studied was not established.

Table 1 Strengths and weaknesses of the six most commonly used standardized assessment instruments when used for ELs

| <b>Assessments</b>                              | <b>Strengths for use with ELs</b>  | <b>Weaknesses for use with ELs</b>   |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Woodcock Johnson - Revised</i>               | the discrepancy between the two domains used to determine LD, cognitive ability and academic achievement are measured; there are highly focused tasks to demonstrate learning with explicit instructions; students can be identified as having LD without being evaluated in comparison to peers | that it is too long to be administered in its entirety; reliability of the test and the content validity are questionable since 1) it measures merely auditory short term memory rather than short term memory as a whole and 2) it has only been normed on Latino population, but of unspecified linguistic proficiency   |
| <i>Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children</i> | high reliability and validity with strong internal consistency; the setting for the students taking this assessment is within a school; has been proven to be reliable for predicting academic success   | out of step with the current theories in intelligence; doesn't provide useful information about how that success may be improved; the items are verbally demanding; not sensitive to the needs and limitations of linguistically and culturally diverse students; greater reliance on culturally-based information; greatest discrepancy between performance domain scores and verbal domain scores for language minority students |
| <i>Wide Range Achievement Test</i>              | tests the subjects on reading, mathematics, and spelling   | virtually unchanged in the past 60 years; inadequate construct validity; contains bias, especially cultural biases; lacks depth of assessment within each of those domains   |

| <b>Assessments</b>  | <b>Strengths for use with ELs</b>  | <b>Weaknesses for use with ELs</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| <i>Kaufman Functional Academic Skills Test</i>            | intended to be administered in a short amount of time; measures of functional skills within reading and mathematics that are tested in real-world contexts               | cannot adequately test a wide range of skills and abilities;  |
| <i>Woodcock-McGrew-Werder Mini Battery of Achievement</i> | a brief assessment battery; assesses the applied and basic skills of an individual; one of the best measures of complex reading skills, while still using short passages | reliability of the test and the content validity are questionable since measures merely auditory short term memory rather than short term memory as a whole; has only been normed on Latino population, but of unspecified linguistic proficiency |
| <i>Leiter International Performance Scale - Revised</i>   | standardized assessment tool that is most appropriate for ELs  | the student needs language to encode the necessary information into memory in order to be able to utilize it and the test contains several measures of memory   |

(Continued from previous page)

*Response to Intervention*

In 2004 the requirement of an ability-achievement discrepancy for placement into special education changed under the new IDEA. Consequently, standardized psychoeducational assessments were no longer the sole method of making placement decisions. Under IDEA 2004, what is known as a response to intervention (RTI) criteria can be used to place students in special needs programs, whereby students who are struggling academically are exposed to a variety of different types of instruction to see which is the most effective (Klingner, et al., 2006, p. 108). Despite these advances, there are still a great many districts which believe standardized tests are the most objective and therefore the most “fair.” The literature seems to suggest that there were also ESL instructors who were pushing for ELs to take the standardized tests if they were struggling, since they felt they had done all that they could for that students, and, therefore, there must be more than just a language acquisition difficulty (Klingner, et al., 2006; Englebert-Johnson, 1997). This study also pointed out that some educators, even those making decisions about diagnoses, are of the belief that a student with limited English proficiency (LEP) has a lesser intellect and may have a disability relating to language or general learning, when in fact they are merely struggling to understand the language not the content (Klingner, et al., 2006; Englebert-Johnson, 1997). This idea should be easily refutable by the logical conclusion that a native-English speaker would score lower on an intelligence scale if the test were administered in a foreign language studied by the test-taker, unless they were biliterate in that second language.

The alternative to standardized testing, Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM), is a method of RTI assessment, which does not require the use of standardized instrumentation. CBM provides individualized, proactive suggestions within the teaching-learning context through tests that actually come from the curriculum in a student's own classes. These suggestions are made within the context of the curriculum as well as the instructional context (Ortiz, 1997) and often include evaluations of interactions between not just teacher and student, but also the student with other students. The literature reviewed supports this option as being practical, economical in terms of time and finance, and completely valid and reliable. Furthermore, because of these advantages, RTI can be used to follow up on individual students' progress within a program, as well as determining the efficacy of the program itself and evaluating material from content areas in which students actually study. There would be a range of assessments, including cloze, short answer, and essay. Reading samples are taken from actual classroom material. Research indicates that this method of assessment is both valid and reliable with both construct and criterion referenced validity. The CBM is appropriate for evaluation of a student's progress in writing ability, as well as for use as a tool for identification of special needs learners. In addition to the CBM, the Pupil Rating Scale - Revised, also known as the Pupil Rating Scale for Learning Disabilities, can be used, since one detractor to the CBM is that it often focuses on spelling, rather than content or fluency or any other mark of grammar (Englebert-Johnson, 1997).

### Evaluation of Writing Samples

Tate and Heidorn (1999) looked at prompted, expository, and narrative writing of Grade Four general education students in Florida public schools. They analyzed the writing samples and compared them from the baseline to one year subsequent. They began by establishing “anchor” papers, which were used to define the six rating scale points they determined necessary to evaluate student writing. The types of errors these papers focused on, in terms of mechanics were in word choice, punctuation, use of verbs, and spelling. These error types are the ones that will be used to analyze the written samples.

### Evaluation of Writing Samples from ELs

According to the research Klingner, Artiles, and Méndez Barletta (2006), ELs who also had LD wrote class notes which contained more “disjointed fragments” and tended to write the exact words of the teacher rather than paraphrasing more frequently than their bilingual peers without LD diagnoses (p. 112).

Englebert-Johnson (1997) deemed “Written Expression,” or how well students can relay their thinking through writing, to be both reliable and valid in assessing students’ growth in writing, and said “it is appropriate to use in the assessment of pupils who are just learning English” (p. 27). Furthermore, she states that the writing assessments help to elucidate the ELs’ English language abilities in the areas of lexicon and syntax, as well as phonology. Englebert-Johnson also stated that collecting writing



samples over a period of time is the optimal way to monitor and evaluate the growth and overall performance of ELs' English language abilities (1997). In Englebert-Johnson's 1997 study of ELs at a Belgian international school, it was determined that CBM showed a marked difference within the Written Expression results. The writing sample results showed differences between a pre-identified "Special Needs" group and native English speaking group that were far more disparate than for any other subsection of the two assessment tools. While the writing evaluation used the number of words correctly spelled as the sole scoring method, Englebert-Johnson determined this method to be effective in discriminating children with learning disabilities (pp. 84-86).

Huang and Morgan (2003) examined the writing samples of 35 ESL students with limited to intermediate level English language proficiency in grades 8-10 in Canada. The study purported to show that knowledge structure analysis as a theoretically motivated approach is useful as an evaluation tool for young ESL teenagers. This article described a functional approach to analysis of discourse in science content area reading and writing by ELs, rather than an analysis of "discrete errors in isolation" (p. 256). They pointed to other previously carried out research which indicated that content area instruction was not necessarily a good means of teaching ESL, since there was only minimal focus on form and structure. The written assignments that were analyzed went through two revisions with the final revisions being peer-edited. Huang and Morgan (2003) argued that utilizing a grammatical meter stick for looking at progress ignores the deeper accomplishments of the final drafts, which attempt to express the concepts more completely and with greater understanding, while losing focus on the grammatical

features. They believed that if they had used grammatical rubrics in a future study, they would be able to see very little difference from the first draft to the last. The linguistic devices which they chose to examine were: reference (generic), transitivity (relational), conjunctions (additive), nominal groups (through modification of head nouns), and lexis (p. 248). Though this may be an effective means of discerning differences in learners and their levels of understanding of a concept, it may not be entirely practical means for classroom or SPED teachers to evaluate student comprehension, due to the level of complexity.

Within an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, Hasselgren (2000) studied 11-12 year-old English learners in their third year of English instruction at Norwegian primary schools. This research was intended as more of a holistic program analysis looking at the how the program fostered development of the pupils' linguistic abilities in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Within this analysis, there was attention paid to written progress and ability to communicate in an academically appropriate manner. She, like Huang and Morgan, chose to focus on functional evaluations of written work rather than on specific types of errors. She primarily focused on topics and content development, and the range of conditions in which learners are able to produce language.

Cumming, Kantor, and Powers (2002) analyzed the ratings of three different groups of highly qualified Educational Testing Services (ETS) raters of compositions produced by ESL and EFL students on standardized tests. They identified that these raters of varying experiences and backgrounds exhibited commonalities in their rating strategies. These similarities included the following: surface feature analysis (e.g.

formatting, length), exerting strategies for judging the sample (including: error type analysis, comprehensibility, rhetorical strategies interpretation, clarity of the viewpoint of the writer), and finally scoring the overall written work (p. 74).

### *Special Education*

Learning disabilities can be found in roughly 5-10% of all school-age children (Hurley, 1997). Of those ELs in special education, 55% are in pullout programs, meaning that they are in programs in which additional instruction is given outside of the classroom setting with either an ESL or SPED specialist (Klingner, et al., 2006).

A fundamental problem with diagnosing individuals using the term “learning disability” is that the term implies a certain homogeneity of those carrying this label. This problem demonstrates an underlying need to further classify individuals with learning difficulties within a specified taxonomy rather than to treat them as though one common solution might exist. Clearly, there is a need to differentiate students with LD from not only their classmates without LD, but also their fellow classmates with LD (Hurley, 1997).

Very often ELs are inappropriately placed into special education because only formal assessment tools are utilized to make placement decisions. Even with the advent of IDEA 2004, many schools prefer what may be deemed by administrators as a more objective and, therefore, fair assessment process. However, different interventions within the classroom before referral can oftentimes help to minimize the number of students improperly placed into special education (Klingner, et al., 2006). In their research paper,

Klingner, Artiles, and Méndez Barletta (2006) stated that they often encountered teachers who were pushing for ELs experiencing difficulties in ESL to take standardized tests for special education placement, since they frequently were of the opinion that they had done all that they could for these students, and that there must be an LD responsible for the academic setbacks. This indicates that the ESL teachers are aware that there is something different about the learning process of these students, but they may have difficulty being able to quantify what it is that is different.

Klingner, Artiles, and Méndez Barletta (2006) pointed out that a greater number of ELs in special education for LD than native English speaking learners (NESLs) may not indicate that too many ELs are placed in special education, but rather that the mainstream population may not be receiving adequate supplementary services when they are struggling academically. However, they state, too, that there is an unfortunate belief by many educators and even those making decisions about diagnoses, that a student with limited English proficiency (LEP) has a lesser intellect and may have a disability relating to language or general learning, when in fact they are merely struggling to understand the language and not the content. In many of these cases, the ELs are being tested in English, instead of their native language regardless of their level of proficiency in English and many times with no accommodations for taking the tests (Klingner, et al., 2006; Englebert-Johnson, 1997). This idea should be easily refutable by the logical conclusion that a native English speaker would score lower on an intelligence scale, if the test were administered in a foreign language studied by the test-taker. Clearly that individual's IQ did not change between the taking of the two tests. The possibility of discrimination in

standardized testing was first made known by special interest groups. They asserted that as a result of such discrimination, minorities were being systematically excluded from higher education. This discrimination against language minority groups in standardized testing had led to a disproportionately higher number of ELs being placed in special education classes (Artiles, et al., 2005; Hinton, 1995; Rhodes, et al., 2005).

### English learners in Special Education

Within general education there is frequently a perception that ESL and SPED services are redundant. The research indicates that the academic needs of ELs and SPED are similar, but certainly not the same and, therefore, the appropriate interventions for each group are not the same. Many professionals in the field of Special Education are perplexed with how exactly to deal with the various challenges presented by ELs in special education classroom settings. There is also great concern that special educators are not applying teaching methodology based upon theory derived from sound empirical research with regard to ELs (Artiles, et al., 1997). An increased understanding of the differences between ELs and SPED students will help to develop more appropriate interventions for not only both groups of students, but also students who are categorized in both groups. The interventions that are appropriate for ELs can be modified using best practices for Special Education to allow for more effective interventions for ELs with learning disabilities. These interventions would ideally allow educators to provide support in one setting or the other instead of both, preventing ELs with IEPs from being pulled twice as often. There has been no indication in the research that pulling students

into both programs provides a doubling of progress, rather it often causes these students to miss out on other essential curriculum that may hinder their academic success in later years (Artiles, et al., 1997).

A great deal of research has been conducted on writing samples in ELs and native-English speaking students. There have been very few studies, however, that have been done to determine differences of writing samples between ELs in SPED and ELs not receiving SPED services. There are no known studies that look to the use of writing samples as a means of determining whether ELs should be receiving SPED services in addition to EL services. Since writing samples are the most controlled and deliberate form of language production, they can be good indicators of the processing of a student.

The extensive legal framework is in place to ensure proper placement of all students into appropriate programs. The difficulty comes in when educators must make a determination as to whether a student is not performing due to learning disabilities or other factors that affect their academic success. This study looks specifically at students who are learning English and the procedures for placing them in special education. It is clear that ELs can benefit from special education if they have a learning disability. It is also clear that using the same standardized assessments as their native-English speaking peers to determine placement is not appropriate. The use of curriculum-based measures and their response to interventions may provide the most accurate data to allow for a placement that is at once legal and appropriate. Collecting data from ELs writing samples may provide the most concrete indicators of learning disabilities.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Writing samples are especially reflective of the mental processes of students because the written modality of language production is more deliberate and controlled than oral language production. Many existing assessments attempt to measure receptive language skills either through reading or listening, but the comprehension and processing can not be measured directly as it takes place internally. Additionally these processes can only be measured by the learner producing language either in written or in oral form. This further compounds the problem, because the student needs to first comprehend one medium of language and then express in the same or even in a different medium, making it difficult to determine if the deficiencies lie in the comprehension or in the expression.

In this study, the focus will be functionally broad, but will focus particularly on the specific types of errors. This error analysis is not meant to be a method that is necessarily helpful in a classroom setting, but rather as a means of placing the students into appropriate programs that will be better equipped to deliver the interventions that will most help the student improve academically. Certainly this may help to determine the types of interventions needed, as it may become clearer where strengths and deficiencies lie. Again in Cumming, Kantor, and Powers' (2002) study, the idea of error analysis resurfaces. This study indicates that in addition to the usefulness described in other studies, that it is a type of analysis that has the potential for interrater reliability, which is essential in making placement decisions.

### Textual Analysis

The text can be analyzed for multiple different features as the body of literature would suggest. The intent of this study is for the analysis to reveal a pattern that educators can use to help identify ELs in need of SPED services. Error analysis has a high likelihood of being reliable when measured by different raters. This reliability is essential in that data in the Response to Intervention (RTI) model of SPED identification needs to be done over a period of time. Requiring teachers to evaluate intricate grammatical constructions may be too cumbersome to be appropriate for this end, since it would likely require extensive training into grammar and usage to allow teachers to accurately score the written samples produced by the students.

### Evaluation of Writing Samples from Special Needs Learners

Barrera (2006) conducted research that was intended to increase classroom instructors' ability to meet the educational needs of the EL students with LD. Barrera's research also provides a framework for in-class assessment based on the curriculum rather than on standardized assessment tools. Furthermore, he sought to compare the writing samples of ELs with special needs to ELs without special needs. He found that the only differences between these two groups of pupils was in the number of complete sentences, but that he could see no marked difference between the ELs without special needs and the general education students in this regard. There were also observed differences in the length of the discourse and the number of keywords used. Barrera concluded that the only effective means of differentiating between the ELs with LD and



those without, from writing sample evaluations, lies in their expressed ability “to apprehend sufficient vocabulary” (Barrera, 2006, p. 152). This would indicate that two key features to focus on would be the relation of complete to incomplete sentences and accurate use of terms. For this reason word choice and tense of verbs are two main features that the study focuses on. Additionally spelling and punctuation were analyzed as these are often a common mistakes made in writing (Englebert-Johnson, 1997).

### Design of Study

The intent of the study is to be able to determine which types of errors would be salient features to be able to allow for distinction between ELs who have not acquired the language skills to allow them to be successful and ELs who have a learning disability. The further intent of this is to allow educators to easily and more objectively analyze an open-ended, extended written sample to see if the patterns match those of ELs in one category or another. Written samples were collected from three different secondary schools in southern Minnesota. The students whose writing samples were used ranged from grade nine to grade twelve. The samples were obtained from their regular teachers as part of their regular coursework. No additional writing assignment was given as a part of this study. In all cases, they responded to an open-ended writing prompt in writing journals. Teachers collecting the data submitted written samples that students were able to write at greater length about. Permission of the principals of all of the schools involved in the study was obtained per the IRB recommendation. In all cases, the

identities of the students were kept anonymous once they had been coded by category and given unique learner numbers.

### Research Questions

The research set out to determine if there were any patterns in the errors made by learners within specific categories. The frequency of overall errors, as well as the frequency of specific errors, was taken into account. The research question was: what patterns are there in the frequencies of errors among learners of four different categories (NE/NSPED, NE/SPED, EL/NSPED, ELSPED)? My hypothesis is that the students in the EL/SPED group will have a greater frequency of errors than any of the other groups, but that the types of errors will mirror those of the NE/SPED group.

### Research Design

The teachers collecting the written samples were asked that they be first-draft free-writing samples that did not include any correction or editing marks on them. These teachers keyed the photocopies of the samples into one of four categories: English learner not in special education (EL/NSPED), English learner in special education (EL/SPED), native-English speaker not in special education (NE/NSPED), and native-English speaker in special education (NE/SPED). Teachers working with these students were asked only to designate those in special education if those students were identified as having a learning disability. Furthermore, teachers were asked not to include writing samples

from students where there was contention with in the student's team about whether the placement or choice not to place the student in special education was correct. The rationale for this was to be sure to include data from the students who were all correctly categorized to allow for more accurate data, since there may have been cases where students were either incorrectly placed in special education or when students should have been receiving special education services, but were not. Once the students had been categorized they were assigned a unique code number to preserve their anonymity as well as the school from which the sample was obtained.

A word count was done on each of the samples as the samples varied widely in length from 27 words to 237 words. Errors were then marked on the copies of the samples in one of four types: word choice, punctuation, verb use, or spelling. An error in word choice included situations where a word was left out, a different word should have been used, the lexical meaning of the word didn't make sense in the given context, the word was placed incorrectly in the sentence, or if a homophone was incorrectly used (e.g. "their" in place or "there"). An error in verb constituted a verb that was incorrectly conjugated for the tense, mood, aspect or number; a verb form that was incorrectly used (e.g. "caught" instead of "catch") or in cases of modal verbs or auxiliary verbs being either incorrectly used or omitted. In cases where a verb was misused in terms of its lexical meaning, it was marked as an error in word choice, not as a verb error. An error in punctuation was counted only if it involved an incorrect usage or omission of a period, question mark or apostrophe. All other punctuation errors were not counted as there tends to be widely varying opinions of when a comma, semi-colon and other punctuation marks

should be used correctly, especially in the use of adverbials (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 499). Spelling errors included words that were incorrectly spelled, for errors in capitalization, incorrect forms of plurals (e.g. “childs” instead of “children”). Capitalization errors were not counted if there was an issue of a run-on sentence, since the error was counted as one of punctuation. Also the misspellings of proper nouns were not recorded unless the word was not capitalized. This determination was made since there are many variations in the spellings of names (e.g. Kerry, Cary, Kari, Carrie, etc.).

Marks were made after the word where the error occurred and only one type of error was allowed after any given word. This prevented the possibility of there being more errors than words in the sample. If there were two or more possible types of errors in one place, the errors were marked according to which type most obstructed the meaning. The most obstructive type was word choice, followed by verb, next spelling and the least severe type was punctuation. There were no errors found that did not easily fit into one of these categories.

### *Project Description*

The writing samples from four different groups of students were examined: students receiving ESL services, native English speaking students receiving special education services, students receiving neither ESL nor special education services, and students receiving both ESL and special education services. The differences in the writing samples were analyzed by looking for errors and putting those errors into types. The frequency of correct words were determined as well as the frequency of total and

specific types of errors. The data then were examined to see if there is a pattern in frequency of errors as well as the type of errors made by each category of student.

#### *Description of Participants*

This study included written samples from secondary students from one of three high schools in southern Minnesota. The high schools were in communities which ranged in population of 3,000 to 40,000. The students were from one of four different categories: students receiving ESL services, students receiving both ESL and special education services, students receiving special education services but not ESL services, and students receiving neither ESL nor special education services. The students completed free-writing assignments as part of their normal curriculum. ELs were at all levels of proficiency, including three beginners. The most common language spoken was Spanish, but there were also individual speakers of Hmong, Ukrainian, German, Indonesian, Chinese, Korean and Portuguese. The categories totaled 40 EL/NSPED students, four EL/SPED students, 18 NE/NSPED students, and 12 NE/SPED students, for a total of 74 students from all subgroups.

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

The data were entered on a spreadsheet including the learner code number, the category of student (e.g. EL/NSPED), word count, total number of errors, and number of errors by type (e.g. word choice). The word count minus the total number of errors was calculated for each student to figure the number of words correctly used in the writing sample. A ratio of the number correct to the word count was then figured for each

student. The data were grouped by learner category and averages were calculated for each error type within each category of student. Within each category, the frequency of correct words was calculated by dividing the total number of correct words by the total word count. Furthermore, the average number of errors was divided by the average word count to determine the frequency of each type of error by learner category. Finally, the percentage of each type of error out of the total number of errors was calculated for each category of learner.

The data were analyzed by looking for differences in the frequencies of correct words as well as the frequencies of certain types of errors. All four categories of learners were compared to each other. Also, the percentages of each type of error were analyzed by learner category.

## CHAPTER 4

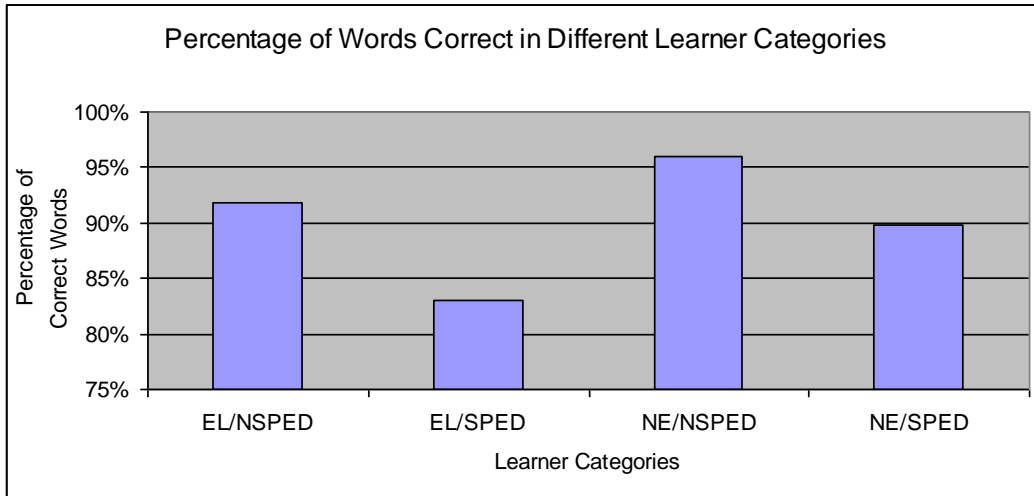
### RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The results of the study were collected quantitatively in terms of frequencies of the number of words in the writing samples to the number of words without errors. There was only one error possible per word, thereby eliminating the statistical probability that there would be more errors than words correct. Additional data was then measured in terms of the frequency of errors per the total number of words in the writing samples. All of the data was therefore expressed in terms of numbers less than one with three significant digits as some of the frequencies were too close to be analyzed with fewer significant digits.

#### Data

The data were collected in all four categories of learner (EL/NSPED, EL/SPED, NE/NSPED, NE/SPED). The results were graphed by the average percent words correct in the different learner categories as shown in Figure 1. The graph shows that EL/NSPED had 91.8% words correct, EL/SPED had 83.1% correct, NE/NSPED had 95.9% correct, and NE/SPED had 89.9% correct.

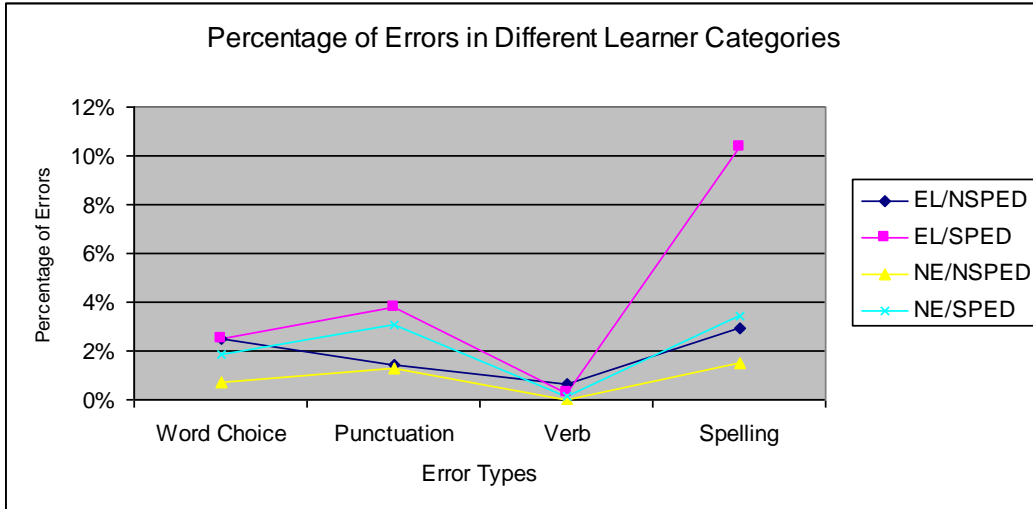
Figure 1 Percentage of words correct in writing samples by different categories



The data represented in Figure 2 shows the percentages of the types of errors in each category of learner. The EL/NSPED group had an average of 2.5% word choice errors, 1.4% punctuation errors, 0.6% verb errors, and 3.0% spelling errors. The EL/SPED group had an average of 2.5% word choice errors, 3.8% punctuation errors, 0.3% verb errors, and 10.3% spelling errors. The NE/NSPED group had an average of 0.7% word choice errors, 1.3% punctuation errors, 0.1% verb errors, and 1.5% spelling errors. The NE/SPED group had an average of 1.9% word choice errors, 3.1% punctuation errors, 0.1% verb errors, and 3.4% spelling errors.

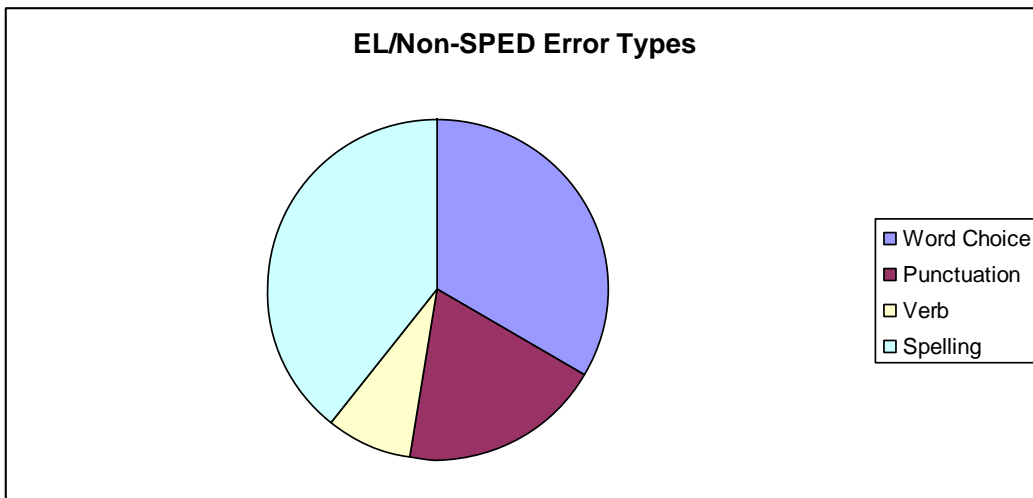


Figure 2 Percentage of errors in writing samples by different categories of learners



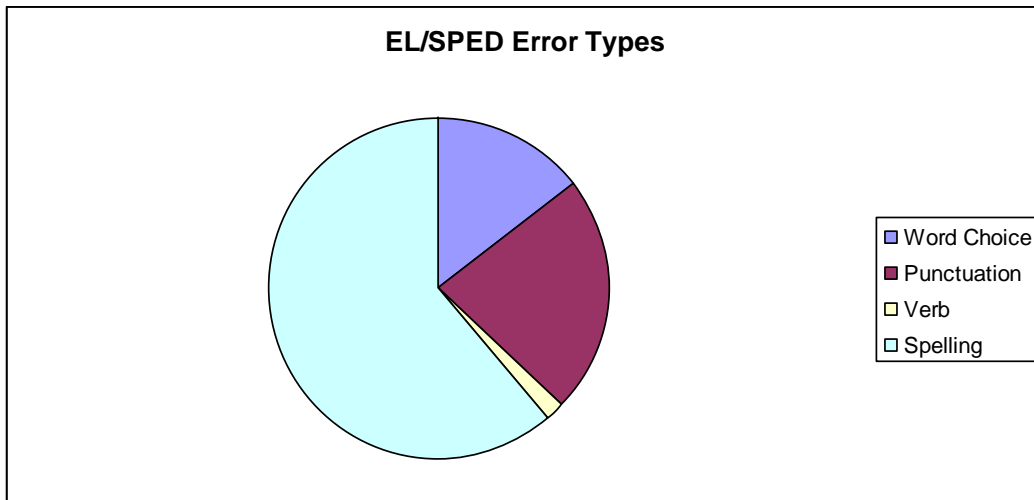
The data in Figure 3 shows that the most common error type by EL/NSPED students was spelling (40%) followed by word choice (33%), punctuation (19%), and then verb errors (8%).

Figure 3 Types of Errors made by ELs not in SPED



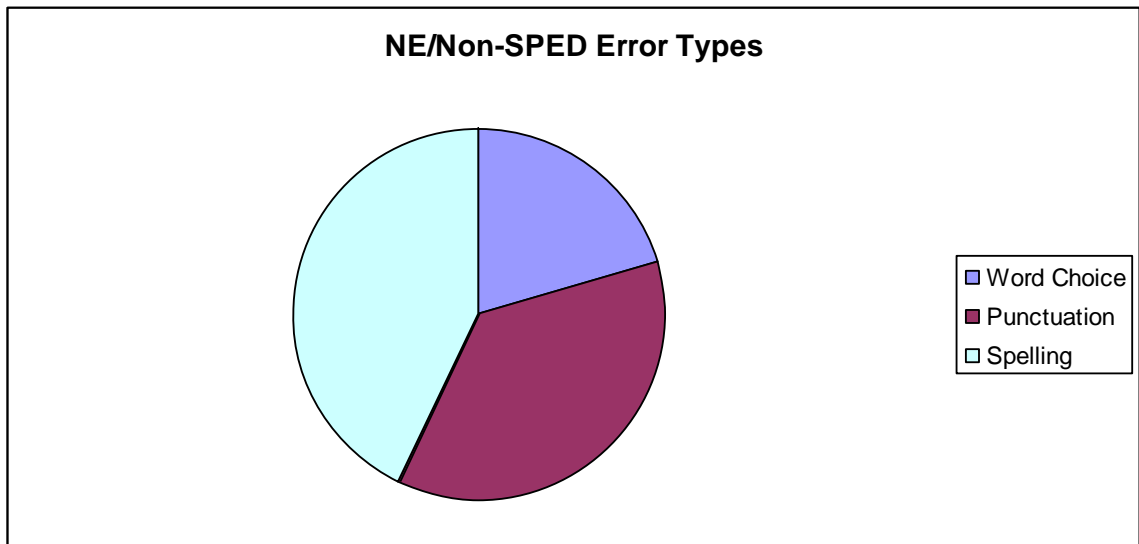
The graphic in Figure 4 shows that the most common type of error made by EL/SPED students was spelling (61%); followed by punctuation (22%), word choice (15%), and then verb errors (2%).

Figure 4 Types of Errors made by ELs in SPED



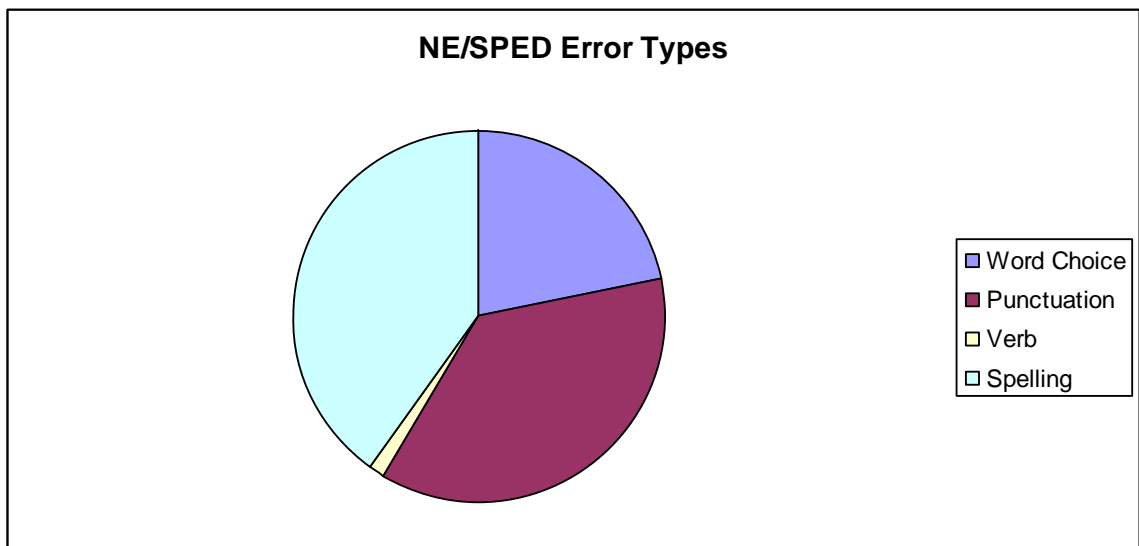
The data shown in Figure 5 shows that the most common type of error made by NE/NSPED students is spelling (43%), followed by punctuation (36%), and word choice (21%) with verb errors being less than 0.5% and therefore not represented on the graph.

Figure 5 Types of Errors made by native-English speakers not in SPED



The data in Figure 6 shows that the NE/SPED students had the most common error in spelling (41%), followed by punctuation (36%), then word choice (22%), and finally verb errors (1%).

Figure 6 Types of Errors made by native-English speakers in SPED



#### Summary of Data

The data show that the most errors were made by EL/SPED followed by NE/SPED with the fewest errors being made by the NE/NSPED group then the EL/NSPED. This shows that in both the native English speaking students and English learners that the group having the most errors was the students in Special education. The difference in the frequencies of words correct was more disparate between the EL/SPED and the EL/NSPED than the NE/SPED and the NE/NSPED.

The EL/SPED category of students had the smallest percentage of words correct. The NE/SPED students had only a slightly less percentage words correct than the

EL/SPED. The NE/NSPED students had the greatest percentage words correct. The difference between the ELL/NSPED and EL/SPED was almost 8.8%. The difference between the NE/NSPED and the NE/SPED was 6.0%

The data clearly show that students in all categories made the most errors in the category of spelling. The EL/SPED group made almost twice as many errors in spelling than in all three of the other categories combined. In the other three categories of students, the second most common type of error was only slightly less than that of spelling. In all categories of students except the EL/NSPED group, the second most common type of error was in punctuation. The greatest differences between the ELs in special education and the those not in special education is that about 50% of the errors made by the SPED group is in the area of spelling and the second type of error is in punctuation, whereas ELs not in special education made only slightly more errors in spelling than in word choice.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Special education (SPED) services are meant to address the fact that certain learners may require additional services that address the challenges of specific learning disabilities and allow students to be able learn in an environment that supports rather than hinders their learning. This must be done in a “least restrictive” manner in order to prevent students from being secluded from a mainstream education any more than necessary (Serna, et al., 1998). The idea of least restrictive environment has given educators and parents the concern that students should not be placed into too many programs. An increase in immigration over the past few decades has caused the number of English learners (ELs) arriving in U.S. schools to grow. Along with that the concern over whether or not ELs should be placed in SPED services when they are continuing to struggle academically despite the additional support they are receiving in English as a second language (ESL) programs has also grown. This difficulty to make gains academically is especially concerning when the student is not improving apace with siblings or peers of similar linguistic or educational backgrounds. There is little doubt that the type of interventions that a student receives in SPED programs is similar to but not redundant of the services received in ESL. Therefore, students need to be able to be placed in the program(s) that best suits their needs. In many instances this is for them to receive SPED services in addition to ESL services. Likewise, there need to be safeguards in place such that ELs who do not need SPED services are not receiving them

unnecessarily. To do so, may result in a child having negative feelings about themselves or education altogether.

### Summary

Special education (SPED) services are defined within legal parameters to ensure that students who would benefit from these services have access to them in order to increase their success in schools. At the same time, the law protects students from being incorrectly classified as requiring SPED services as this can result in stigmatization and students not being able to reach their full potential academically and socially (Salend, et al., 1997). This concern of misidentifying students has resulted in the need for a standardized method for placing students into SPED programs.

Likewise, there are legal definitions of who may be defined as an English learner (EL). These definitions are based upon the linguistic upbringing of the children and their performance in English-language settings. Schools have a far greater flexibility in determining qualification for ESL services than they do for SPED services. Also, the determination of which students are ELs tends to be more apparent upon the students' arrival in school. The difficulty comes in when trying to determine whether or not the difficulties in education result in a learning disability or in another internal factor such as motivation or an external factor such as social challenges. This difficulty in determining the cause of a student's difficulties can often result in disagreement among teaching

professionals, though there is increasing consensus among educators that there needs to be access to both types of services if that is what is beneficial to the student.

Historically the sole litmus for placement into SPED programs was defined by standardized tests to determine a discrepancy in a student's academic achievement versus his ability to learn. Though there are many tests available to place students within the education system, there is no demonstrated assessment that is shown to be valid and reliable for ELs because these tests rely so heavily upon literacy in English or are translated versions that then no longer maintain the same reliability/validity they did in their original forms. The most frequently used assessments are the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III (WISC-III) and the Woodcock Johnson – Revised (WJ-R) (Koehn, 1998). When these standardized assessments were relied on exclusively to make that determination, ELs were overrepresented in SPED programs. Even less language-demanding assessments such as the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT), the Kaufman Functional Academic Skills Test (K-FAST), the Woodcock-McGrew-Werder Mini Battery of Achievement (MBA), and the Leiter International Performance Scale - Revised (Leiter-R) do exist (Flanagan, et al., 1997). This difficulty in being able to properly assess students for whom English is not their first language resulted in a pendulum swing in the other direction wherein teachers were reticent to place ELs in SPED services for fear of overrepresentation of this group (Artiles, et al., 2005).

Relatively recently, there was a change in the requirement of criteria for determining placement of students into SPED under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). This change allowed for methods other than



standardized assessments to be used. This development was helpful in allowing for response to intervention (RTI) methods such as curriculum-based measurements (CBM) to replace standardized tests in situations where they are not deemed appropriate. In these instances, written samples gathered from regular instruction can be used to aid in the evaluation of students for SPED services (Barrera, 2006).

Written samples can be examined for features that may be able to help differentiate between ELs who do not need SPED services and those who should be receiving SPED services. The intent of this study was to develop a tool that would allow educators to use written products from within any curriculum rather than requiring an additional assessment or curriculum-based measure. This study focused on the frequencies and types of errors made by students in four different categories: ELs receiving no SPED services (EL/NSPED), ELs who receive SPED services (EL/SPED), native-speakers of English receiving no SPED services (NE/NSPED), and native-speakers of English who receive SPED services (NE/SPED). The types of errors analyzed were word choice, punctuation, spelling, and verb errors.

### Conclusions and Implications

My conclusion is that the written products of students who are EL/SPED do differ from the other three categories of students in the frequency and types of errors made. This group of students made considerably more frequent mistakes in their writing samples regardless of the length of the discourse. In fact, EL/SPED students made errors

on average almost twice as frequently as frequently as EL/NSPED students. It shouldn't be surprising that this group had more mistakes on average than all other categories of students, but that it was so far greater than other ELs was surprising. EL/SPED students without exception made many more spelling errors than any other type of error. In all cases, the EL/SPED students' spelling errors comprised approximately 50% or greater of all the total errors. Thirdly in about half of the cases, the EL/SPED students had their second greatest number of errors in the area of punctuation, whereas EL/NSPED students did not. Only one EL/NSPED student had less than 90.0% correct, who also had close to or greater than 50% of the errors being made in spelling.

The implication of these findings is that if an EL is being referred for SPED services for a learning disability and other measures have indicated that the student may qualify for SPED services, an analysis of the written sample produced by the student in the regular coursework can be done to assist in the decision making process. If the student makes frequent mistakes in his or her writing and approximately 50% or greater errors are made in spelling, SPED services may be appropriate. I would not recommend the sole use of any one type of CBM to make a definitive placement. My recommendation would be to use a writing error analysis in conjunction with other RTI data, especially when compared to same age, similar background peers. The method is rather straightforward for collecting the data. I would further recommend using multiple samples over an extended length of time when evidence-based interventions are being used for literacy development. It may be useful when not only productive literacy skills are addressed, but also receptive literacy skills. A tool like Table 2 may help in the data

collection and recording process. This could be used to compare other learners to an individual if the averages are not calculated. If an EL has a far greater percentage of errors than their fellow EL, look at the percentage of their errors that come from spelling, if 50% or more of their errors are in spelling, it may indicate a learning disability. If the percentage of spelling errors is within a few percent of the second most frequent error, it is less likely that a learning disability is present.

Table 2 Suggested tracking record for errors in writing samples

|       | Word Count                                     | # of Spelling Errors | # of Word Choice Errors | # of Punctuation Errors | # of Verb Errors | Total errors |
|-------|--|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|--------------|
|       |  |                      |                         |                         |                  |              |
|       |  |                      |                         |                         |                  |              |
|       |  |                      |                         |                         |                  |              |
| Total |  |                      |                         |                         |                  |              |
|       | Percent of errors out of word count            |                      |                         |                         |                  |              |
|       | Percent of each type error out of total errors |                      |                         |                         |                  |              |

### Limitations of Research

This study has some limitations in its design and the collection of the data. The nature of the test, though quantitative, is descriptive rather than prescriptive and therefore the error analysis has not been tested to determine the reliability for making decisions relating to placement in a SPED program. However the reliability of this could be tested by implementing this measure along with other measures. Also, if there were a greater curricular focus placed on the aspects of spelling and punctuation, it is possible the student would have a lesser percentage of their errors in those areas. This could also be tested to see if there was an impact made on the types of errors with various interventions aimed at addressing those errors. Moreover, since I was the only rater of the samples, there is a question of how great the inter-rater reliability of this method is. Since there is research to indicate that error analysis has very high inter-rater reliability, though, it may not be significant for a first analysis. Additionally, the sample size was small especially

in the category of EL/SPED because there were few instances where there was not disagreement in the appropriateness of the EL's placement in SPED. The number was an acceptable number for an initial study of its scope and breadth. Finally, because the vast majority of ELs in southern Minnesota speak Spanish as their first language, there could be variations in students who have different first languages. The relative homogeneity in the first languages of the participants may have shown trends in that subgroup of ELs that could then be tested on ELs with different first languages.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

Future study in this area should look into expanding the number of samples from different first languages to determine if the same patterns emerge. Research could also be done to determine if this method of error analysis is accurate in evaluating a placement for SPED services. Other aspects of the writing sample could be done to determine if there are other features which differentiate ELs needing SPED services from ELs who don't, or conversely connections between ELs and native-English speakers needing SPED services. These features could include the types of words used. For example the frequencies of different parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. could be collected. From those results errors in these categories could also be analyzed for patterns.

Finally, if the suggestions made in the use of frequency of errors and the percentage of those errors being spelling errors to aid in the placement of ELs in special

education, a study should be done to determine whether this can be used prescriptively rather than simply descriptively. The students should be re-evaluated periodically to determine whether the correct placement decision was made in cases where this method is employed.

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