It is important for educators who are screening English language learners (ELLs) for learning difficulties to consider that some behaviors that are considered signs of a learning disability also resemble linguistic behaviors of students learning a second language (L2). In addition, the behaviors may reflect cultural differences or values of students coming to U.S. schools from other countries and educational systems.

The following table highlights examples of similarities between possible linguistic, cultural, and learning disability (LD) explanations for behaviors demonstrated by ELLs. The list is not comprehensive, nor should it be used as a diagnostic tool, particularly since not all students with LD exhibit the same learning difficulties. Rather, it is a starting point for conversations regarding students having difficulty. We urge you to explore other potential explanations for learning difficulties based on what you know about your own students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Behavior</th>
<th>Potential Language Explanations (Limited L2 proficiency)</th>
<th>Potential Cultural Explanations</th>
<th>Potential LD Explanations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Expectations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Interaction</strong> Student has trouble interacting with:</td>
<td>• Student may not understand peer / teacher conversations, questions, etc.</td>
<td>Different cultural norms regarding:</td>
<td>Student may have trouble with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Peers (taking turns, interpreting body language and behavior, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Touch</td>
<td>• Language processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers (asking questions and voicing needs, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Proximity</td>
<td>• Auditory processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional</strong> Student feels:</td>
<td>Student may be:</td>
<td>Student is adjusting to a new cultural environment</td>
<td>Student may:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frustrated</td>
<td>• Struggling to communicate</td>
<td>• Student feels stress due to current or previous situations and instability (especially refugees and migrants)</td>
<td>• Be aware that he/she is falling behind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Withdrawn</td>
<td>• Feel overwhelmed or tired by the demands of learning a new language</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feel unsuccessful</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Anxious</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>In the Classroom</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong> Student has trouble:</td>
<td>• Student has limited comprehension skills and may not understand assignment or expectations</td>
<td>Different cultural norms regarding:</td>
<td>Student may have trouble with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meeting deadlines</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Time management</td>
<td>• Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Finishing work on time</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Deadlines</td>
<td>• Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Activities</strong> Student has trouble:</td>
<td>• Student has limited comprehension skills and may not understand activity</td>
<td>Different cultural norms regarding:</td>
<td>Student may have trouble with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Following directions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Expressing contradicting opinions</td>
<td>• Auditory processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working in a group</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Group vs. independent work</td>
<td>• Language processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Paying attention</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gender roles</td>
<td>• Sequencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Concentrating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Focusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Finishing tasks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Prioritizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participating in classroom discourse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cause &amp; effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Testing</strong> Student does poorly on:</td>
<td>• Limited understanding of content due to unfamiliarity with L2 what he/she knows in L2</td>
<td>Different cultural norms regarding:</td>
<td>Student may have trouble with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Summative assessments</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Testing-taking skills</td>
<td>• Language processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sharing work vs. cheating</td>
<td>• Expressing and organizing ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Student Behavior Language Explanations (Limited L2 proficiency) Cultural Explanations LD Explanations

### Language Skills / Proficiency

**Reading**
- Student has trouble:
  - Mastering sound-symbol relationship
  - Rhyming
  - Recognizing sight words
  - Learning new words
  - Comprehending text
- Student is unfamiliar with phonetic rules and patterns of L2
- Student has limited literacy skills in L1
- Student has:
  - Different cultural experiences and references than those presented in reading material
- Student may have trouble with:
  - Language processing

**Writing**
- Student:
  - Is reluctant to write
  - Has trouble expressing, organizing, and developing ideas
  - Makes frequent grammatical errors
  - Speaks more fluidly than he/she writes
- Student hasn't learned a variety of structures and vocabulary in L2
- Student is afraid to make mistakes
- Student's social language is stronger than academic language
- Student has:
  - Different cultural experiences and references than those relevant for the assignment
- Student may have trouble with:
  - Fine motor skills
  - Expressive language

**Speaking**
- Student:
  - Is silent for long periods of time
  - Has trouble pronouncing words
  - Speaks with frequent pauses and errors
- Student is in silent period
- Student hasn't learned structures and vocabulary in L2
- Student is afraid to make mistakes
- Different cultural norms regarding:
  - Student participation in discussions
  - Expressing contradictory opinions
  - Gender roles
- Student may have trouble with:
  - Oral language difficulties

**Listening**
- Student has trouble:
  - Understanding spoken directions
  - Remembering what he/she has heard
- Student has limited aural comprehension skills
- Student needs extra scaffolding and support (visuals, demonstrations, etc.)
- Student may have trouble with:
  - Auditory processing
  - Focusing

### Cognition

**Cognitive Skills**
- Student has trouble understanding, remembering, and/or identifying:
  - New concepts
  - Cause & effect
  - Classifying
  - Summarizing
  - Abstract ideas
  - Idioms & slang
- Student has limited academic language skills and background knowledge applicable to new concepts
- Student has limited reading/listening comprehension skills
- Student may have trouble with:
  - Organization
  - Sequencing
  - Abstract reasoning

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Adapted from Hamayan et al. (2007) and Klinger et al. (2008).

### References

Hamayan, E., Marler, B., Sanchez-Lopez, C, and Damico, J. “Table 3.3: Possible Explanations for Typical Difficulties Encountered by ELLs.” *Special Education Considerations for English Language Learners.* (p. 40). Philadelphia: Caslon, Inc.