

Language-Based

TEACHING SERIES

LANGUAGE-BASED
**Learning
Disabilities**



Landmark School
Outreach Program

PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
FOR EDUCATORS

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Chapter 1

Language-Based Learning Disability

WHAT TO KNOW

The development of fluent language skills is rooted in complex cognitive processes that include attention, auditory and visual perception and processing, memory, and executive function. Students who have difficulty in any of these areas may also have difficulty acquiring the facility with language that school requires. To understand a reading selection, for example, students must be able to pay attention to the task of reading, decode the words, retrieve vocabulary and related knowledge from memory, and recognize the syntax and structure of discourse.

The Basics

Language-based learning disability (LBLD) refers to a spectrum of difficulties related to the understanding and use of spoken and written language. LBLD is a common cause of students' academic struggles because weak language skills impede comprehension and communication, which are the basis for most school activity.

Like all learning disabilities, LBLD results from a combination of neurobiological differences (variations in the way an individual's brain functions) and environmental factors (e.g., the learning setting, the type of instruction). The key to supporting students with LBLD is knowing how to adjust curriculum and instruction to ensure they develop proficient language and literacy skills. Most individuals with LBLD need instruction that is specialized, explicit, structured, and

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multisensory, as well as ongoing, guided practice aimed at remediating their specific areas of weakness.

LBLD can manifest as a wide variety of language difficulties with different levels of severity. One student may have difficulty sounding out words for reading or spelling, but no difficulty with oral expression or listening comprehension. Another may struggle with all three. The spectrum of LBLD ranges from students who experience minor interferences that may be addressed in class to students who need specialized, individualized attention throughout the school day in order to develop fluent language skills.

Academic Proficiency

Academic proficiency develops in relation to students' increasing skills and abilities. Its three interrelated elements, shown in Figure 1, are coordinated by the individual's executive function. Executive function enables students to maintain focus, progress, and motivation; make connections with existing knowledge; recognize when comprehension falters; and apply strategies to modulate frustration and resolve lapses in understanding.

Language and literacy skills include listening, speaking, reading and writing. Study skills include flexible and appropriate use of strategies for managing materials, time, and language. Self-efficacy (the belief that one's actions are related to outcomes) includes skills in self-awareness, self-assessment, and self-advocacy. All of these skills are coordinated by executive function, which is the brain's super-manager and empowers students to set goals, marshal the various internal and external resources needed to meet them, and make adjustments to ensure accomplishment.

Most students with LBLD develop academic proficiency only when they are taught skills within a supportive environment of curriculum and instruction designed to meet their specific needs. When teachers know how to celebrate students' strong skills and remediate their weak ones using skills-based curriculum and instruction, students' lives can change. The first step to

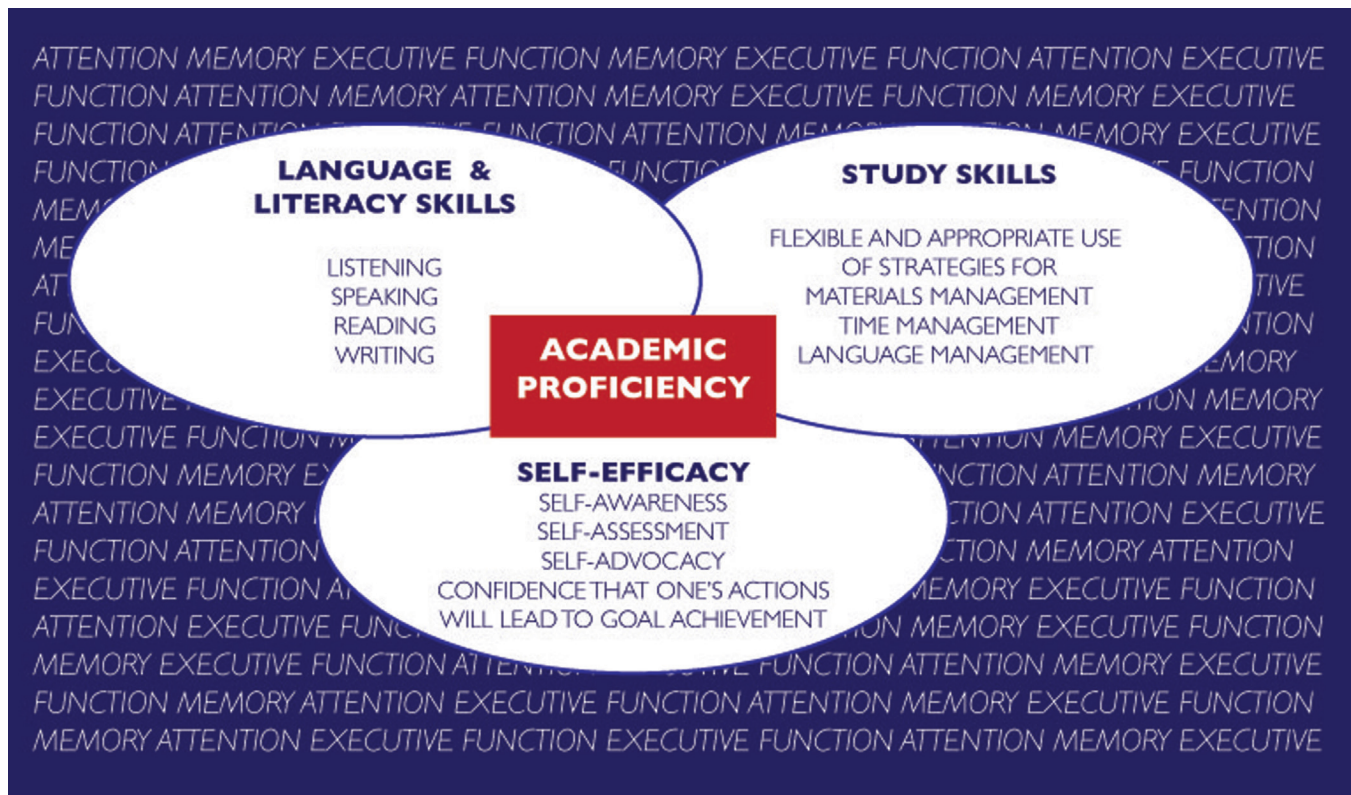


Figure 1. Elements of Academic Proficiency

empowering students with LBLD is to understand how and when LBLD impacts their school experience and why language-based teaching works.

Emergence and Signs of Language-Based Difficulties

Children naturally develop skills at their own pace, and most students have difficulty learning from time to time. To assess whether a student's performance in a skill area warrants concern, we must take into account typical development patterns. We expect preschool children to have difficulty tying their shoes, cutting out pictures from magazines, adding numbers, and writing neatly. Middle school students should be able to do these things quite easily. It is persistent difficulty in one or more skill areas that requires investigation. Even so, the level of struggle that calls for investigation does not emerge at a predictable time in child development; rather, difficulties may appear at any time from preschool

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through adulthood.

While some students with language-based learning disabilities are diagnosed very young, many other students progress through early elementary school with few issues. As they transition into middle school, high school, or even college, the demands for language rise, as do expectations for independent learning. Students who performed competently in structured, skills-based, supportive classrooms may find themselves floundering as they try to manage their school and homework with less individual guidance from teachers. They may suddenly seem anxious, frustrated, angry, or defeated about school. This level of change warrants investigation, and should not automatically be attributed to typical adolescent behavior.

COMMON DIFFICULTIES FOR STUDENTS WITH LBLD

LISTENING

SOCIAL SKILLS

SPEAKING

ATTENTION

READING

MEMORY

WRITING

ORGANIZATION

SPELLING

PERSEVERANCE

MATHEMATICS

SELF-REGULATION

Sometimes difficulties emerge because the compensatory strategies students used in the past stop working. Many bright students with learning disabilities go to great lengths to mask their struggles. Their intelligence enables them to compensate for lack of skill in one area with talents in other areas. A student might be a terrific talker and demonstrate solid knowledge in class discussions. Why would the teacher guess this student cannot read fluently? While students' capacity to adapt is admirable, the cost is high. Too often,

they enter middle and high school with elementary-level reading and writing skills. The fact is, if schools took the time to administer literacy screening assessments to all students at least once each year, those at risk could be identified, provided with remedial instruction, and offered accommodations to help them succeed in class.

Many screening assessments are commercially available, and easy to administer and score. Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) can also be used to screen students. Excellent free resources for CBM are available online at www.interventioncentral.org. In addition to screenings, students offer a rich source of information about their learning strengths and struggles - if we take the time to ask. The learning questionnaires at the end of this chapter show one example of how to ask students to self-report.

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTY OR DISABILITY?

Language difficulties are not always language disabilities. In order for a student to be eligible for special education services guided by an individualized education plan (IEP), he or she must be diagnosed with a disability. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a language-based learning disability is considered a specific learning disability (SLD). A diagnosis of SLD means the student's difficulties are *not* the result of:

- ENVIRONMENTAL, CULTURAL, OR ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE
- DIFFICULTY ACQUIRING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
- A MOTOR DISABILITY
- A VISUAL OR HEARING ACUITY PROBLEM
- IMPAIRED COGNITIVE FUNCTION (THOUGH SEVERE FORMS OF **LBLD** CAN AFFECT PERFORMANCE ON ASSESSMENTS OF COGNITIVE FUNCTION)

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In Their Own Words

Students with LBLD Talk about School

I'm not good at school. I'm good at baseball.

Elias, age 8

There are a lot of ways to be smart; I guess school's just not mine. I wish it was but I'd rather be on stage anyway. I have no problems there, and it's fun and I learn a lot.

Pedro, age 12

I'm pretty sure I work harder than anybody else. Some of my friends don't even study for tests and they get As and Bs. Sometimes I get a good grade.

Monica, age 13

I've been going to school triple-time for most of my life because I have learning disabilities. I go to regular school, then I go to tutoring around four or five times a week and in the summer too. It's rather tiresome.

Lily, age 16

