

Contrasting Possible Explanations for Typical Academic Difficulties Encountered by ELL

Observable Behavior	Possible ELL Explanations (Observed in English)	Possible Disability Explanations
Omits words or adds words to a sentence; forgets names of things that he or she knows has to describe them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word not in English (L2) vocabulary yet • Word/concept not learned in home language (L1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited vocabulary due to poor oral comprehension and lack of opportunity to use vocabulary • Memory limitations • Word retrieval problems
Becomes distracted easily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is not getting comprehensible input in English • Is not getting visual/concrete support for material in English • Student may be exhausted from having to function in English all day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor oral comprehension due to lack of lexical development or grammatical mastery • ADHD • ADD
Has trouble following directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough English proficiency to understand what is being said • No demonstration or context given for directions/procedure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't process the entire set of directions with sufficient speed • Distractibility • Memory limitations • Not able to understand the temporal or spatial concepts
Can do rote arithmetic on paper but has difficulty with math word problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In word problems the computation is embedded in language that the ELL may not have acquired yet • Numerals may be unfamiliar to ELLs across linguistic and cultural context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processing • Abstract reasoning • Lack of generalization • Can't retain concepts while performing the processes
Avoids writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing in L2 takes longer to develop, (developing after listening, speaking, reading) • Afraid to make mistakes on paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine motor difficulty • Grammatical and lexical limitations that negatively affect clarity, topic expansion, and/or voice • Has difficulty expanding and/or controlling ideas • Frustration from over-correction • Expressive language difficulties

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Doesn't transfer learning from one lesson to another; has to relearn each concept from scratch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be in the early stages of learning English • English was learned orally with no context to make it meaningful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory limitations • Comprehension difficulties • Poor ability to create inclusive conceptual categories to generalize learning
Very literal – misses inferences, subtleties, nuances, and innuendoes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has yet to acquire enough L2 to express/represent abstract concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstract reasoning difficulties • Comprehension difficulties
Often understands concepts but can't indicate understanding in written symbolic form with paper and pencil or through multiple choice test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough proficiency in English, making writing difficult; multiple choice test require high levels of academic English proficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty expressing and organizing thoughts on paper
Learns from watching, not listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In early stages of English development and depends on visual context to understand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral comprehension difficulties • distractibility
Can't categorize, classify, or summarize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not understand the topic of study because of limited English proficiency • Does not understand the directions in English and needs the task to be modeled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational issues • Executive functioning problem
Can't retell a story in sequence or summarize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May understand story but may not have enough expressive language to retell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational issues • Poor lexical cohesion • Experiential coherence problems • Comprehension difficulties
Low frustration tolerance; gives up easily or explodes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't understand content because of low proficiency in English • Tired of having to function in English • Is conscious of constantly making mistakes in English and doesn't feel successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigmatized • Poor affective/emotional control • Doesn't understand • Student conscious of falling behind