



ALTERNATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROJECT

# A Framework for Understanding English Learners With Disabilities: Triple the Work

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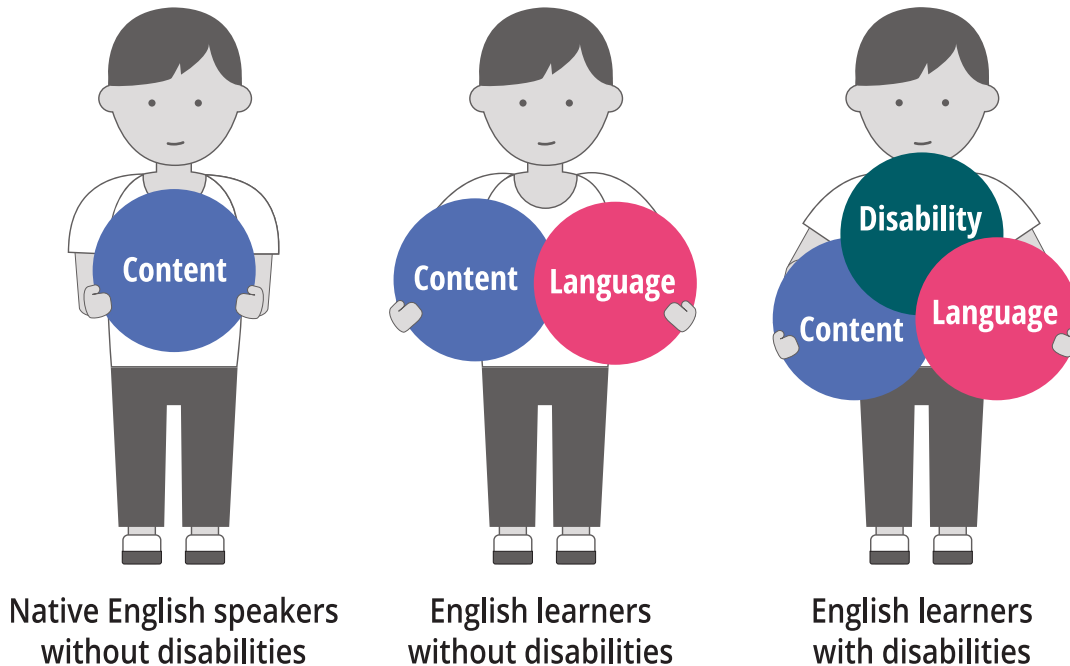
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## Project Background

The ALTELLA project researches instructional practices, accessibility features and accommodations, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to develop an evidence-centered design approach that informs our understanding of alternate English language proficiency assessment for these students.

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English learners who have disabilities are a small but important subgroup of students in U.S. schools. Despite this subgroup's small size, these students have diverse needs related to language and disability. This brief focuses on considerations of students' language- and disability-related needs and their implications for instruction and assessment.



## Double Work, Triple Work, and More

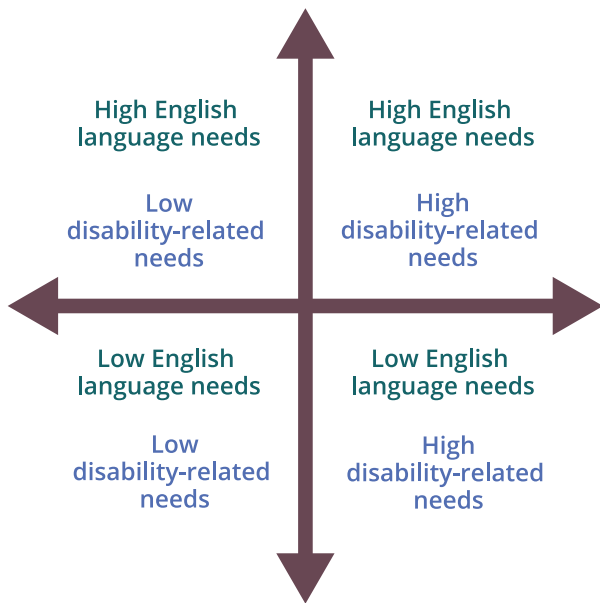
Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) ascertain that English learners must perform double the work of their native English speaking peers—learning English while studying core content areas in English. With this burden in mind, we suggest that English learners who have disabilities often perform triple the work, since their disability-related needs must be met as well. Moreover, English learners who have significant cognitive disabilities experience triple the work and beyond as they encounter even more labor-intensive challenges in the classroom associated with their language and disability needs. For example, English learners with significant cognitive disabilities may face challenges related to learning the content, developing proficiency in English, possibly using American Sign Language or another signing system, or using an augmentative/alternative communication system, among other learning opportunities and challenges.

## Language and Disability Needs Framework

To ensure that all students are meaningfully included in instruction and assessment and are advancing to college, career, and community readiness, educators need to consider their individual needs, characteristics, and preferences. For English learners with disabilities, including students with significant cognitive disabilities, educators should make sure that students' language- and disability-related needs are met. Instructional and assessment decisions should be individualized in response to language- and disability-related challenges English learners with disabilities face in the classroom.

One approach to considering language- and disability-related needs of English learners with disabilities is to think about where each student falls within the Language and Disability Needs Framework (Shyyan et al. 2016). In this framework (Figure 1), language-related needs are represented on one continuum and disability-related needs fall along the other

**Figure 1: Language and Disability Needs Framework**



continuum. Students can be located anywhere in the four quadrants, representing variations of intensity of these needs.

In general, students with high English language needs and low disability-related needs will require more language-based instructional and assessment supports while their counterparts with high disability-related needs and low English language needs will require more supports that remove disability-related barriers. At the same time, students with high English language needs and high disability-related needs will benefit from more intensive language- and disability-related supports to alleviate linguistic and disability-related challenges. Students with low English language needs and low disability-related needs will require fewer supports. However, even within one quadrant, students vary depending on the intensity of their needs.

Although the vast majority of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities might be in the quadrant of high language-related and high disability-related needs, educators should be cognizant of high levels of diversity within this population of students (Christensen, Mitchell, Shyyan, & Ryan, 2018; Christensen & Mitchell, 2018) with some students having needs associated with the other three

quadrants. Moreover, even within the high language-related and high disability-related needs quadrant, students can be in different locations, and their individual needs will vary.

Furthermore, student needs may change over time. As students grow in their proficiency in English, educators expect their positions within the quadrants to change. Although many disability-related needs may be consistent, other needs, such as for help with speech language, may shift. Educators must regularly re-evaluate students' changing language- and disability-related needs.

## How to Use the Framework

This framework of accounting for varying language- and disability-related needs for English learners with disabilities was developed to empower educators with a better understanding of two major aspects of their students' needs. The framework facilitates instructional and assessment decision making and helps educators consider combinations of student needs. Educators should take variability within each quadrant into account, and students' individualized needs should be addressed on an individual basis. Also, when talking about language, educators should keep in mind the complexity of this phenomenon and consider related factors such as communication and culture, for example (Christensen & Shyyan, 2018; Huff & Christensen, 2018). Similarly, disability complexity should be factored in, with the considerations of the disability type, intensity, number (in case of multiple disabilities), etc.

The framework's second aspect helps educators plan and stratify instructional and assessment resources and approaches in accordance with student needs. Developing a classroom chart of students with this framework in mind might help educators think about students' individual needs and better understand how students compare to each other and shift from one quadrant to another depending on their growth. Figure 2 provides a copy of the framework that can be used for this purpose.

## Questions to Consider for Individual Students

Consider the following questions when using the framework with individual students:

1. Where can the student be placed on the language and disability grid?
2. What disability-related challenges are apparent for this student?
3. What instructional and assessment supports would meet the student's disability-related needs?
4. What language- and culture-related challenges is this student facing?
5. What linguocultural supports would be beneficial for the student in instruction? Is the student able to receive these supports during assessments?
6. What instruction and assessment accommodations would benefit this student?
7. Are special education teachers and language acquisition professionals involved in making instructional and assessment decisions for the student?
8. Has the student's placement changed since the previous evaluation period? If the student shifted from higher-needs to lower-needs quadrants, what strategies worked well to assist this student in the classroom? If the student shifted from lower-needs to higher-needs quadrants, what additional instructional and assessment supports are required?

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ALTELLA is housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at the School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison | [altella.wceruw.org](http://altella.wceruw.org)  
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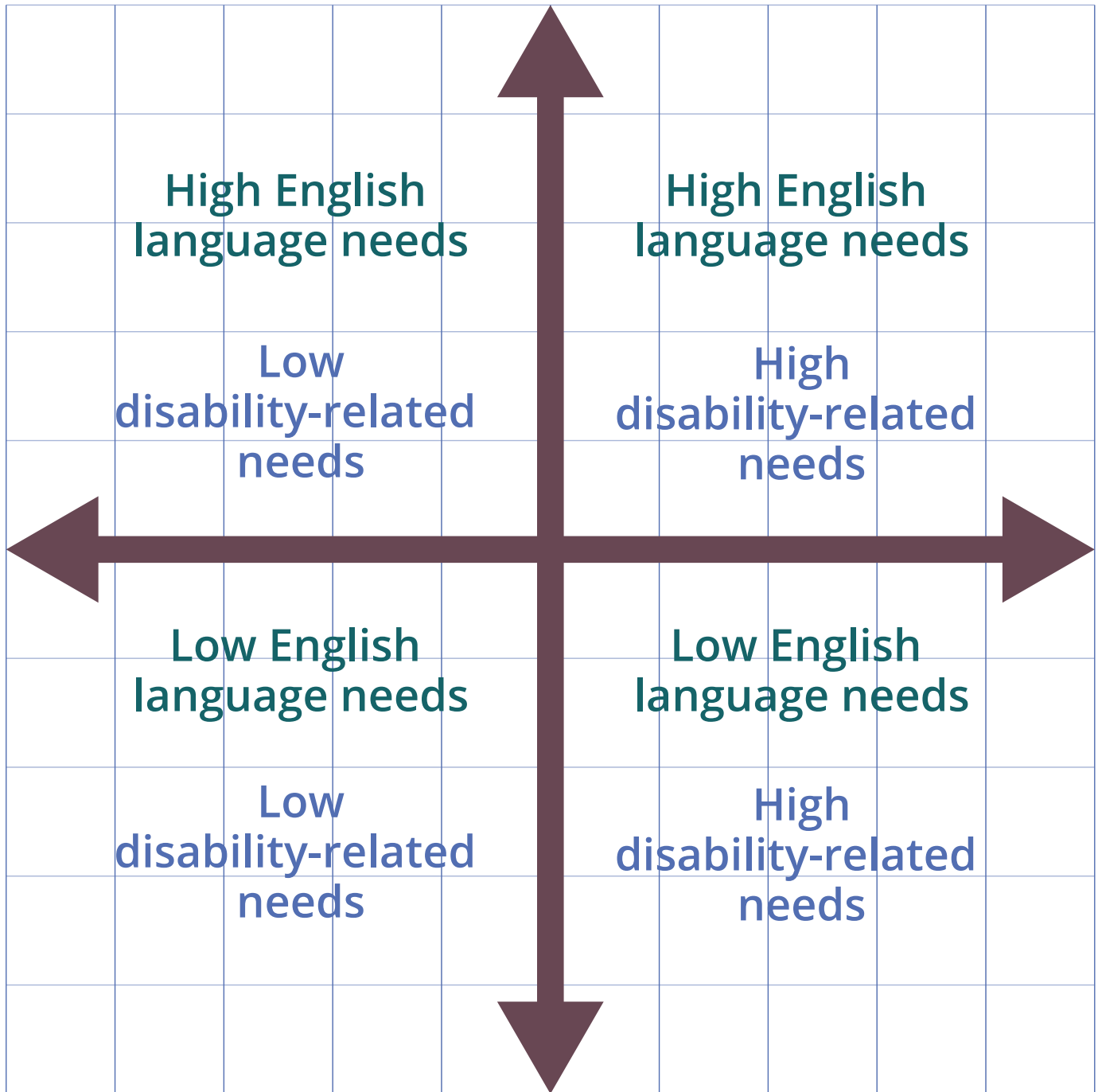


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Figure 2: Language and Disability Needs Framework Worksheet



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