

# Gifted & Talented English Learners: Using Critical Discourse Analysis to Make the Implicit Explicit

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## INTRODUCTION

English learners (ELs) are the fastest growing population of learners in the United States, with the prediction that one-fourth of our students will be ELs by the year 2025 (National Education Association, 2008). Despite their growing numbers, ELs represent the most underrepresented group of learners in gifted education (GT). To address this inequity and foster equitable identification of GT ELs, we must advocate to increase awareness of the issue and use of effective approaches, including the use of language in the discourse of laws, policies, and procedures.

Critical Discourse Analysis is a means to analyze the inherent power exchange between what a writer intends and how a reader interprets it. In a particular state with an increasing number of EL students and GT laws, policies, and district report requirements that mandate equitable identification of GT ELs, how are districts interpreting those requirements in their district reports in ways that reflect their district's population of ELs?

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How do state laws, policies, and report requirements address identifying gifted and talented English learners?
- 2: How do districts' reported interpretations and implementations reflect state laws, policies, and state report requirements?

## MATERIALS & METHODS

I analyzed state law, policy, and district report requirements, as well as district plans (n=57).

I used two analytical approaches:

1. **Content Analysis (CA)** to count, code and categorize incidences of words and phrases related to ELs in the state language and districts, generate content categories through inductive coding, and examine the text for trends and patterns about "sender(s)" of message, the message itself, and the audience of the message.
2. **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** on the three districts with the lowest and three highest incidences of EL words and phrases (Table 1) to examine texts for explicit and implicit sociopolitical meanings (Saldaña, 2013) of information, action, and identity (Gee, 2014). Specifically, I focused on Gee's building tools of Significance, Activities, and Relationships.

Number of Words or Phrases related to ELs	Rank of the Number of EL Words and Phrases (1 represents the district report with the lowest count)
0	1
2	2
2	3
36	55
42	56
45	57

## CODING

After conducting my initial coding, I had 60 distinct codes. I then grouped my codes into categories.

- Some categories emerged organically, such as the incidences of how many times the population of ELs is referred to as underrepresented, under-identified, underserved, etc.
- Other categories required more consideration, such as whether I should group culture, diversity, and ethnicity together as one category of descriptors of the population.

For now, I left them as separate categories to support future evaluation of the effect of their uses individually and collectively.

EL-Related Words and Terms By Categories		EL-Related Components By Categories	
• Culture	• Languages	• Current EL	• Considerations
• Diversity	• Addressed	• Accommodations/	• EL Screening
• Language Status	• Population	• Considerations	• Measures
• Ethnicity		• Future EL	
		• Accommodations/	

## ANALYSIS

**Law:** State law requires districts to report their efforts to identify gifted students with limited English proficiency including:

- referral and screening procedures;
- multiple sources of data in a body of evidence;
- criteria for determining exceptional ability or potential,
- a review team procedure; and
- a communication procedure by which parents are made aware of assessment processes, and gifted determination.

**Policy:** Policy invokes the US DOE definition to define ELs, including an explanation and range of designations used across different agencies (LEP, NEP, ELL, ESL). Policy also specifies limited English proficiency as a distinct category of learner rather than just a more general designation of under-represented students.

**Report Requirements:** Report requirements direct districts to specifically report how they will ensure "equal and equitable access to identification for all students...with limited English proficiency."

The requirements also direct districts to reflect on and answer for:

- equal and equitable access for limited English proficiency children.
- the use of unbiased assessment tools to promote GT EL demographics that reflect a district's overall demographics.

**District Reports:**

- Communication, identification, and programming, although each district differs regarding the degree and types of measures and methods.
- Districts vary in their use of vocabulary to refer to ELs and their accompanying considerations.
- Districts vary in their use of grammar and syntax (e.g. specific versus general pronouns, passive versus active voice).

## FINDINGS

1. **Specificity:** Specifically referring to ELs, rather than simply implying their inclusion under the umbrella term of "underrepresented" contributes to the importance of addressing ELs' particular needs.  
Example: "*Gifted children represent all cultural, ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds*"
2. **Discourse:** Asking districts to answer questions about equal and equitable practice for ELs, as well as their commensurate representation within the identified population of learners, engages districts in reflective, proactive practice beyond static reporting.  
Example: "*Does the identification procedure ensure equal and equitable access to identification for all students (e.g., minority students, economically diverse students, culturally diverse students, students with limited English proficiency and children with disabilities) through the use of assessment tools that are unbiased toward the group completing the assessments?*"
3. **Building Tools:** District language reflects GT EL identification through
  - a. **Significance** depending on the selection and use of particular vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.  
Example: "*Implements and trains GT staff on the new 'Program and Monitor' status for Hispanic EL students*"
  - b. **Identification Activities** being enacted, depending on the measures and methods described.  
Example: "*EL teachers are also administering an under-represented population checklist to flag advanced EL students, who may need further testing.*"
  - c. **Relationships** the district is seeking to build through inclusive pronouns and the use of the active voice.  
Example: "*Help [EL] families understand gifted education and programming.*"

## DISCUSSION

Including rich, descriptive language regarding ELs echoes the challenge the population faces due to how "The terms used to describe [ELs] blur, overlap, and change with time, as well as with shifting socio-political dynamics" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). The shifting socio-political dynamics they describe refers to the Discourse around the civil rights of ELs as defined by the US Office of Civil Rights. The Office of Civil Rights clearly specifies the obligations that schools have to ELs and limited English proficient parents. It mandates that schools take affirmative steps to ensure that ELs can meaningfully participate in educational programs and their parents can understand relevant communication.

CDA is an important tool for GT ELS as CDA not only provides a means to better understand such a complex issue, but also a means to support change. Analysis of how documents, lessons, presentations, and the media approach GT ELS would provide us with important tools for advocacy. Armed with findings related to relationships, activities, politics, significance, connections, identities, and sign systems and knowledge, we could foment dialogue to dispel myths and support equal and equitable education for GT ELs.

## LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This initial study is limited by focusing on the top and bottom three district reports of one state. It is also limited by only including data through district-level reports.

Given the need for effective advocacy to equitably identify GT ELs, my next step will be to analyze the use of language in school-level documents in schools that are successfully identifying GT ELs in numbers commensurate with the demographics of their district. From there, I will expand my study to additional states.

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