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# Redefinition of Language Learning Disabilities and the Ways to Learn English as a Second Language

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# Redefinition of Language Learning Disabilities and the Ways to Learn English as a Second Language

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**Abstract:** This paper explains why language learning disabilities need to be redefined from the aspects of the research histories of learning disability and language learning disabilities and the history of English education policy in Japan and suggests the effective ways to learn English for children with ‘New Language Learning Disabilities (N-LLD).’

**Keywords:** Language Learning Disabilities; English as a Second Language; Inclusive Education

**Knowledge Focus:** Project Focus

**Topic Area:** Education Pre-K to Grade 12

## Introduction

Disabilities within learning language have gathered attention recently. Disability regarding learning is called learning disability, which is also called ‘specific learning disorders’ in DSM-5 and developmental learning disorder in ICD-11<sup>1</sup>. According to DSM-5 and ICD-11, learning disability is diagnosed when persons have significant and persistent difficulties in learning academic skills, which may include reading, writing, or arithmetic due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors. Language learning disabilities consist of learning disabilities and it includes reading and writing disabilities. It is probable that children with language learning disabilities have serious problems when they study English at school. English education in Japan has been rapidly promoted especially from 2000.

There are two social problems considering learning English. The first is specification of the meaning of learning. Disability of learning languages has been considered as reading and writing disabilities in the medical scene. However, there are other disabilities of learning languages in the case of learning English. The second is the acceleration of English education in Japan, especially from 2000. It is symbolic of the trend that the latest ‘course of study,’ which will be enforced from 2020, requires even elementary school students to study English as an obligation. This is a serious situation for the children with language learning disabilities because they have possibilities that they are forced to study English under unfavorable circumstances.

Therefore, it is crucial how children who have disabilities of learning languages learn English as a second language. To consider the problem, the redefinition of learning language disabilities is needed. This article explains the two social problems and clarifies the reason why redefinition of learning language disabilities is needed.

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## Research History of Learning Disability and Language Learning Disabilities

Language learning disabilities include only reading and writing disabilities based on the definition by DSM-5 and ICD-11. It is because language learning disabilities are considered as a part of learning disability. Thus, history of learning disability indicates the specification of definition of learning disability. One of the more comprehensive reviews of the history of learning disability was given by Wiederholt in 1974 when he split it into three distinct periods (Wiederholt, 1974).

The first phase from 1800 to 1940—Wiederholt named it foundation phase—and the second phase from 1940 to 1963—named transition phase—are the prehistory of learning disability, and the third phase began from 1963—named integration phase—when S. A. Kirk, who was an American psychologist and educator, coined and defined learning disability (Kirk, 1963). The concept of learning disability was based on the following three disabilities: The first one is disorders of spoken language, the second one is disorders of written language, and the last one is disorders of perceptual and motor process. After the 1940's, a lot of research tackled the substantiated hypothesis of the disabilities found in the first phase. However, it caused a confusing situation because several names of disabilities were coined and defined at this point. In the United States, when people moved to different states, they were diagnosed with different terms of disabilities. It was because the names of disabilities increased too much through the transition phase and the concepts and the criterion of disabilities were different in each state (Ueno, 2019). It can be said that the confusing situation made the concept of 'learning disability' that integrated disabilities.

In 1963, Kirk coined and defined 'learning disability' as the term for children who had difficulties in learning regarding recognition that were called several diagnostic names. Wiederholt considered the year as the beginning of the integration phase. Kirk (1962) defined learning disability "as a retardation, disorder or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing or arithmetic resulting from a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbance and not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instructional factors" (p. 263). He also explained the term "learning disability to describe a group of children who have disorders in development in language, speech, reading, and associated communication skills needed for social interaction. In this group I do not include children who have sensory handicaps such as blindness or deafness, because we have methods of managing and training the deaf and the blind, I also exclude from this group of children who have generalized mental retardation" (Kirk, 1963, p. 263). His definition of learning disability did not include sensory disabilities, such as visual disability, deaf and hard of hearing because it was already known the way to manage and train according to him. His definition was relatively comprehensive with the exception of sensory disabilities. It included disabilities such as reading disability, written expression disability, arithmetic disability, communication disability, motor skills disability, attention-deficit and disruptive behavior disabilities, and Asperger's disability. It is also worth mentioning that these disabilities were all

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## **Research History of Learning Disability and Language Learning Disabilities (cont.)**

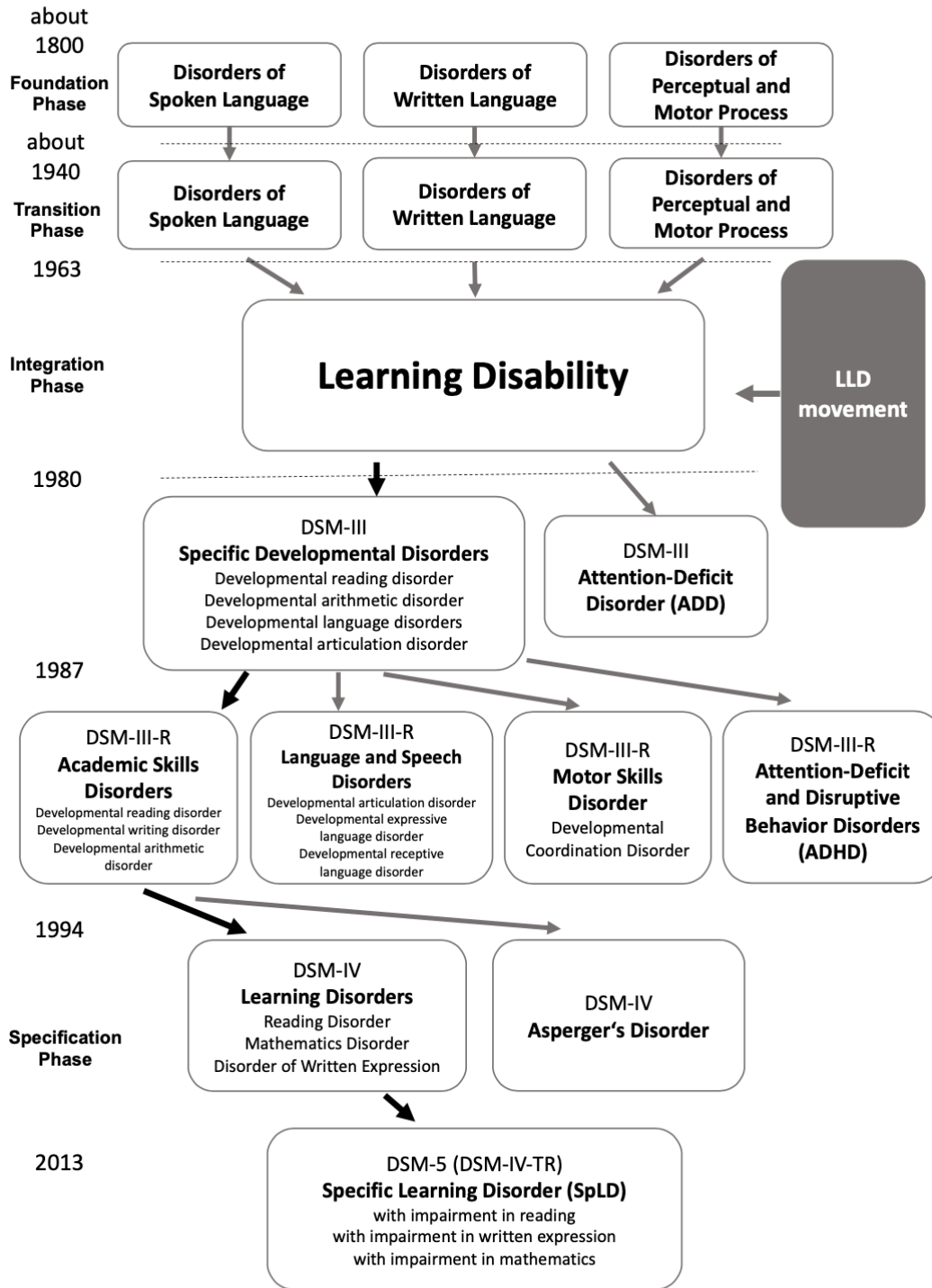
coined their diagnosis at a later date. After his definition, other individuals and associations defined each learning disability one after another. Exclusion of sensory disabilities and intellectual disability from learning disability was passed down and it is well known that the definition by National Association of Children on Handicapped Committee (NACHC) in 1968<sup>2</sup>. It is quoted widely and included in Public Law 94-142 Act of 1975 in the United States.

During the 1970's, many researches in language development and disabilities, speech science, information processing and related areas began to affect special education. The 'language learning disabilities (LLD) movement,' which existed for years but became more visible in the early 1970s (Butler & Wallach, 1995), was part of a wave of research and practice that brought language disabilities and learning disabilities closer together (Wallach, 2004). The 'LLD movement' was a movement for integration of disabilities that attempted to expand the field of learning disability to language disability and coined 'language learning disabilities.' Wiederholt summarized the history of learning disability from 1800 to 1974. It is important to add to his debate that the integration phase came to an end in 1980.

In 1980, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition (DSM-III) was published by the American Psychiatric Association. Since its publication, the concept of 'learning' has ever been specified (see Figure 1). In the latest manual of mental disorders, DSM-5 published in 2013, learning disability was renamed specific learning disorder (SpLD) and it resulted in the specification of learning. International Classification of Diseases 11<sup>th</sup> Revision (ICD-11) published in 2018 also describes learning disability as a developmental learning disorder and it only includes reading, writing, or arithmetic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018).

The definitions of learning disability of DSM-5 and ICD-11 is more partial than Kirk's definition. The 'LLD movement' brought learning disability and language disorder closer together but disabilities of language and articulation have been separated from learning disability since 1987, when DSM-III-R was published (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1987). The latest definition of learning disability in DSM-5 and ICD-11 is specified and it has only reading, writing, and arithmetic disabilities. It has never been seen the movement for integration of disabilities such as the 'LLD movement' that attempted to expand the field of learning disability since DSM-III was published (Kaihara & Shibata, 2020). Therefore, the fourth phase from 1980 to present could be named 'specification phase.' Learning disability includes language learning disabilities but they only consist of reading and writing disabilities based on the definition in DSM-5 and ICD-11. Learning disabilities have changed its definition through history. However, it is sure that language learning disabilities included only reading and writing disabilities caused by neurodevelopment and other disabilities such as visual disability, deaf and hard of hearing are not considered as the part of them.

**Figure 1.** History of Learning Disability



*Figure 1 Image Description (alternative texts): Figure 1 is a flow chart of the history of learning disability and it describes how terms of disabilities changed (disorders of spoken language, written language, perceptual and motor process, etc.) and what disabilities are included in the disability from about 1800 to 2013. In the figure the history is split into three distinct periods (foundation phase, integration phase, and specification phase) and it is written the terms of disability that were coined and defined in the periods.*

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## English Education Policy in Japan

English education especially in Japan pushed the change of the definition for language learning disabilities. It has been promoted, especially since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when globalization began to accelerate. In the meeting “Japan’s Goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” it was discussed that it was necessary first to set the concrete objective of all citizens acquiring a working knowledge to develop English skills as global literacy in 2000 (Prime Minister's Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2000). It was said that global literacy was English as the international lingua franca. In 2003, ‘an Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”’ was released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) based on the meeting (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2003). In the plan, it is written clearly that the levels of English skills that citizens should acquire. For example, when children graduate junior high school, they are required to get English skills at the grade 3 of *jitsuyo eigo gino kentei* or ‘test in practical English proficiency’ (EIKEN) Test in Practical English Proficiency. When they graduate high school, they are needed to have pre-level 2 or level 2. When they graduate universities, it is required to acquire English skills that they could communicate with foreigners in the business situation. It means that the plan specifies what extent English skills children should acquire based on the meeting. According to the MEXT’s plan, courses of study were revised and enforced in 2002. The courses of study made English class a required course in junior high school. Furthermore, courses of study was revised again in 2008 and 2009, and it was written that the subject ‘foreign language activities,’ which was for forming the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities in English, not in several foreign languages in fact, was introduced in elementary school in grade 5 and 6 students in the grades study English to develop their communication abilities such as listening and speaking. MEXT subsequently developed the plan of English educational reform for globalization in 2013. In this plan, it is aimed that ‘foreign language activities’ were introduced as a class in grade 3 and 4 and the students in the grades are required to develop their communication skills. Moreover, the subject ‘foreign language’ was introduced as a required course and students in grade 5 and 6 are needed to study English and evaluated by the score. In 2020, the plan will be implemented by the latest ‘courses of study.’ The course of study also refers to communication skills required in global society. Tendency can be seen that English education in Japan has been accelerated from Japanese government policy.

The Japanese government promotes that citizens develop English skills rapidly. However, globalization is not Anglicization. This trend has been criticized from the points of view of ‘English Imperialism’<sup>3</sup> and ‘Linguistic Instrumentalism’<sup>4</sup> (Kubota, 2015; Mashiko, 2018). In Japan, English skills affect not only entering and graduating schools, but also employment and promotions, even if the jobs do not require English skills directly. Early English education makes even elementary school students involved in competition of English skills under the social circumstance. The reason why early English education is contended is because, firstly, English is not native language for Japanese people. Secondly, English is the most dominant language in the

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world and globalization is considered as Anglicization. It is needed for Japanese people to acquire English skills as an international language. When the persons whose native language is not English are forced to study English and are evaluated by their English scores, it can be said that the persons are a linguistic minority. Furthermore, it means that when children with language learning disabilities are compelled to study English and are valued by the score, they can be said that they are a double minority.

According to Collins and Wolter (2018), children who experience underachievement at school that are caused by disabilities of learning languages are at high risk of dropping out. They are forced to join the competition of English abilities. The prejudice against their language skills and abilities have adverse effects on their future. The most serious problem is that students who are double minority and have difficulties in learning languages are forced to participate in the competition.

However, the existence of the persons whose disabilities are in the situation of learning a second language and are socially constructed has never been focused on in the definitions of learning disability and language learning disabilities. Consequently, it is needed to redefine language learning disabilities that have difficulty in learning English according to the social model.

### **Redefinition of Language Learning Disabilities**

The term language learning disabilities was derived from the term learning disability, and it describes disabilities of reading and writing according to the medical definition of learning disability. Although the 'LLD movement' brought learning disability and language disability closer together it could have affected the integration of disabilities, as such, they were separated because the meaning of learning was specified and language disability was not considered as a part of learning disability. Medical definition of learning disability specified its meaning of learning from the medical perspective. It is considered that it locates the 'problem' of the difficulties in learning languages within the individual in the way of thinking. The individual model of disability has been argued and criticized already and it was overcome by International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) but still underlies the concepts of learning disability and language learning disabilities. As a result, learning disability and language learning disabilities are regarded as terms for diagnosing patients who need to fix and label people for intervention to find out who needs special education. Due to the way of thinking, if children are underachieved it is scored and marked that it is all their faults, and their lack of abilities in Japan were evaluated by English scores.

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## **Redefinition of Language Learning Disabilities (cont.)**

Under the social circumstance that persons with language learning disabilities are forced to study English and are evaluated by English score, it can be said that the concept ‘New Language Learning Disabilities (N-LLD)’ is needed. ‘N-LLD’ is the term that expresses the persons who have difficulty in reading, writing, speaking and listening under the circumstance that is socially constructed and the existence has never been focused on as a social minority. The reason why the existence of ‘N-LLD’ as a social minority should be found, coined and defined is that English is not native tongue for Japanese but a second language and it is necessary to keep people in higher education and higher social class.

The difficulties in learning second languages occurs with other difficulties widely. For example, children with mild dyslexia usually understand what is written in their native language because it is their native tongue and they can infer the contents. However, when English that is a second language it is difficult to infer what is spoken and written. It is possible that they have never found they are dyslexic until they learn English (Narita, 2019).

The concept of ‘N-LLD’ makes the existence of the persons who have never been focused on come to the front. For example, even minimal hearing loss that has been ineligible for language learning disabilities affects academic ability (Bess, Dodd-Murphy, & Parker, 1998) and it also affects subsequent development how long children spend their lives without awareness of hearing loss (Goldberg & Richburg, 2004). Although the disabilities are within society, it is marked and the children are also convinced that all factors are within the individuals. When Kirk (1963) coined and defined learning disability, he had excluded sensory disabilities such as deaf, hard of hearing, blind and low vision. Kirk considered those disabilities already “have methods of managing and training” (p. 3). On the other hand, when people study a second language, it is not that simple. Nakajima (2018) refers to the inequality of accommodations of listening tests. Even children aware of their disabilities have problems, however there are much more children without awareness of their disabilities.

Furthermore, ‘new language learning disabilities’ enable disabilities that are already included in the previous definition of learning disability to be focused on its hidden problems that have never been seen in native language.

Wydell and Butterworth (1999) reported the case of AS, a 16 years old English/Japanese bilingual boy, whose reading/writing difficulties are confined to English only. Wydell and Butterworth explain the case by the hypothesis of granularity and transparency. According to the hypothesis, the case could be described as a phonological dyslexic in English. What is especially taxing in English is that the mappings are not always one-to-one and transparent. This kind of sub-lexical or sub-syllabic phonological processing required for English is not called upon for reading either Japanese Kana or Kanji (Wydell & Butterworth, 1999). The hypothesis shows that it is possible that dyslexia is found only after studying English.



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As well as hard of hearing, it is difficult to find that children are dyslexic. There is much truth that it depends on the environment around the children whether they find their disabilities. They do not know what the factors of their underperformance are or to what extent it is their faults and their lack of abilities. They have been faced with the problem named ‘new language learning disabilities.’

According to the social model, ‘new language learning disabilities’ are not only dyslexia and language disability that ‘LLD movement’ brought them closer together but also sensory disabilities such as deaf, hard of hearing, blind, and low vision. Persons with ‘new language learning disabilities’ are the persons who have disabilities when they are forced to study English as a second language and it is different from previous concept of language learning disabilities. Under the situation, persons with disabilities have the same social problem.

The unique and important point of ‘new language learning disabilities’ is that it is only defined under the situation that people are forced to study English and the English skills are affected largely to their social lives, especially their academic backgrounds and employment. In that sense, the concept of ‘new language learning disabilities’ are different from the learning disability and language learning disabilities that have underlain through the history Wiederholt summarized. When it is considered that persons are disabled by socially constructed, it should not be overlooked the existence of ‘new language learning disabilities’ as a social minority. This redefinition challenges the tendency to label persons with disabilities as individual problems.

### **Method**

The most important thing for children with ‘new language learning disabilities’ is how they overcome the race of English skills. If ‘new language learning disabilities’ are socially constructed, it is possible to overcome the difficulties in learning English and the way to learn English is needed. As thus, the authors have held English workshops to substantiate whether the way to learn English introduced for hard of hearing and dyslexic children could be effective. The target was 11 students around 10 years old and they joined the workshop learning phonics, syllable, and English preposition. Some of the contents used Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment such as an interactive projector.

Phonics and syllable learning are introduced as the way to learn English in Japan especially for dyslexia. Children in the workshop learned combining the individual alphabet sounds with the letters by phonics. In the workshop, children who have never learned phonics listened to the pronunciation (/æ/, /t/, /b/, /r/ and /z/) and chose the correct alphabets with an interactive projector. When they listened to /b/, they tended to the letter of d, and when they listened to /r/, they chose the letter of w. The children also learned syllables to know English rhythm and accent and the difference of a single, unbroken sound of a spoken (or written) word between English and Japanese. They learned how many sounds consist of each word ‘Paris,’ ‘peach’ and ‘umbrella.’ When they said the word while putting their hands under their chins, they

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found a tip for it. In the other workshop, children learned English words by sign language used in the United States. Generally, sign language is used in school for Deaf. The reason children learned English by sign language was because sign language used spaces and it could express the meanings of words without written language. Children chose the correct words (e.g. ‘about,’ ‘around,’ ‘in,’ and ‘on’) and to fill in the blank thinking about the meaning of the text. They chose the answers using the sign languages expressing the prepositions. They followed it, tried the motion and guessed what the sign language means.

### **Discussion**

The workshops were held to demonstrate two hypotheses: One is that phonics and syllables considered effective ways to learn English for dyslexia would also be efficient for children who are not dyslexic. English mappings are not always one-to-one and transparent according to Wydell and Butterworth (1999). English is different from Japanese Kana and Kanji from the aspect of sub-lexical or sub-syllabic phonological processing. Therefore, it could be considered that phonics could be effective for persons who speak and use Japanese and learn English as a second language and the workshop validated it. Phonics has never been studied at school in Japan and the children who joined it knew phonics only after the workshop. They repeated the phonics game with an interactive projector and it would be said that they have stronger phonological awareness than before by the phonics game. In other words, phonics would be an effective way to learn English for Japanese. The other hypothesis is that using sign language would lead to a better understanding of English preposition and it is also considered appropriate. The workshop shows that sign language that was regarded as a language that persons who are deaf or hard of hearing use could be useful for learning English because it has uniqueness using spaces and it could express the meanings of words without written language. The workshops show the potential that persons who use sign language as their native language and those who did not learn English. According to the three English workshops results, it can be said that it is one of the ways to achieve inclusive English learning.

### **Conclusion**

Persons with ‘new language learning disabilities’ are defined as a social minority who have difficulty in learning language and are in the situation evaluated by English scores. ‘New language learning disabilities’ are disabilities related to learning a second language and it does not appear when the people use their mother tongues. It is scored and marked that it is all their faults and their lack of abilities. As mentioned above, the social inequality has been reproduced by English ability (Kaihara & Shibata, 2020). Therefore, effective ways to learn English is needed as soon as possible. The authors did the trials to consider effective ways to learn English for ‘new language learning disabilities’ and found that the ways to learn English that is accumulated in the fields of education of each disorders, such as phonics, syllables and sign language, would be effective ways not only for the persons who have the disorders but also persons with or without disabilities in learning English. After the workshop, 94% of the

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participants said the three ways are effective for learning English. This trial suggests that considering disability in the social context. It shows the common difficulties in learning English for persons with ‘New Language Learning Disabilities’ and the possibilities of inclusive learning.

### Authors



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**Kuniomi Shibata**, Ph.D. is an associate professor at Tsuda University and specializes in assistive technology, especially focusing on information technology for persons with disabilities. Currently, he is in charge of support programs for students with disabilities, through the Yes of the Parent of a Student with Disabilities.

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### Endnotes

1. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is the handbook used by healthcare professionals in the world as the authoritative guide to the diagnosis of mental disorders published by American Psychological Association (APA). DSM contains descriptions, symptoms, and other criteria for diagnosing mental disorders. DSM-5 was published in 2013 and it changed diagnostic criteria for Specific Learning Disorders (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Mental Health (ICD) is the foundation for the identification of health trends and statistics globally. It is the international standard for reporting diseases and health conditions and the diagnostic classification standard for all clinical and research purposes. ICD-10 was endorsed in May 1990 by the Forty-third World Health Assembly and ICD- 11 was the revised version in 30 years.
2. Definition of learning disabilities by National Association of Children on Handicapped Committee (NACHC) in 1968 is the following: ‘Specific learning disability’ means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, 1968, p. 34)
3. ‘English Imperialism’ is the concept that criticizes several problems because of the global expansion of English from the perspective of history. Mashiko (2018) refers to ‘English imperialism ideology’ and mentions that the ideology justifies that even if persons are a linguistic minority, they can make the argument in English exercising their linguistic rights because English is regarded as global literacy and it is the most dominant language in the world.
4. Linguistic instrumentalism is a view of language that its existence is in terms of its usefulness to achieve particular utilitarian goals. According to Kubota (2015), Linguistic instrumentalism is linked to the notion of human capital (for example, skills deemed necessary for the knowledge economy) and the unstable employment conditions of neoliberal society.