

WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

By Robin L. Schwarz, Lesley University

Learning Lab, Tutoring Coordinator

The labeling of learners is widely condemned by teachers, educators, parents, and learners themselves because the label so often has negative implications or is just not very accurate. Nonetheless, we all use labels sooner or later, mostly because it is convenient. **ESOL** and **LD** are examples of this. These are labels of longstanding use and we all sort of think we know what they mean, and so use them handily to discuss a subgroup of learners in adult education. Thinking we know what they imply, we may not question these labels—or the lack of them—even when we see evidence to contradict them in an adult learner's background.

What is your idea of an **ESOL** learner? To most teachers, this is someone learning English, not one who speaks English as another language.

Moreover, while **ESOL** implies language needs, these learners are necessarily culturally different as well. But without that label, these factors may well be ignored.

And how about **LD**? When used accurately, the label is supposed to indicate significant, neurologically-based difficulty in some specific area of learning. Unhappily, the label has been misapplied to learners from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds for many years—misapplied because their symptoms of learning difficulties matched those of **LD**, but were caused by other factors. In an adult program in the South West, I recently asked a group of teachers learning to use a commercial screening procedure designed to evaluate adults for learning problems how many **ESOL** learners were in their programs. None, they said. But when I asked what percentage of their students had a different culture and/or language at home, the teachers replied that 90% of their learners did!

In fact, of the five case studies these teachers presented during training, three learners were Hispanic. These women began speaking English when they entered school as young children and so were not labeled as **ESOL** learners. Therefore, when they began having problems in school around 4th or 5th grade, their linguistic skills were not evaluated, but rather their academic achievement and intelligence were. All were labeled as **LD** and all dropped out of high school.

Though the screening revealed no processing or skill issues consistent with having **LD**, the trainees continued to focus on that label, dismissing the fact that these women spoke Spanish and were raised in homes with cultural values which differed from those of their trainee to teachers—and no doubt of their teachers in elementary school, too.

When these factors were insisted on during training, the teachers then reexamined their data. They realized that each learner had problems and behaviors consistent with weak language skills, such as not remembering sentences in English, or asking English speakers to look at them while speaking. One teacher noted that he had ignored information showing that his case subject had better reading and writing skills in Spanish than in English. Trainees agreed that they needed to assess the women's phonological skills and language knowledge. Then the trainees began to ask themselves how much the women's culture might have played a role in their inability to deal with certain kinds of problems on their own or influenced their focus on their mothering as opposed to "marketable skills" in their training program. The teachers resolved to find out more about these questions.

A Native American who lived on a reservation was the fourth case study. Like the Hispanic women, he had been diagnosed in middle school with **LD** and dropped out of high school. Again we have to wonder about the accuracy of this diagnosis given his background because also like the women, there was no evidence in the screening that he had any **LD**. The man's deep connection to his culture was clear from the fact that when his drinking problem had gotten out of hand, he had consulted the tribal medicine man. Though the teacher doubted a second language was at work, she was encouraged to find out more about this man and to help him explore how he might tap other cultural resources to help him stay sober and finish his GED.

Only just recently, education policy makers have begun to recognize that language learning is a life-long process and that cultural orientation grows and changes but is not erased. Thus, even though a person may appear to be "proficient" in English (whatever "proficient" means), their linguistic as well as their cultural background continue to be important influences on the way they perceive and use language and experience learning. Yet, all of that influence may be missed—or dismissed—if a learner is NOT labeled **ESOL**.

Therefore, to avoid the trap of the narrow label of **ESOL** and help us acknowledge the richness and impact of our learners' backgrounds, I suggest that adult education adopt the label "culturally and linguistically different" (CLD).

For more information, see also www.floridatechnet.org/bridges/newsltr5.pdf