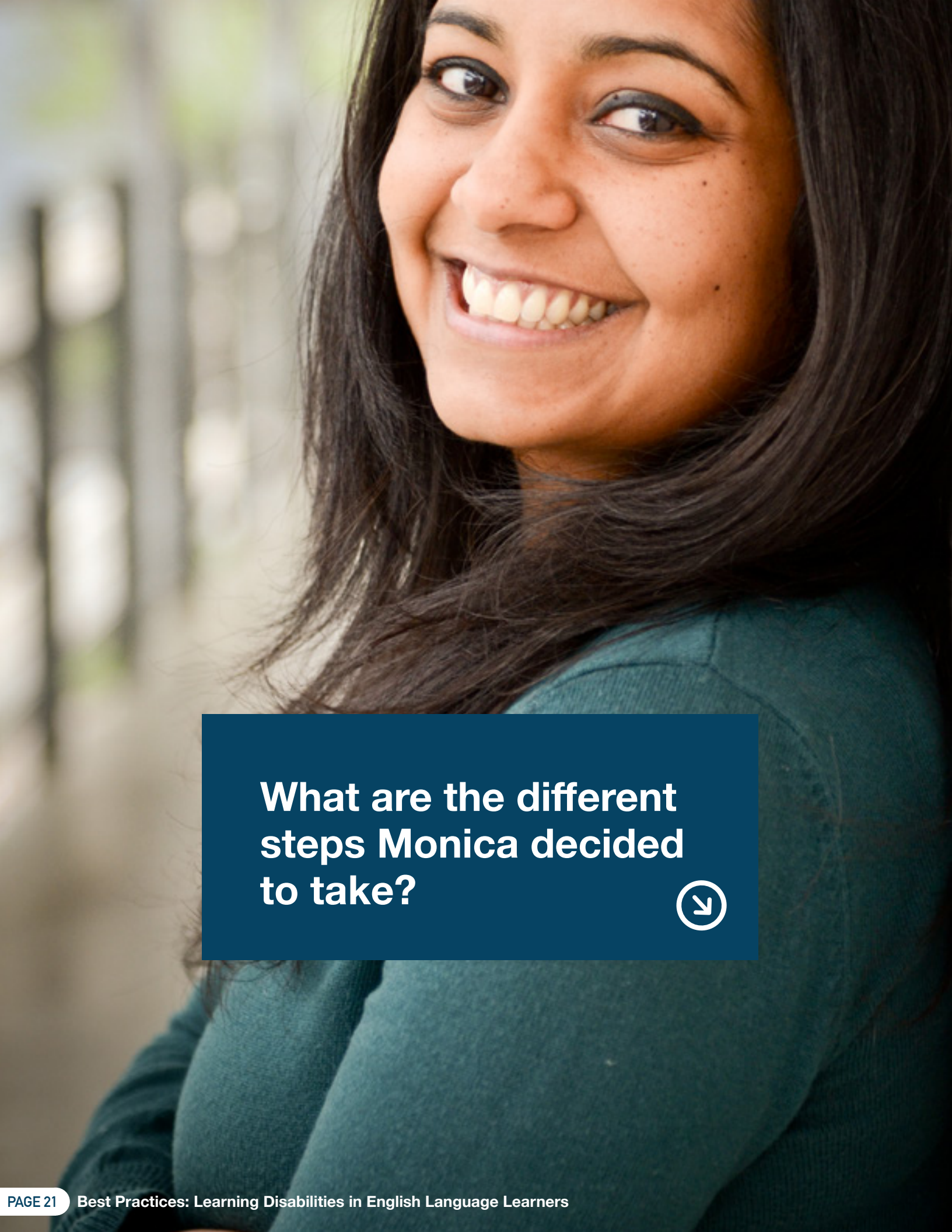


Best Practices

Learning Disabilities in English Language Learners

During the second semester of an English as a Second Language (ESL) course, a faculty member finds one of the students from Saudi Arabia, Mohammed (not his real name), is doing fine in all his courses, except for those related to reading. The instructor approaches Monica Malhotra, the ESL international student advisor at University of Texas in Austin about the concern that Mohammed doesn't seem to progress, and questions if it's his struggles with English or something else.

Monica calls Mohammed into her office. The student explains he understands the lectures but when he goes to read his assignments it just takes him so long. The pages don't seem as clear to him. He is a student on a scholarship from the Saudi government and enrolled as a non-matriculated student in the university's ESL program. As a result, he does not automatically have full access to support services with the university.



**What are the different
steps Monica decided
to take?**



Testing for a Learning Disability (LD)

Monica asks Mohammed to get tested for a LD when he was home over the school break.

- This would allow him to get tested in his own language and be potentially more culturally normed
- LDs typically show up in the first language too
- He could avoid the costs of testing that he would need to pay for in the United States

He did not have difficulty finding someone to do diagnostic testing in Saudi Arabia, however the tests had many errors when he brought it back and was shown to the U.S. LD specialists. Other options are to find a LD specialist in the United States that would offer testing on a sliding fee scale, if cost was an issue. Students at a high school level may find these tests covered by the U.S. school district.

Talking About and Understanding a LD

Monica talks with Mohammed about what is a LD in a positive and empowering way.

- He begins to understand it as a difference and takes to heart his need to self-advocate
- He sought out books on the topic of LDs and this helped him develop a positive outlook

His family offered very limited support because they did not understand LDs, and thought it would be easier and best if he returned home. He was able to continue in the United States with counseling support to handle the pressures he felt to succeed without his family support.

Connecting with LD Experts

Monica consults with the disability office on campus and seeks out off-campus LD coaches for Mohammed.

- Disability advisors on campus looked at his tests and suggested possible accommodations she could ask faculty to implement in the ESL program
- He met with LD counselors to learn more about his recent diagnosis
- Off-campus classes on learning methods for reading and writing were available from an LD specialist which he could concurrently enroll in and use as a substitute for other courses

He was able to take the allotted course credits to maintain his visa with the help of this LD class. Monica asked for an enrollment letter from the LD specialist to state the hours, dates, days of week, and curriculum in order to confirm he was taking the required 18 hours.

Getting Funding and Support

Monica requests funds from his Saudi government sponsor to cover the LD specialist off campus.

- This was able to be requested as extra support funds without needing to indicate its specific use
- Monica creates a rubric to more easily show that the student is not progressing and how an LD specialist would help beyond the classroom accommodations
- Mohammed's grades greatly improved as a result of this off-campus coaching

This took extra attention and education by the international student advisor to get the sponsor's funds, although it should be a more common practice in ESL programs across the United States. Mohammed was later accepted into a graduate school program also sponsored by the Saudi government.

Two Views on the Topic

Ruth J. Fink, Ph.D.

Learning Disabilities Specialist, Language Disorders Specialist, (Retired) Professor Adjunct, (Retired) Director of Disability Services, University of Colorado-Boulder

You are going to find very few qualified individuals to give [LD diagnostic] tests in the native language unless it is Spanish, German or French; and then it is most likely in New York City, or possibly Los Angeles. Then if an English-language test is translated into Turkish, Korean or Russian by a native speaker, so there is less validity or reliability.

Everything is an educated guess. So I rely heavily on:

- An extensive interview with the student
- A description of the student's difficulty in English with the professor
- TOEFL scores
- An English vocabulary test
- Parts of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT)
- A thorough academic history beginning at the pre-school level

I always suggest that the professor should give a test in the allotted time everyone else gets, mark it, and then give the student another 30 minutes to see if improvement occurs. A couple times of doing this, we can get a reasonable idea of how fast the student processes the English language, and whether extended time will help or not. If it doesn't help, then we go back and look at TOEFL and Vocabulary scores, and compare them to actual class performance in English.

I speak English exhaustively with the student in question so as to obtain an informal evaluation of their use of English in common 'street language,' academic language (the language of learning), and then in vocabulary commonly used in their major.



David B. Woodward

President & CEO, A.C.E. - Associates in Cultural Exchange

There are potentially conflicting legal requirements. In the case of law pertaining to non-immigrant visas, the student has to make continued progress toward his or her educational goal and accreditation does not allow for repeated 'failure' in a program.

Conversely, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires 'reasonable accommodation' be made for people with disabilities in educational programs and this extends to ESL programs.

In my opinion, what accreditation precludes is an ad hoc response to the student need, so there should be an established process for evaluating the situation, implementing a solution, and following up.



At the end of the day, it's important to do what is right for the student as well as what is right legally. I think there is room for individualized programs which allow for exceptional program length as long as one can demonstrate in writing that the program is consistent with established protocols in terms of achieving measurable results.