

## A Language Disorder Versus a Language Difference

Early childhood teachers ask questions similar to the preceding ones when working with young children who are English learners and may or may not have a disability or other special needs. Although the answers to such questions may not always come easily or clearly, the teacher should collaborate with the child's family and available specialists to determine the existence of an authentic language disorder rather than a language difference. A *language disorder* is "an inability to understand and process language either expressively or receptively" (Tompkins 2002, 6). In contrast, a *language difference*, that is, a difference in understanding and using a language that is influenced by a child's linguistic and cultural experiences with a first language (Roseberry-McKibbin 2002) or with a variant of the standard language (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, and Newcombe 2005), is not an indication

### RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

#### Behaviors Demonstrated by English Learners and Children with Disabilities

English learners may exhibit certain classroom behaviors that concern their teachers and may cause the teachers to refer the learners to special education classes. Although those behaviors are similar to those exhibited by children with disabilities, the reasons for their existence are different. For English learners the behaviors are temporary adjustments in response to being placed in an environment in which they fail to understand the rules or the language being spoken. Therefore, teachers should team up with professionals knowledgeable about second-language acquisition to sort out which behaviors are due to learning English as a second language and which are due to other causes. Behaviors that can be misinterpreted include the following:

- Speaks infrequently
- Speaks excessively (in the home language or in English)
- Refuses to answer questions
- Confuses similar sounding words
- Is unable to tell or retell stories
- Has poor recall
- Uses poor pronunciation
- Uses poor syntax and grammar
- Does not volunteer information

Adapted from Ortiz and Maldonado-Colon (1986).