

# Response to Intervention in Reading for English Language Learners

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A considerable amount of evidence suggests that approaches involving early intervention, ongoing progress monitoring, and effective classroom instruction consistent with Response to Intervention (RTI) are associated with improved outcomes for the majority of students in early reading and math (e.g., Burns, Griffiths, Parson, Tilly, & VanDerHayden, 2007; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007; Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004). Considerably less information exists, however, about the effectiveness of these approaches with a growing population of students, English language learners (ELLs) at risk for reading problems. We also have considerably less information about the types of interventions that are effective for students who do not adequately respond to the interventions that typically are effective (Vaughn et al., in press; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007). Such students are likely to be identified as having learning disabilities.

This article briefly highlights the knowledge base on reading and RTI for ELLs, and provides preliminary support for the use of practices related to RTI with this population.

## Caveats and Considerations About Recommendations for Teaching English Language Learners with Reading Difficulties

ELLs are typically served in bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) programs. Bilingual education students receive instruction in their native language and a structured program of ESL instruction. Students in ESL programs do not receive native language instruction; they are typically taught within general education classrooms and receive a support program for ESL. How much native language and/or ESL instruction students receive depends on the program model. In planning RTI approaches, it is important to understand the program in which ELLs are enrolled, how their native language and English proficiency is assessed and

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monitored, and the core literacy program they receive for development of native language and/or English literacy skills.

In implementing RTI approaches with ELLs, a significant challenge is determining students' knowledge and skills in their first language and then understanding their performance in their second language (English). For example, there are subgroups of students whose literacy knowledge and skills in their first language (e.g., Spanish) are adequate, but whose literacy skills in their second language (i.e., English) are low. These students have demonstrated the capacity to acquire reading skills and now require instruction so they can apply those skills to the acquisition of English literacy. Other students may have low literacy in both first language and English because they have not received adequate instruction in either language. Still another group of students, the smallest group, demonstrates low literacy skills in both their first language and English even after receiving adequate instruction.

Further complicating issues related to oral language development and literacy acquisition are situations in which a student's first language is not shared by other students in his or her grade, the student's first is a language without adequate print sources for instruction, or the student cannot receive instruction because a bilingual education teacher is not available to provide it. For these reasons and myriad others, there are no formulas or ready guidelines that can be easily provided for assessment and treatment.

It is also noteworthy that although there are many caveats and considerations involved in decision making about screening, assessment, and intervention for ELLs, parents and educators cannot postpone decision making until a better knowledge base is available. They are eager to make decisions that will be associated with improved outcomes and that will facilitate appropriate early identification and intervention when required. Thus, the following guidelines are provided to encourage educators to promote effective practices related to RTI with ELLs and to acquire further knowledge and skills so that they demonstrate improved confidence in their decision making with these students. Keep in mind, though, that teachers and schools must proceed with the most effective practices possible. Also, please note that these guidelines may be altered as new research evidence becomes available.

### **What skills must educators have to effectively implement RTI for ELLs?**

Many educators, including those providing special education services, are concerned that they do not have the knowledge and skills to appropriately instruct ELLs. In some cases, these personnel are fearful that their lack of knowledge of the student's native language renders them incapable of providing valuable instruction. As a result, they may elect to do the minimum amount needed to intervene and instruct. For this reason, it is essential that

educators be provided with the resources needed to support them in this process. Being provided professional development for enhancement of knowledge and skills is essential; in addition, a problem-solving team with knowledge and experience working with ELLs can be a valuable resource to facilitate decision making and to design instructional supports.

- Provide ongoing and research-based professional development to teachers and other school personnel.
- The more that personnel know about the development of oral language, early literacy, students' home language, contextual considerations, and the cultural background of students, the better informed they will be in making appropriate decisions about interpreting screening and assessment results and in designing appropriate interventions.
- Fully credentialed bilingual education and ESL teachers must continuously acquire new knowledge regarding best practices in bilingual education and ESL.
- General education teachers should regularly participate in professional development focused on meeting the needs of ELLs (e.g., information about bilingual education, ESL strategies, and the cultural and linguistic characteristics that serve as assets to the academic success of ELLs).

### **How Is Universal Screening Effectively Implemented With ELLs?**

- ELLs can be screened on the same early reading indicators as native English language speakers, including phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and word and text reading (Gersten et al., 2007).
- Universal screenings must be conducted using native language and/or English measures that have demonstrated high validity and reliability (see the [Research Institute on Progress Monitoring Web site](#)).
- Consider the proficiency in the target areas in the L1 of ELLs. Students highly proficient in early reading skills in L1 and low in that proficiency in L2 can be considered instructionally different from students low in proficiency in L1 and L2.
- Provide instructional support to ELLs with low performance in reading areas even when oral language skills in English are low. Interventions should simultaneously address development of language and literacy skills in English.

### **How Is Progress Monitoring Effectively Implemented With ELLs?**

- Monitor ELLs' progress as frequently as you monitor the progress of all other students—a minimum of three times per year for students at grade level or above and three to six times per year for students at risk for reading problems.
- When ELLs demonstrate low abilities in grade-level target skills in reading, provide research-based instruction.
- Consider students' accents and pronunciations when scoring English measures and provide appropriate interpretations when words are mispronounced. Do not penalize students for dialect features.

- Consider that students may be acquiring word meaning while acquiring word reading and, thus, oral reading fluency may proceed at an expected rate early (while students are focusing on word reading) and then proceed at a lower than expected rate later when students are focusing more on word meaning.

### **How Is Tier 1 Instruction Effectively Implemented for ELLs?**

- Set high but reasonable instructional expectations that provide ongoing instructional support to ensure that these expectations are met.
- Consider the core instructional program that English Language Learners are being provided for oral language and literacy instruction in the native language and/or in English. Consider all of the knowledge and practices associated with improved outcomes for Tier 1 reading instruction and make sure these practices are in place for ELLs. Although these practices vary by grade level, in general they include consideration of the foundational skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics early in the reading process, with continued emphasis on vocabulary and concept building throughout the instructional process. Reading words accurately and with prosody, as well as reading for meaning and learning, are emphasized through listening comprehension early and then later through reading comprehension.
- For students in bilingual education programs, use grade-appropriate measures that match the language of reading instruction. Monitor native language and English language and literacy progress from initial instruction through the transition process, and then in English when students are ready to exit and are no longer receiving reading instruction in the native language.
- Do not wait for English oral language to meet grade-level expectations before providing reading instruction. Provide instruction in early reading while also providing support for English oral language development.
- Promote language and vocabulary development throughout the day.
- Ensure that students are provided ongoing and appropriate instruction in academic language use in the native language and/or in English. Integrate academic language development into core instruction across subject areas.
- Scaffold language and opportunities to respond. Scaffolding language includes paraphrasing key words, providing opportunities to extend answers, supporting language by using familiar synonyms (e.g., “that is also like...”) and familiar antonyms (e.g., “that is also different from...”), reframing students' responses, confirming aspects of the answer that are correct, and providing language supports to further explain aspects that require refinement.
- Provide opportunities for appropriate peer learning, including peer pairing and small-group instruction.

### **How Is Tier 2 Intervention Effectively Implemented for ELLs?**

- Provide intensive reading interventions to ELLs demonstrating low reading skills immediately when needed. These interventions can be effectively implemented as early as 1st grade, as well as for more mature readers with

reading difficulties.

- Ensure that interventions are sufficiently intense by retaining small groups (3–6 students) who are provided intervention for a minimum of 30 minutes each day.
- When students receiving literacy instruction in English demonstrate weak reading skills or have evident reading difficulties, do not wait for English oral language to improve before providing reading interventions. Use appropriate practices for building oracy skills and vocabulary development as well as reading skills.

### **How Is Tier 3 Intervention Effectively Implemented With ELLs?**

- ELLs who are significantly behind in reading require highly intensive and extensive reading interventions that start immediately (as early as 1st grade) and continue until the student is able to adequately benefit from reading instruction provided within the core classroom instruction.
- Tier 3 intervention needs to be provided by a well-trained specialist such as a bilingual education or an ESL teacher with a strong background in literacy, or a learning disability teacher who has a strong background with and understanding of the educational needs of ELLs.
- Tier 3 instruction may need to last for a significant period of time when students are making minimal progress; adjustments to instruction may need to be made, with consideration given to the integration of contextual factors (e.g., family, personal, and classroom variables) that may need to be addressed as necessary. A team approach to problem solving may be very useful in interpreting factors that influence progress and provide suggestions for designing instruction.
- Students who have been provided research-based reading interventions that are typically associated with improved outcomes may not demonstrate significant gains and may require highly individualized reading instruction that considers other factors such as attention, language and vocabulary development, and behavior problems. A team approach to problem solving that considers many of these factors may facilitate the development of an appropriate instructional plan.

### **How Confident Are We About RTI With ELLs?**

There are many advantages to using RTI approaches with all learners, including ELLs. These advantages are realized when schools provide appropriate universal screening— at the beginning and middle of the year at minimum to identify students who are at risk for reading difficulties and to provide interventions to meet their needs. Determining that adequate instruction class-wide is occurring for ELLs ensures that students are less likely to fall behind and that they will continue to thrive in the classroom.

Using ongoing progress monitoring as a source of data to inform decision making will facilitate both decision making and students' progress. When students demonstrate reading difficulties, the provision of small-group intensive interventions targeting their instructional needs and then monitoring their progress ensures that instruction is modified to meet the

needs of students.

- ELLs benefit from teachers who are highly interested in ensuring that their students make adequate progress in reading and that they themselves have the knowledge and skills to provide appropriate instruction.
- ELLs will be better served if teachers and school personnel do not expect or accept low performance and if they do not view students as undeserving of effective interventions.
- ELLs who exhibit learning disabilities may be underidentified and undertreated because school personnel may not have the knowledge and skills needed to identify and treat these students.
- Students who are ELLs will benefit from native language instruction and from most of the same instructional practices that are associated with improved outcomes for native English speakers.
- This is also the case for ELLs who receive instruction in English providing that appropriate practices for teaching ESL are used. Strategies and instructional routines such as repetitive language, rapid pacing, modeling, time to practice and discuss reading, and systematic and explicit instruction are beneficial with ELLs with reading difficulties.
- School personnel do not delay literacy instruction until students' English oracy skills are well-developed, but instead support learning while promoting English language development.
- Students benefit when school personnel are focused on meeting students' educational needs rather than on finding an external source to explain the educational needs.

## Readings to Consider for Further Information

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