

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive RTI

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Reflection and Discussion



- At what stage is your school or district in implementing RTI?
- What are the greatest challenges you are facing?



Challenges When Using RTI with English Language Learners

- Most teachers lack the training, expertise, and experience to teach reading and other subjects to English language learners.
- Most “evidence-based” practices have not been sufficiently validated with English language learners.



- Most English language learners do not receive optimal instruction. There is:
 - too much focus on expecting students to fit the curriculum, rather the other way around, and
 - too much focus on phonological awareness and letter naming at the expense of other skills.
- Recommendations for assessing and teaching English language learners do not adequately account for what we know about learning to read in one's first and in a second language.



- Most school-level teams charged with making special education eligibility decisions for culturally and linguistically diverse students lack training and experience in distinguishing a language difference from a learning disability.
- We are not doing enough to examine underlying assumptions about teaching and learning, about who matters and who benefits and who struggles: "It was if the failure was invisible, or worse, inevitable" (Noguera & Wing, 2006, p. 168).



- If a child does not make adequate progress with *research-based instruction* that is presumed "to work," the assumption is made that the child must have a deficit of some kind.
 - *How do we ensure that the child has in fact received culturally and linguistically responsive, appropriate, quality instruction?*
 - As with earlier identification criteria, this model *must* be based on students having received an adequate "opportunity to learn."



Challenges at Marble Mountain Elementary

- Marble Mountain Elementary School
 - Student population is 92% Latino; 53% are ELLs
 - 31% of ELLs receive special education services
 - Low performance on the CSAP
- Mountain View School District
 - Based their RTI model on a careful review of research
 - Provided 3 days of professional development on how to implement RTI (e.g., do progress monitoring).



Challenge 1: According to progress-monitoring data, more than half of the ELLs in each first-grade class are not reaching benchmarks. It is not feasible to provide Tier 2 instruction to all of these students.



- When many students are not progressing, **change instruction:**
 - Has the instructional program been validated with students like those in the class?
 - Is instruction at an appropriate level for students' language and learning needs?
 - Is the program well-implemented?
 - Are teachers sufficiently differentiating instruction to meet diverse student needs?
 - Is the environment conducive to learning?
- This will require **observing in classrooms** and supporting instruction.
- *Develop and capitalize on local expertise.*



Challenge 2: School personnel are unclear how the RTI process is similar to and different from the Pre-Referral Process used in previous years. RTI meetings look much like the CST meetings of old, centered on possible reasons for a child's struggles from a deficit perspective, with a push to place students in special education.



- Shift from figuring out what is wrong with a student to looking more broadly at the instructional context and at how to provide support for all students who need help, regardless of label.
- Make sure someone on the team has expertise in ELLs and how to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities.



Challenge 3: School personnel are confused about Tier 2 interventions and wonder whether ELL services "count" as a secondary intervention.



- English language development should be part of Tier 1 for all ELLs.
- Tier 2 interventions:
 - **Supplement the core curriculum**
 - Are based on students' needs as assessed by progress monitoring and other data
 - Are the domain of general education



- *Challenge 4: School personnel are not adequately prepared to teach English language learners or to distinguish between LD and learning differences.*



- State certification requirements should focus more on teaching English language learners.
- Teacher education programs should prepare all pre-service teachers to work with English language learners.
- Professional development opportunities are essential and should focus on teaching English language learners.



**Assumptions Underlying RTI that
May Be Problematic with ELLs**



Assumption 1: "Evidence-based instruction" is good instruction for everyone. English language learners who have been taught with "evidence-based interventions" have been provided with an adequate opportunity to learn.



What Do We Mean by "Evidence-based"?

- The RTI model is based on the principle that instructional practices or interventions at each level should be based on scientific research evidence about "what works."
- However, it is essential to find out *what works with whom, by whom, for what purposes, and in what contexts*—



essential

What Works With Whom, By Whom, For What Purposes, and In What Contexts?

Population validity, ecological validity, construct validity are essential if research results are to be generalized - *yet frequently seem to be ignored.*

Experimental research studies tell us what works best with the majority of students in a research sample, **not all students.**



With Whom?



- When deciding if a practice is appropriate for implementation as part of an RTI model, it should have been validated with students like those with whom it will be applied.
- The National Reading Panel report "**did not address issues relevant to second language learning**" (2000, p. 3).



With Whom?

- Research reports should include information about:
 - language proficiency
 - Ethnicity
 - life and educational experiences (e.g., socio-economic, previous schooling)
- Data should be disaggregated to show how interventions might differentially affect students from diverse backgrounds.



With Whom?

- English language learners are often omitted from participant samples because of their limited English proficiency.
- Yet language dominance and proficiency are important research variables and can affect treatment outcomes.
- Leaving students out of studies limits the external validity and applicability of such studies, especially for those who teach English language learners.

By Whom?

It is essential to **observe** in classrooms.

- Is the instruction appropriate for students' language and learning needs?
- What is the relationship between a teacher and students?
- How does the teacher promote interest and motivation?



- **We draw different conclusions when several students are struggling rather than just a few ...**

By Whom?

Is the teacher...

- skilled in effective intervention and assessment procedures for English language learners?
- knowledgeable about the centrality and importance of culture in learning?
- knowledgeable about second language acquisition, bilingual education, and English as second language (ESL) teaching methods?

Does the teacher...

- have the attributes of culturally responsive teachers?
 - build positive, supportive relationships with students?
 - work well with students' families and the community?
 - help most culturally diverse students succeed to high levels?
- collaborate well with other professionals?

For What Purposes?

- What is the goal of instruction?
 - Some widely touted instructional approaches help improve word identification skills, but not necessarily reading comprehension.
 - According to the Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report, "Reading First did not have statistically significant impacts on student reading comprehension test scores in grades 1-3."
 - Some differences in the early grades "wash out" by third grade.



In What Contexts?

Variations in program implementation and effectiveness across schools and classrooms are common (see the First Grade Studies for a classic example, Bond & Dykstra, 1967).

- When students struggle, is it the program, the teachers' implementation, or the school context?
- What is it about the system that facilitates or impedes learning?
- Schools are dependent on larger societal influences that should not be ignored.

In What Contexts?

- RTI requires strong leadership from the principal (and others) and must be a comprehensive, school-wide approach that:
 - coordinates curriculum and assessment considerations,
 - addresses teachers' professional development needs,
 - attends to school climate issues,
 - and enhances leaders' capacities to orchestrate and respond to multiple (often contradictory) reforms (Adelman & Taylor).

In What Contexts?

• To conclude that failure resides within students when they do not progress with a certain intervention and decide they belong in special education ***without considering other factors*** is problematic and ignores what we know about teaching and learning.



- It is not enough to implement isolated evidence-based interventions.
- Instructional methods do not work or fail as decontextualized practices, but only in relation to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are implemented.



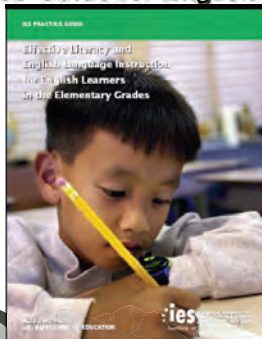
Assumption 2: Students who fail to respond to research-based instruction have some sort of learning problem or internal deficit, and perhaps even a learning disability.

- Many factors affect a child's response to instruction:
 - Instructional method
 - Level of instruction
 - Learning environment
 - Student-teacher relationship



Assumption 3: Learning to read in one's second language is similar to learning to read in one's first language; therefore assessment methods and instructional approaches that have been found through research to be effective with mainstream English-speaking students are appropriate for serving ELLs.

Recommendations from the IES Practice Guide for English Learners



- “For students in kindergarten and grade 1, early screening measures ... fit into 3 categories:

- Measures of phonological awareness
- Measures of familiarity with the alphabet and the alphabetic principle, especially measures of speed and accuracy
- Measures of reading single words and knowledge of basic phonics”

- “Districts should establish procedures for—and provide training for—schools to screen English learners for reading problems. *The same measures and assessment approaches can be used with English learners and native English speakers.*”



- “Schools with performance benchmarks in reading in the early grades can use *the same standards for English learners and for native English speakers* to make adjustments in instruction when progress is not sufficient.”

- “*Being at risk means that the English learner needs extra instructional support to learn to read. This support might simply entail additional time on English letter names and letter sounds. In other cases additional support might entail intensive instruction in phonological awareness or reading fluency.*”





- Yet there are important differences between learning to read in one’s L1 and L2 (August & Shanahan, 2006).



Phonological Awareness and ELLs

- Phonological awareness (in English) can present special challenges to ELLs.
 - Some phonemes may not be present in the student’s native language and, therefore, might be difficult to distinguish auditorily from similar sounds.
 - Sound placement in words differs across languages.
 - Phonological tasks with unknown sounds and words are more difficult.



Alphabetic Principle, Decoding, and ELLs

- The process of learning to read in English is facilitated when students are already literate in their L1 and the orthographic systems of the two languages are similar.
 - However, some letters may look the same but have different sounds.
 - For example, vowels in Spanish and English represent different sounds. Therefore, English vowel sounds and their various spellings can be very challenging for ELLs.
- Unfamiliar phonemes and graphemes make decoding and spelling difficult.
- Not knowing English vocabulary prevents ELLs from using word meaning to figure out how to read a word; learning letters and sounds can seem very abstract.



Vocabulary and ELLs

- Some ELLs are able to read phonetically (word call) yet do not understand what they read.
- ELLs literate in an L1 that has many cognates with English have an important resource. Yet false cognates can perplex students (e.g., “fast” in German means “almost”; “embarasada” in Spanish means “pregnant”).
- ELLs can be confused by common words:
 - prepositions (e.g., “on,” “above”)
 - pronouns (e.g., “she,” “they”)
 - cohesion markers (e.g., “therefore,” “however”)
 - words with multiple meanings (e.g., “bat,” “light”)
 - figurative language such as similes (e.g., “swims like a fish”) or metaphors (e.g. “his stomach was a bottomless pit”)
 - idioms (e.g., “to know something inside out”)



Reading Comprehension and ELLs

- Many factors affect the reading comprehension of ELLs, such as:
 - language proficiency,
 - vocabulary knowledge,
 - ability to use comprehension strategies,
 - differences in text structure,
 - culture influences,
 - Interest,
 - schema.



Oral Language and ELLs

- Optimal programs for ELLs include a focus on oral English language development.
- ELLs benefit from frequent opportunities to engage in structured, supported, academic talk.
- **This focus on oral language development includes not only vocabulary, but also common language structures.**
- When students' oral language improves, so do their reading fluency and comprehension.



What does it look like when teachers who lack preparation in teaching ELLs apply generic “evidence-based” practices?

- *Note:* Examples are from actual classrooms with ELLs, most at beginning levels of English proficiency.



Tier 1 Example

The whole Class is sitting in a circle, with the teacher seated at the head. Teacher says, "Yesterday, how many of you knew your sight words? One student speaks out, "One?" Another, "Three?" Teacher replies, "You are right. Three students were able to tell me their sight words. We need to practice these words; we are really behind. Every one of you should know these sight words by now. You need to practice these at home. Don't you practice these at home?" Teacher says this with frustration in her face and voice. Teacher states, "Only those 3 students will be able to pull from the treasure chest." ... Teacher begins sight words practice and holds up index cards with-*Big, My, See, Like, I, At, This, And, Up, Have, Too*. Students repeat sight words as Teacher holds up index cards. This is a repetitive process. She then holds up the word "Big" without saying anything. One student says the word "Big." She holds up another. "See." The same student says the word again. She holds up the word "see" again and tells the student who knew the previous answer not to say anything. Pause. Another says "see." She continues to go through this process with all the words, and says, "Okay guys, you need to practice these at home, you are not paying attention, you should have known these words by now." (Orosco, 2007)

Tier 2 Example

T., "Let's work on our sight words." T. writes sight words on her dry erase board: *have, many, some*. T. reads the words and has students repeat them. Some students read the words without much difficulty; others do not say anything. T., "Okay, now can you guys use these words in a sentence? Who would like to try?" No takers. T., "Someone?" T. looks at a student across from her and says, "Pick a word and try." The student is hesitant. T., "How about if I help you? Can you say this, *I have some snow*. Repeata (Spanglish)." The student seems to get the gist, "I hab... so...mo... s...no." T., "Good. How about someone else? How about the word *many*?" Students hesitate. T., "Okay. Here is an example. *I have many friends*. Can you say this?" Student, "I...hab... ma...ni friend...z." T., "Good. Next word. *Some*." T. looks at another student and makes up a sentence, "*I have some toys*." S. repeats... The teacher takes them back to class.

Tier 3 Example

- The teacher has a master's degree in special education and has been teaching for about 20 years. She noted, "I teach LD by the book."
- 4 second-grade English language learners, all determined to have learning disabilities.



Teacher: "Boys and girls, we need to read our story, 'Polar Bears'. We need to listen to see what color they are, where they live or what they eat." Teacher directs students to look at the title page, asks what they think the book is about. No response. Teacher asks, "Are polar bears nice?" No response. Teacher begins to read: "Polar Bears live in the Arctic at the North Pole. The polar bear is a marine mammal... Polar bears are carnivores..." [OC: I wonder how many students know what a marine mammal is, or a carnivore.] ... As she is reading students are beginning to check out; one student is playing with the drawstring in his hooded sweater. Another two are whispering to each other. The teacher continues: "The white fur is important camouflage for the bears as they hunt their prey on the ice..."

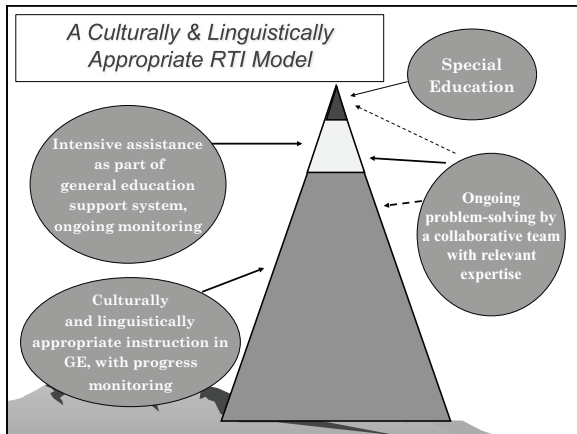


[OC: What is camouflage? This story uses tough words for ESL students at this level. I wonder if the teacher knows whether these kids really understand this.] Teacher: "Okay let's talk about the story now. So what do they smell?" No reply. Teacher, "Anyone?" One student, "People." Teacher, "Good." [This was not in the story.] Teacher, "Do polar bears live here in Colorado?" Students, "Yes." Teacher, "Good. They could if they lived at the zoo." [Colorado was not in the story.] ... Only one student is responding, with one word answers. [OC: I wonder if this book is too difficult for them. However, it would work for these kids if the language was modeled and sheltered for them...] (Orosco, 2007)



**What do schools that
successfully meet the needs
of English Language
Learners look like?**





An RTI Framework for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

1st Tier

- The foundation of Tier 1 should be culturally and linguistically responsive, appropriate, quality instruction with on-going progress monitoring and authentic assessments.
- Tier 1 includes these essential components:
 - a supportive, motivating learning environment;
 - culturally responsive, research-based, appropriate core instruction (validated with similar students, in similar contexts);
 - knowledgeable, skilled, caring, culturally responsive teachers; and
 - **differentiation** to meet students' needs.

Guiding Questions

- When a child shows signs of struggling, the first step should be to observe in her classroom.
 - Is instruction targeted to and appropriate for the student's level of English proficiency and learning needs?
 - Is the teacher implementing appropriate research-based practices with fidelity?
 - If the teacher is modifying practices, for what reasons?
 - Does the classroom environment seem conducive to learning?
 - Are the student's true peers succeeding?

If most English language learners in the class are thriving, the next step should be to collect student data:

- Has consideration been given to the child's **cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and experiential** background?
- Have authentic assessments been used in addition to progress monitoring?
- What tasks **can** the student perform and in what contexts?
- Does the student differ from true peers in rate and level of learning?
- Have the child's parents been asked for their input?



2nd Tier

- When students have not made adequate progress when taught using appropriate methods at the 1st tier, *intervention* is warranted.
- Tier 2 is a level of intensive support that *supplements* the core curriculum and is based on student needs as identified through progress monitoring and other means.
- Interventions are instructionally, culturally, and linguistically responsive and appropriate.



Problem-solving Team

The make-up of the team should be diverse and include members with expertise in culturally responsive instruction, and, if appropriate, English language acquisition and bilingual education.



3rd Tier

- This tier is generally considered to be special education, though students might receive this level of support without an IEP.
- Instruction at this level is:
 - tailored to the individual needs of the student,
 - even more intensive,
 - of longer duration.
- Students with disabilities must also be provided with access to the general education curriculum and be instructed in the least restrictive environment.





"Stop asking me if we're almost there; we're Nomads, for crying out loud."

Reflection and Discussion



How will we know when we are "there" (i.e., we have succeeded)?

What is needed for RTI to be effective, appropriate and equitable for all students, including English language learners?

RTI Models Represent a New Beginning

- We are encouraged by the potential of RTI models to improve educational opportunities culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- RTI models represent a new beginning and a novel way of conceptualizing how we support student learning, along a continuum rather than categorically.
- Yet we must ensure that students truly receive appropriate instruction and an adequate opportunity to learn.



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