Response to Intervention and English Learners

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Guillermo has struggled since he enrolled in Lincoln School. He receives English as a second language (ESL) services, but general education teachers at Lincoln have had little or no professional development to help them understand second language acquisition and learn effective practices for working with English learners. Guillermo's teachers over the past 2 years thought he just needed more time to learn English, but Guillermo speaks English fairly well; it is in academic situations where he falters. His current teacher recognizes that English learners like Guillermo require instruction that takes into consideration the linguistic demands of academic tasks. She has been teaching in ways that make lessons more understandable to English learners, but she and the ESL teacher both agree that Guillermo hasn't been making adequate academic progress. In the past, she might have been tempted to consider a referral for special education services, but because her school has a well-developed Response to Intervention (RTI) process, she will tap into that source to get Guillermo the help he needs.

RTI is an instructional service delivery model founded on two key premises:

- All children can learn when provided with appropriate, effective instruction.
- Most academic difficulties can be prevented with early identification of need followed by immediate intervention.

RTI uses a multi-tiered structure of increasingly intensive and focused instruction and intervention for serving the needs of students with academic or behavioral concerns (see Figure 1). It is being seen as a more effective process than more traditional approaches, which involve either waiting for a student to fail before intervening or identifying a potential need for special education services, then testing, determining eligibility,
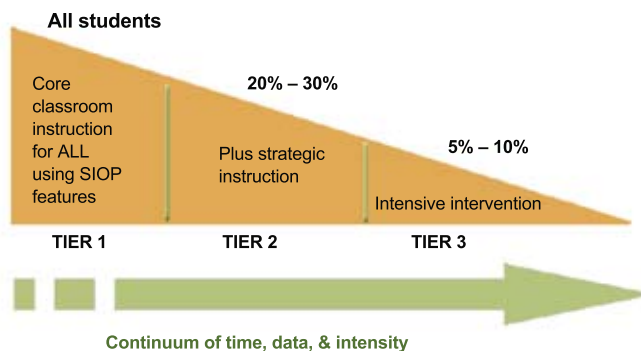

Figure 1. Response to intervention.

and placing the student. But for English learners—the fastest growing segment of the school population—the RTI process raises some special issues. Because English learners face the challenge of learning new material, skills, and information in a new language, teachers need to use practices that have been shown to be effective in making instruction understandable for them (August & Shanahan, 2006; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008).

Like Guillermo, many English learners have floundered without appropriate assistance for a number of reasons, including low expectations for their academic performance (Artiles & Trent, 1994; McKown & Weinstein, 2007). In addition, because culturally diverse students have historically been both over- and underrepresented in special education, some schools restrict referral for special education services or assessment until English learners have been in school for some period of time. They hope this will reduce the misidentification of English learners as having learning disabilities. Often, teachers assume that English learners' academic difficulties are related to language acquisition and give them additional time, ostensibly to learn English, before offering appropriate academic support.

In the past, when English learners didn't make adequate academic progress, one of the only options available to teachers was to refer the students for an assessment to identify possible learning disabilities. Now the RTI process is available as an alternative to the IQ–achievement discrepancy formula, which measures the gap between a student's potential and achievement (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008; National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d.). This brief is designed for educators who are learning about or have begun the process of implementing RTI to help them tailor its use to meet the needs of English learners.

RTI Services

The first step in following the RTI model is ensuring that general education instruction reflects best practice and meets the students' academic and linguistic needs. For English learners who struggle, we need to consider what instructional accommodations are necessary for them to succeed academically. RTI services are typically provided in one of two ways: a problem-solving procedure or a standard treatment protocol (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008; Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007). In the problem-solving procedure, decisions about the instructional adjustments or services to be provided for an individual student are based on results of assessments and observations and are tailored to the needs of the student. With the standard treatment protocol, the school has a specific set of programs or interventions available for use at various tiers of service (described below), and students with a specific profile of needs are placed in the most appropriate program. Schools often use a combination of the two approaches (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Whichever approach schools take, educators with knowledge of second language acquisition and effective practices for English learners must be involved in the decision-making process.

Tier I: Standards-Based Instruction

Tier 1 services involve providing effective, differentiated instruction in the general education classroom using whole-class and small-group formats. For English learners, this instruction is made comprehensible by having clear learning objectives and using a variety of techniques, such as presenting material visually, providing sufficient repetition, and offering opportunities to practice new learning.

The key to an effective RTI model is providing instruction in the general education classroom that is in accordance with students' needs. Teachers should be provided with sufficient support (e.g., release time, shared planning periods) to allow collaboration within and across grade levels. This enables them to make decisions—based on standards, data from benchmark and diagnostic assessments, classroom observations, and language proficiency assessments—about what to teach in order to meet the specific needs of their students. Teachers then design and deliver lessons that utilize research-based components of systematic, explicit, intensive instruction with many opportunities for active student engagement. More specific instructional practices for English learners are described later in this brief.

Tier 2: Supplemental Instruction

If students are not responding as expected to Tier 1 instruction, as determined through progress monitoring assessments, work samples, and daily observations, they can be considered for Tier 2 services. Services provided at this level are intended to be supplemental—provided in addition to the continuing Tier 1 instruction—and closely aligned with the content and focus of the classroom instruction.

Tier 2 services are intended to be short-term. With this extra instruction, the desired outcome is that students will learn the skills they have been struggling with and can then benefit from Tier 1 instruction alone. Tier 2 services can be provided by classroom teachers themselves in small-group instruction, by specialists who work in the classroom or pull students out during the school day, in before- or after-school programs, or in Saturday school or summer school. Instruction for English learners might include intensive English language development, instruction with ample contextual clues to make it understandable, and/or specific literacy interventions (Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; Richards & Leafstedt, 2010). If students are not making sufficient progress with Tier 2 services, educators may consider Tier 3 services.

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention

In some RTI frameworks, Tier 3 includes special education services for students who have been formally identified as having a learning disability and have had an Individualized Education Plan developed for them. In other cases, schools design Tier 3 to be an intensive, focused intervention that may include students without disabilities. In some cases, Tier 3 is supplemental—provided in addition to Tier 1 and Tier 2 services. In other cases, particularly when the student's performance level is far

below grade-level expectations, Tier 3 may be provided as a replacement to core classroom instruction. Tier 3 instruction is more intensive than Tier 2 because it is provided in smaller groups and with a more specific skills focus. (Vaughn, Wanzek, Murray, Scammacca, Linan-Thompson, & Woodruff, 2009). Whatever the format, all interventions provided in Tier 3 must be research based (Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, in press).

Assessments Used in RTI

RTI models involve administering assessments and using the results to make key academic decisions. *Benchmark* or *screening assessments* are used to identify students who are not meeting established performance benchmarks and may therefore need additional assistance. *Diagnostic assessments* can help pinpoint specific skills for which the student may need additional or specialized instruction. *Progress monitoring assessments* are often used with students receiving supplementary assistance or intensive intervention to help teachers determine whether the student is making adequate improvement in response to instruction. A fourth category of assessments, sometimes referred to as *outcomes assessments,* includes tests used to measure progress toward standards or broader objectives, such as annual state tests or standardized achievement tests.

Benchmark, screening, and progress monitoring assessments typically use curriculum-based measurement (CBM) procedures. Curriculum-based measures of oral reading fluency involve having students read aloud from unpracticed passages or lists of words for one minute and scoring the number of words read correctly. CBM has been established over the past decades as valid and reliable for screening decisions and for monitoring students' progress in reading (Wayman, Wallace, Wiley, Tichá, & Espin, 2007). While only a few published studies have addressed the use of curriculum-based reading measures with students who are not proficient English speakers (Wiley & Deno, 2005), those studies have found the reliability and validity for oral reading fluency to be the same for English learners and native English speakers (Baker & Good, 1995; Graves, Plasencia-Peinado, Deno, & Johnson, 2005). It is recommended that, whenever possible, initial screenings in early reading skills be conducted in both the student's native language and English to get an accurate assessment of skill development (Richards & Leafstedt, 2010). In all cases, the unique linguistic needs of English learners must be considered when selecting assessment methods and interpreting the results.

Instructional Considerations for English Learners

When an RTI model is in place and assessments indicate that a student is not making sufficient progress in the general education classroom, the first consideration is to examine the quality of instruction that the student is receiving. Are research-based practices used consistently? How well does classroom instruction meet the student's specific needs? Effective instruction for English learners provides access to the core curriculum and, at the same time, intentionally develops their English language proficiency. Specific features of high-quality instruction include explicitly teaching the academic language required to complete the lesson's activities and assignments, activating and strengthening students' background knowledge, promoting oral interaction and extended academic talk, and reviewing vocabulary and content concepts to provide repetition of key ideas and their associated language (Echevarria & Short, 2009).

Many teachers are familiar with some strategies or techniques for making instruction understandable for English learners, such as using visuals, repeating key vocabulary, or slowing their speech. But teachers need a way to consistently and systematically implement best practices to provide optimal learning conditions for English learners. The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model provides a framework that is composed of research-based features of instruction, including the techniques previously mentioned (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). The SIOP Model consists of 30 research-based features of instruction that, when implemented to a high degree, improve the achievement of English learners (Echevarria, Richards, Canges, & Francis, 2009; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2009).

Effective Practices for Teachers of English Learners

Before English learners are recommended for Tier 2 or Tier 3 services, teachers need to ensure that these students have had sufficient exposure to high-quality, appropriate teaching that includes academic English instruction in an environment that is supportive of their language development. The following practices are essential for providing meaningful, understandable lessons for students learning English.

Pay Systematic Attention to Language Development

When teachers have both a content objective and a language objective for their instruction, they remain cognizant of daily English language development. Standards for English language arts or English language development can be used to guide the selection of language objectives to increase students' proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Systematic attention to language development includes vocabulary knowledge, which has been found to relate strongly to students' reading comprehension and to their overall academic success (August & Shanahan, 2006; Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995; Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004). For English learners, vocabulary development should be an intentional goal of every lesson. Teachers can present new terms in context, talk about them, encourage students to use them in conversation and peer dialogue, and post them for students to see and use.

Build on Students' Background Experiences

Although students come to school with a wealth of experiences, these experiences may not align with those reflected in texts and lessons. Teachers can tap into students' experiences and link them to the lesson by asking questions about the topic. For example, the teacher may ask, "Have you ever had to take care of a younger brother, sister, or cousin? Tell me about it," then "Well, today we're going to read about a boy who had to bring his little sister with him to his baseball game. How would you feel if that happened to you?" This type of discussion makes a link between students and the text. The same approach can be used with historical events, science concepts, and math word problems.

Use Techniques That Make the Lesson More Understandable

Provide visual clues for students by using gestures, modeling, pictures, demonstrations, and graphic organizers. Writing words on the board or overhead projector to accompany speech creates a context for understanding. Words and key lesson information should be posted in the classroom as a reference for later use.

Use scaffolding to provide students with the level of support they need to complete the task or assignment successfully. As students become more proficient, the amount of support provided decreases, until they can work independently. The gradual release of responsibility model explicitly moves instruction from the teacher ("I do it"), to guided instruction with the whole class ("We do it"), to students working together with teacher supervision ("You do it together"), and, finally, to students being responsible for their own work ("You do it alone") (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

Create Opportunities for Practice and Application

The gradual release of responsibility model provides students with ways to practice using new information and concepts. However, some students may need additional opportunities to practice new learning with continued support as they move through the process. Support may include hands-on activities that are meaningful and engaging, more teacher modeling or guided practice, scaffolding of tasks (e.g., providing partially completed graphic organizers or outlines for students to fill in), and explanations in the student's primary language.

English learners need structured opportunities in all subject areas for practice of academic English. These can be provided by creating balanced turn taking between teachers and students in class discussions and by having students work in small groups or with partners to discuss and grapple with ideas and information in the text. Opportunities for practice using academic English can advance learners' proficiency and improve their knowledge and use of English. There is a strong relationship between oral language proficiency and literacy (August & Shanahan, 2006), which makes development of oral language a priority.

Use Repetition and Redundant Information

Following the simple rule "Say it, show it, repeat it" ensures that students have multiple exposures to the information in a lesson and that they receive the information in a variety of ways. Teachers can provide extra support for English learners by using technology such as PowerPoint slides, overhead transparencies, smart boards, audiotaped texts, and Web sites as supplements to oral presentations.

Assess Frequently and Reteach as Necessary

The saying "practice makes perfect" is true only if the practice is accurate. Because there is much that may be misinterpreted by students who are learning in a new language, teachers of English learners need to check frequently for understanding and reteach when needed. Periodic review and practice are called for because English learners require repetition and redundancy. English learners improve their conceptual understanding and English proficiency with repeated exposure to learning.

Summary

Research has shown that educators today have at their disposal the tools and strategies necessary to provide effective instruction to all students (August & Shanahan, 2006; Ellis & Worthington, 1994; Genesee et al., 2006; Marzano, Gaddy, & Dean, 2000). By using an RTI framework to guide their professional decisions, teachers can provide specialized supplementary instruction and intensive intervention to those students who need such additional assistance. With English learners, it is imperative to consider whether current classroom instruction reflects best practices for their specialized needs. When making these decisions, it is important to consider each child's particular set of life experiences and to work closely with families to identify relevant cultural influences and considerations (Brown & Doolittle, 2008).

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CREATE, the Center for Research on the Educational Achievement and Teaching of English Language Learners, is conducting a program of research designed to address the critical challenge of improving educational outcomes for English language learners in the middle grades by

- Enhancing the empirical research base for readers in Grades 4–8
- Using both narrative and expository text to develop and test effective interventions that promote content knowledge and language and literacy development
- Investigating the features of instruction and text modifications that facilitate learning for English learners (e.g., traditional instruction vs. ESL-enhanced instruction, teacher-guided instruction vs. group work, traditional text vs. modified text)
- Designing, testing, and delivering professional development that ensures that teachers implement effective classroom practices to help English learners achieve high standards

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