

Effective Instruction for ELLs using an RtI Approach

To provide ELLs with rigorous, culturally responsive instruction, a strong Response to Intervention (RtI) model should be in place. This set of guidance documents has been designed to assist teachers, instructional leaders, and ELL support services with RtI implementation, as the model is adapted in each context. The documents outline a rationale for using the RtI model with a school's ELL population, and describe the road map for implementation.

Document 1: *RtI for ELLs -- An Overview*

Document 2: *RtI Infrastructure – Coordinating a Team and Organizing Stakeholders*

Document 3: *Strong Core Instruction for ELLs – Tier 1*

Document 4: *Serving Struggling ELLs – A Step-by-Step Approach*

Document 5: *Assessment and Evaluation for Special Education – Tiers 2 and 3*

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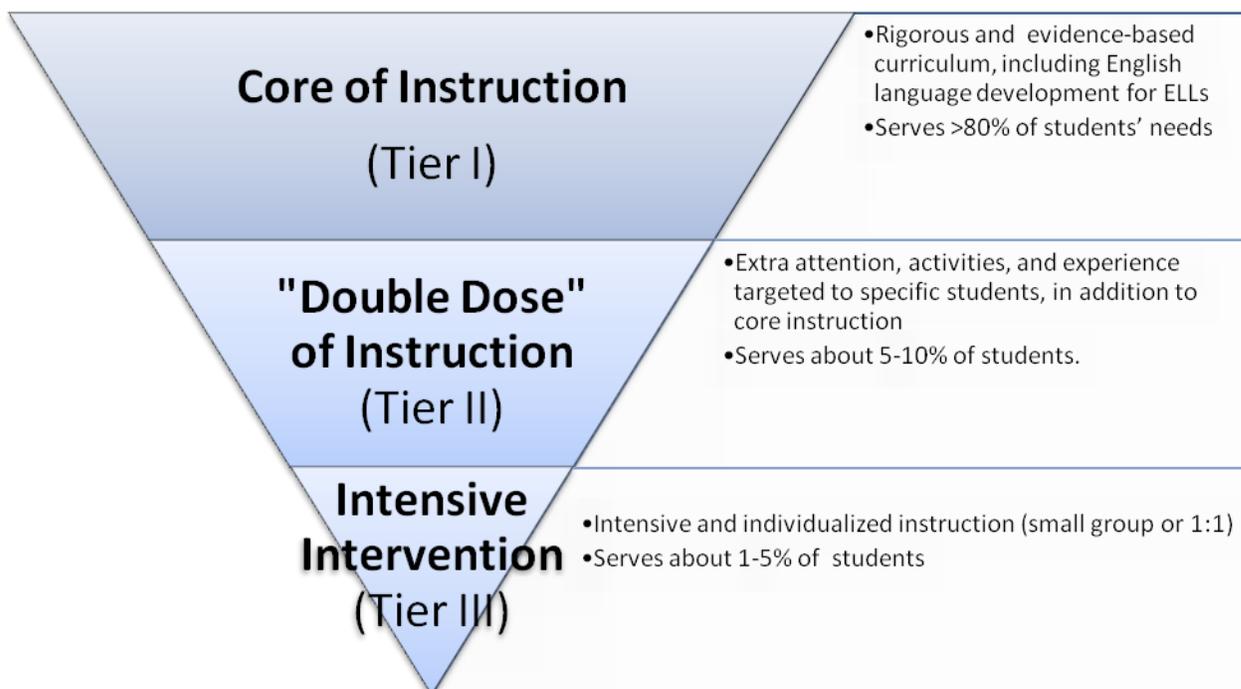
5: Assessment and Evaluation for Special Education – Tiers 2 and 3

RtI for ELLs – An Overview

The Response to Intervention (RtI) model holds significant promise for better serving English Language Learners (ELLs) who are at-risk for academic difficulties. RtI is an instructional model that aims at prevention and early intervention through a tiered system of instructional support—one that adds layers of instructional support to the standard core curriculum delivered in a school, based on the demonstrated and changing needs of the student learners. This includes levels of intervention and instruction that increase in duration and intensity over time; as students improve, measured by reliable and valid assessments, the extra supports are removed. The NYCDOE RtI model is based on three tiers of instruction and intervention support. Please refer to the [NYC DOE Response to Intervention Reference Guide](#)

for general information about the DOE framework and requirements. Tier 1 is the instructional core that is intended to incorporate high quality evidence-based instruction for all students. This includes instruction that has been shown to be effective for ELLs, and differentiation to meet students' diverse needs. Instruction for ELLs in English language development is provided at the Tier 1 instructional level. Students move into Tier 2 and Tier 3 if they demonstrate a need for more targeted and intensive academic support. This extra support can occur in the classroom, but also in separate settings with instruction focused on specific learning targets. Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction should also be tailored to meet ELLs' language needs and should be incorporated into research-based intervention strategies.

Three Tiers of Instructional Support



The purpose of RtI has shifted over time, away from primarily addressing special education pre-evaluation to a more focused problem-solving model. Students are provided with increasingly intensive, targeted instruction designed to match their learning needs, as demonstrated by performance on periodically administered assessments. This problem-solving model holds particular promise for ELLs, a group for which there are significant concerns about appropriate placement in special education services; evidence suggests that in many cases, ELLs identified with learning disabilities (LD) are experiencing difficulties that may not, in fact, stem from LD. When fully and effectively implemented, the RtI model is designed to:

- ✦ determine whether students are benefiting from an instructional program within a reasonable time
- ✦ build more effective instructional programs for students who are not benefiting
- ✦ compare the efficacy of different forms of instruction
- ✦ design more effective, individualized instructional programs
- ✦ reduce inappropriate referral rate

- ✦ increase educational opportunities for linguistically and culturally diverse populations

All of these actions have great potential for effective prevention and intervention efforts to support academically at-risk ELLs. When evaluated collectively, this information should help initiate important conversations about classroom- and school-level models of prevention that will meet the needs of diverse populations of learners, including ELLs at-risk for academic difficulties.

ELLs and Language Acquisition

“Bilingualism is not simply linear, but *dynamic*, drawing from the different contexts in which it develops and functions.” (Garcia, 2011)

In order to meet ELLs’ needs in an RtI framework, it is important to understand their characteristics as children and learners, and to ensure that we view their status as language learners as an asset to draw upon as well as a dynamic developmental process that is inextricably tied to learning opportunities. Unfortunately, many educators have misconceptions about language and literacy development, and these false notions can perpetuate a deficit view of ELLs’ ability to learn; namely, that it is a problem to be fixed rather than a learning resource. See the Table at the end of this document for some of the common misconceptions about the language learning process for ELL students. In addition to having an understanding of these misconceptions, it is essential for practitioners to investigate their students’ educational and linguistic histories. Teachers need to build upon the linguistic capabilities students bring to the classroom and understand where challenges may lie. For example, a Spanish-speaking child struggling with the vocabulary of English school texts might have a well-developed Spanish vocabulary, at least conversationally. With an understanding of this child’s linguistic strengths, the teacher could guide the child to use cognates or familiar concepts in Spanish to support her English reading comprehension.

There are many factors that influence the language learning process and corresponding academic development. These include, but are not limited to:

- familiarity with/and exposure to English
- degree of proficiency in English and the native language
- opportunities to learn language(s) and build knowledge (in any language) in school and the community
- prior schooling experiences
- whether both languages are being learned at the same time (simultaneous bilingual) or whether one is learned, followed by the other (sequential bilingual)

- whether the student actively wanted to learn another language (elective bilingual) or had to learn a second language in order to survive (circumstantial bilingual)

The RtI Model in New York City

Some components of RtI implementation are specific to meeting ELLs’ needs, and show promise for supporting ELLs’ academic outcomes. In particular, the RtI model should include:

- ✦ a systematic process for examining how ELLs’ backgrounds and educational contexts (i.e., first and second language proficiency, educational history including bilingual models, immigration pattern, socioeconomic status, and culture) have an impact on their academic achievement in a U.S. classroom
- ✦ an opportunity to examine the appropriateness of classroom instruction and the classroom context, based on knowledge of individual student factors
- ✦ a regular plan for gathering information through informal and formal assessments
- ✦ nondiscriminatory interpretation of all assessment data

These components translate into 4 action steps for schools, outlined and discussed in this guidance document:



1. UNIVERSAL SCREENING is administered to all students. Universal screening is used to establish a baseline of student performance and identify students who are not making academic progress at expected rates. Screening assessments give clear indications of risk in specific domains through set benchmarks or criteria, or by detailing how a child performs relative to peers of the same age or grade level. These assessments often point out risks that may not be apparent from classroom interactions alone, and they are especially useful for understanding performance across groups of students. For ELLs this means:

- ✦ As required by State rules and as a first step in a universal screening process, when a student enters a NYC public school for the first time, a Home Language Identification Survey (HLIS) is completed. With this information, teachers will begin to uncover the factors that could influence the student’s English language learning process, thereby

allowing this knowledge to guide linguistically responsive instructional choices (see section on ELLs and Language Acquisition above).

- ✦ Beyond screening and identification for ESL services to support language development, the ELL student also takes part in RtI screening to assess whether his/her literacy skills and competencies are meeting grade level benchmarks. If an ELL student is flagged as at-risk or below-benchmark on any particular skill or competency, the student should receive targeted instructional support to bolster development in this area. This support should be delivered in coordination with language support services.
- ✦ When reading instruction occurs in a language other than English, it is strongly recommended that schools administer screening instruments in the language of instruction in addition to English. Whenever possible, it is important to use screening tools that have been validated for the population(s) to be screened.

2. STRONG CORE (TIER 1) INSTRUCTION (click [here](#) for *Strong Core Instruction for ELLs – Tier 1*) **is delivered to all students in the general education classroom by qualified educators.** Strengthening classroom instruction (i.e., the instructional *core*), is a key step to supporting ELLs at-risk for or experiencing difficulties, as well as a critical step in fully implementing the RtI model. In many U.S. schools, large numbers of ELLs are showing low academic achievement because the instructional core has not met their needs as learners. Since the RtI model works best, and serves the greatest number of students, when the instructional core is tailored to the needs of the classroom population, it holds particular promise in settings with high numbers of ELLs. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) provides five interrelated instructional principles for teachers of linguistically diverse populations. By following these principles and teaching rigorous academic content, educators can create high-quality instructional environments that foster academic success.

- ✦ *Teachers and Students Producing Together.* Collaboration in the service of jointly constructing knowledge provides students with opportunities to positively engage with one another and with their teacher around rigorous academic content. Such interactions boost academic development and academic motivation.
- ✦ *Developing Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum.* Language development at all levels should be fostered through purposeful, deliberate conversation between teacher and students, and among students. Reading and writing must be both taught as specific curricula, and integrated into each content area.
- ✦ *Making Lessons Meaningful.* Teachers should leverage students' funds of knowledge and skills as a foundation for new knowledge. Quality core instruction necessarily links students' background knowledge and daily lives to the content at hand, and provides experiences that show abstract concepts drawn from, and applied to, the everyday world.

- ✦ *Teaching Complex Thinking.* As is the case with all learners, ELLs require instruction that is cognitively challenging. Teachers should target academically rigorous and challenging instructional goals, while simultaneously providing students with the instructional supports they need to achieve success.
- ✦ *Teaching through Conversation.* Building students' abilities to form, express, and exchange ideas is best achieved through dialogue, questioning, and sharing ideas and knowledge. In these instructional conversations, the teacher listens carefully, makes guesses about intended meaning, and adjusts responses to assist students' efforts.

3. INTENSIVE, TARGETED INTERVENTION is provided to support ELLs who are not showing sufficient progress on the skills and/or competencies measured. ELLs receive instructional interventions that utilize strategies that are research-based with ELLs¹ (Klingner, Soltero-González, & Lesaux, 2010). Teams considering ELLs' progress should utilize a problem-solving process and a body of evidence to make decisions. For ELLs, the documentation analyzed should include:

- ✦ an explanation of how instruction was differentiated to address native and second language concerns and cultural differences
- ✦ a description of the amount and type of ESL instruction
- ✦ an understanding of whether or not native language support was used
- ✦ a description of the amount and type of native language instruction (as appropriate)
- ✦ an identification of instructional areas (specific skills and competencies) that need further, more intense intervention (Tiers 2 and 3), and:
- ✦ the extent, if any, to which ESL instruction and/or native language instruction is needed during Tiers 2 and 3 interventions to ensure the student will benefit from the intervention

4. PROGRESS MONITORING informs how at-risk students are responding to instruction. Progress monitoring data is used to make educational decisions about changes in goals, instruction, and/or services; as well as whether to consider a referral for special education services. When progress is monitored, the expected rate of an ELL's progress takes into account language development and background. The student's progress is then compared with levels demonstrated by peers from comparable cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds who have received the same or comparable intervention.

When monitoring ELLs' progress, the following should be kept in mind:

- ✦ When most students are not thriving, this is a systemic issue; it is likely that general education—Tier 1 or the instructional core—is ineffective and/or inappropriate.
- ✦ Teachers and school leaders can use data to determine when it is necessary to adjust instruction for *all* ELLs (i.e., the instructional core).

- ✦ If instruction is being provided in both the native language and English, assessments are conducted in each language.
- ✦ Knowledge of typical second language development and the student's history of first and second language (e.g., educational background) is considered when setting benchmarks and interpreting progress.
- ✦ When evaluating instructional programs for students, it is important to gauge achievement levels for the site's overall population and for particular groups (i.e., ELLs) using outcome assessments designed for these purposes (Lesaux & Marietta, 2011). This helps determine the effectiveness of the school's program(s), and gives an indication of how individual students are doing compared to their local and national peers.

In Summary

At a time when there are significant concerns about placement of ELLs in special education services and disproportionality, there are several important features of the RtI system that hold promise for meeting academically at-risk ELLs' needs:

- ✦ The purpose of RtI has shifted away from only serving as a special education pre-evaluation to a more focused problem-solving model that aims at prevention of inappropriate referrals and early intervention through tiered layers of instructional support.
- ✦ All students, including ELLs, are only evaluated for special education when they do not respond to effective and rigorous instruction, or additional intervention that is:
 1. provided with increasing intensity
 2. culturally and linguistically responsive.
- ✦ In serving ELLs, the first focus should be on improving the quality of core instruction and making sure that most students have ongoing, high-quality opportunities-to-learn and are succeeding.

When an ELL seems to be struggling, we ask the following questions to devise a plan for the student's improvement:

- ✦ What is the instruction this child has already received, including in what language, and what were the results?
 - We ask this question about all levels of instruction (Tiers 1, 2, and 3).
- ✦ How can we support the teacher with some new research-based ideas to deliver effective (core/Tier I) instruction?
- ✦ How can we further adjust the Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to help the student overcome his/her difficulties?
- ✦ How can we partner with the family to benefit teaching and learning?
- ✦ Are there other factors we can influence, such as motivation?

If a student demonstrates persistent difficulties and challenges despite additional, high-quality instructional supports and interventions (Tiers 2 and 3) provided over a suitable period of time, there is a need to be addressed. Practitioners then must conduct a comprehensive, multidisciplinary evaluation to [determine](#) if a student requires [special education services](#) (click [here](#) for *Assessment and Evaluation for Special Education – Tiers 2 and 3*).

APPENDIX

Table 1. Misconceptions and Realities about the Language Acquisition Process¹

To build a strong multi-tiered instructional model that is culturally and linguistically responsive, several common misconceptions around the second language acquisition process should be addressed. Supporting ELLs’ learning, demands that educators have a basic understanding of the theories of language acquisition, and how the intersection of language and learning influences ELLs’ academic development. The following table highlights some common misconceptions and realities, and their implications.

Misconception	Reality	Implications
<i>Bilingualism means equal proficiency in both languages.</i>	Bilingualism rarely means equal proficiency in both languages.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ELLs include students with a wide range of proficiencies in their home languages and English, with varying levels of bilingualism. 2. Bilingual students may be stronger in their home languages in some areas, and stronger in other areas in English.
<i>“Semilingualism” is a valid concept and “non-non” classifications, which indicate children are limited in their home language and limited in English (based on test results), are useful categories.</i>	Semilingualism and non-non categories are the results of tests that do not measure the full range and depth of language proficiencies for ELLs (who acquire two languages simultaneously).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The vast majority of children begin school having acquired the syntactic and morphological rules of the languages of their families/communities. 2. Current language assessment measures rarely capture the full range of skills that bilingual children bring to the classroom. 3. Classifying students as “limited-limited” or “non-non” is not useful because it does not guide teachers as to what students know or need to learn; instead, it encourages teachers to have low expectations. 4. Other forms of authentic assessment should be used to determine language proficiency levels of ELLs, including natural language samples.
<i>Most ELLs in U.S. schools</i>	The majority of ELLs in U.S.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The learning trajectories of simultaneous

¹ Note: Adapted from Klingner, Almanza de Schonewise, de Onis, Méndez Barletta, & Hoover (2008).

<i>are “sequential” bilinguals (meaning that they acquire one language at home first and then add another language later).</i>	schools are “simultaneous” bilinguals, acquiring two languages at once.	bilingual students are different from those of monolingual students. 2. Rather than comparing simultaneous bilingual students with monolingual students as if they are “two monolinguals in one,” they should be compared with other simultaneous bilinguals.
<i>The more time students spend receiving English literacy instruction (immersion), the faster they will learn to read in English.</i>	A student who receives some home language literacy instruction achieves at higher levels in English reading than a student who does not receive reading instruction in his home language.	1. Instruction in English and interactions with English speakers are important, but not enough to provide the optimal support for ELLs to be able to fully participate in classroom learning and achieve to their potential. 2. Skills developed in students’ native language transfer to English, particularly when teachers help students make connections across languages. 3. Students acquire English when they receive input that is understandable (i.e. by using language in context, providing background knowledge, using visual and context cues, clarifying vocabulary).
<i>Errors are problematic and should be avoided.</i>	“Errors” are a positive sign that the student is making progress and are a necessary aspect of second language acquisition.	1. Errors can be useful clues to understanding students’ interlanguages and can be a sign of progress. 2. Errors such as confusion with verb tenses, plurals, possessives, word order, subject/verb agreement, and the use of articles are common among ELLs and should not be interpreted as signifying that a student has a disability. 3. Code-switching is common among bilingual individuals around the world and should not be considered a sign of confusion.
<i>ELLs are not ready to engage in higher level thinking until they learn basic skills.</i>	ELLs are equally capable to engage in higher level thinking as fully proficient peers.	1. Instruction and practice at every grade level must provide frequent opportunities for ELLs to engage in higher level thinking. 2. Instruction should ensure that ELLs of all proficiency levels have multiple entry points to access content.
<i>All ELLs learn English in the same way and at about the same rate.</i>	The length of time it takes students to acquire academic language in English varies a great deal, from four to seven years or more.	1. Many different variables affect the language acquisition process. 2. Even when ELLs appear to be quite proficient in English, they may not yet have acquired full academic proficiency. 3. The reasons for an ELL’s struggles when learning to read are more likely to relate to the language acquisition process than a disability.

¹ E.F. Klingner, J.K., Soltero-González, S., & Lesaux, N.K. (2010). RTI for English-language learners. In M.Y. Lipson & K.K. Wixson (eds.) *Successful approaches to RTI: Collaborative practices for improving K-12 literacy*. International Reading Association.