Dear Colleagues,

As you know, since July 2012, the New York State Education Department has required public schools to use Response to Intervention (RTI) in grades K-4; because of how our schools are structured, in New York City RTI is implemented in all grades, K-5. As you continue to develop your RTI structures and refine your expertise in how best to differentiate instruction for your students, ELLs included, we at the Office of ELLs would like to continue to support you by providing additional guidance as to how best to maximize this model with your diverse ELL population.

During past 18 months, OELL has offered school teams several intensive *ELLs in RTI* institutes. As a result of what we learned during these sessions, we created a reference document that highlights some of the most frequent questions you had around RTI and ELLs.

The core of RTI is research-based instruction for all students; this is why we partnered with nationally renowned researchers in the field of literacy and language development to create the following document. The Office of ELLs offers special thanks to Dr. Nonie Lesaux (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and Dr. Janette Klingner (University of Colorado at Boulder) for their guidance and work on this project.

We hope that you will find our document to be a valuable tool – one that provides you with information about how to support your ELLs under the RTI structure, how to design research based instruction that is linguistically and culturally appropriate for ELLs, how to best use assessments to guide daily instruction (Tier1), and how best to design instructional routines and interventions in Tiers 2 and 3.

Cordially,

A. Infante

Angelica Infante
Chief Executive Officer
Office of English Language Learners

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 # 2: RtI Infrastructure – Coordinating a Team and Organizing Stakeholders
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RtI Infrastructure – Coordinating a Team and Organizing Stakeholders

With the principles and practices of general education and special education coming together, the RtI process involves many different individuals and requires significant leadership and collaboration. When RtI is functioning effectively, professionals' roles expand and adapt to implement interventions, monitor progress, and make data-based decisions, all with linguistic diversity in mind.

RtI works when teams and school leaders create a culture of sharing data, thinking objectively about struggling students, and discussing quality of instruction within each tier. Most successful models use grade-level planning meetings for examining, interpreting, and sharing data. Although team members should create a problem-solving perspective, these students are not problems; they are the responsibility of all those involved.

RtI Implementation and ELLs: a Team-Based Strategy

Special attention is needed when implementing the RtI model with the ELL population, particularly in coordinating the various stakeholders who regularly work with and support ELLs. To begin crafting a strategy, administrators need to bring together invested key players and generate a team. Leaders would be smart to carefully consider the team's composition; members should be diverse (however you define it) and respected by their peers. The people on the team should be "nodes" in the professional network of the building, and the process of deciding who is on the team must be perceived as fair and transparent. One possible team combination is a teacher from every grade level, a parent, and key supporting staff members (e.g., ESL teacher, reading specialist, bilingual teacher, and social worker). Teams should stay together a minimum of 2 years to dispel the response that this is yet another initiative, and to recognize the fact that more than one year will be necessary to get things well off the ground.

Who's Involved in RtI and in What Way?

There are many individuals involved in the implementation of an effective RtI model. As you consider the members of your team and your RtI model more generally, bear in mind that individuals can provide diverse guidance and input as members of the team, as well as participating in any RtI-related decisions by consulting and/or meeting with the team along the way. Key information about a child and/or the instructional context, in the service of improved teaching and learning, is the basis for the RtI process. Use the lists below to determine how members of the school community can help as you plan to implement RtI effectively.

Administrator Support

Administrators are essential for communicating a shared vision of RtI at the school, and for providing practitioners with the tools they need to collaborate. Having an administrator who is actively involved in the RtI process on many levels is an essential component. Leaders should:

- design the school's model
- provide logistical support (time and organizational structures as well as materials and assessments) for implementing RtI. Specifically, this support must afford educators with built-in time to collaboratively analyze data, problem-solve, and plan. It should also include relevant and ongoing professional development. Have frequent communication with teachers, students, and parents about student progress.

Overall, leaders are charged with spearheading the RtI effort by sharing data, addressing needs, and celebrating successes.

Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers play a central role in implementing a successful model. Teachers' responsibilities include:

- using high-quality research-based instruction that is differentiated for ELLs
- understanding how to collect data, monitor ongoing progress, and collaborate with colleagues in making student decisions based on the data collected
- sharing their knowledge of student performance in the context of the regular classroom, as well as their expertise in the classroom content and grade-level skills
- maximizing student potential by sharing insights into the student's home life, family background, and interests that affect decision-making

Reading Interventionists/Specialists

The reading specialist also has an essential role in the RtI process, providing both expertise and leadership. Specifically, reading specialists , and/ or trained, knowledgeable, and skilled school personnel, should:

- provide all Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, as recommended by the International Reading Association (2009)
- share knowledge in the key areas of reading research, development, and teaching methodology
- help clarify appropriate reading goals
- oversee progress monitoring
- help interpret assessment data
- serve as a resource for literacy practices
- assume a key role coaching teachers in literacy instruction
- share knowledge of how second language literacy instruction differs from first language instruction, and discuss common challenges ELLs may encounter
- lead the school-wide implementation of RtI

ELL/Bilingual Specialists

ELL and bilingual specialists have specialized expertise about language and literacy development, how to use assessment tools and techniques, and how to use effective instructional practices for ELLs. As a result, it is essential that the ELL/bilingual specialist be included in the RtI decision-making process. As a result of this knowledge, their roles should include:

- clarifying needs associated with second language acquisition
- providing evidence for differences between learning differences and disabilities
- putting RtI data into a cultural context
- modeling effective instructional strategies for classroom teachers (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988)
- assisting with culturally responsive assessment practices

Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers have expertise regarding how to support struggling students. As a result, they have critical roles to play in consulting, collaborating, and supporting as a school takes part in the RtI process, even when students are not being considered for special education. In some schools, intervention teachers and special educators work side-by-side to provide supplemental intervention to all students experiencing difficulty, whether or not they

have an IEP. In other models, the special education teacher only works directly with students with IEPs, but serves on the RtI decision-making team and consults with classroom teachers regarding effective intervention methods. More specifically, special educators should assist in:

- interpreting data
- setting appropriate student goals
- ensuring appropriate referral procedures
- supporting targeted classroom instruction

Other Personnel

School psychologists, social workers, and speech language pathologist (SLP) also have important roles in the decision-making process:

- Psychologists need to have training and knowledge about comprehensive measurement and assessment tools for ELLs, and how to interpret the data acquired through those measures.
- Social workers need to use their specialized skills to incorporate families into the process, and help the rest of the RtI team to understand the home and community factors influencing a student's learning.
- SLPs' expertise in language development is beneficial in understanding the differences between first and second language acquisition.

Parents and Families

Parents and families have invaluable knowledge to share about their child's previous schooling experiences, and language experiences. They can:

- provide insight into their cultural values and norms, as well as interactions with community members and experiences outside of school
- help plan learning and behavior goals that are appropriate for their children, based on cultural norms

Strong Core Instruction for ELLs – Tier 1

The foundation of RtI for ELLs is high-quality core, or Tier 1, instruction focused on promoting language and literacy development. Only once a rigorous, effective instructional core is in place—one that targets the student population's needs on a daily basis as part of a long-term plan—can we begin to build interventions that will serve as truly supplemental and supportive instruction. Unfortunately, some ELLs are taught in contexts with insufficient opportunities to learn; this kind of environment is also known as a "disabling context" (see Tiers 2, 3). To prevent such inadequate learning opportunities, strong core instruction must be the norm. This guide provides a reference for instructional strategies that support differentiated, Tier 1 instruction to promote ELLs' literacy development.

The guide focuses specifically on:

- developing different key domains of literacy, to support competencies in reading, writing, listening, and speaking
- presenting instruction that makes direct and appropriate connections to ELLs' community values, identities, and languages[1]

In combination, this high-quality core literacy instruction is necessarily culturally and linguistically responsive.

Part I. Key Literacy Domains

Oral Language: The Underpinning of Learning and Knowledge

Why this focus?

Core literacy instruction should build on and expand students' existing oral language competencies to support literacy learning and content knowledge. We know from research that English oral language proficiency is closely related to academic achievement in English. Without well-developed oral language, ELLs cannot readily handle the language and knowledge demands

[1] adapted from Klingner, Soltero-González, & Lesaux, 2010

of the school curriculum—a curriculum that is delivered almost exclusively through oral and written language—especially as they move up through the grades.

But large-scale observational research carried out in linguistically diverse schools tells us that systematic instruction focused on oral language is limited. For example, research in high-minority, high-poverty schools[2] finds that early elementary classrooms devote only 8-11% of the reading block to vocabulary development. This minimal focus on vocabulary and language development is mirrored in a similar study, also conducted in a large urban school district, documenting practices in secondary classrooms[3]. With this research in mind, we know that extending and strengthening oral language instruction in classrooms serving ELLs will require a considerable, but very necessary, shift in practice.

What does oral language instruction look like?

Building students' oral language skills means teaching specialized vocabulary (and the often-abstract concepts such words represent), as well as the specialized structures of language in academic speech and text—often referred to as elements of *academic language*. Accessing middle and high school textbooks demands a knowledge of academic language. Building such conceptual and language skills is essential for ELLs to succeed in school.

Core instruction that promotes oral language development is necessarily rich in both language and content. In these learning environments, students have opportunities to learn about, study, and discuss the language of texts. They then use this text-based content learning in interactive experiences like labs, demonstrations, dramatic plays, and debates that promote academic conversation and knowledge building.

Strategies that promote ELLs' oral language development must be explicitly planned and incorporated throughout the school day. These strategies include, but are not limited to:

- building background knowledge:
    - starting with rich text and big ideas so students encounter and study abstract language and abstract concepts, and learn about the world
    - previewing key concepts and challenging vocabulary, as well as reviewing students' understanding of important points
    - when possible, drawing on and using students' home languages
- close, interactive reading aloud (Click here for an example):
    - frontload vocabulary, sentence structures, and concepts

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[2] Gamse and colleagues (2008)
[3] Lesaux et al.

    - ask open-ended questions along the way; engage students in discussion and dialogue about a big idea in the text
    - include relevant multicultural literature as well as multicultural chants, songs, and poems that help to build phonemic awareness
- storytelling using wordless books
- collaborative discussion and debate:
    - devote instructional planning and time to student projects that are discussion-based, including oral presentations and debates
    - during discussions, pose open-ended questions and keep the conversation going
- role playing and rehearsed oral performance
- multifaceted and intensive vocabulary instruction:
    - study words, word parts, and word families as part of the content-based literacy instruction; build words and knowledge at the same time; include a focus on words with multiple meanings
    - include vocabulary learning strategies such as using visual cues, total physical response (TPR; i.e., physically acting out new terms), and realia
- sentence transformations through guided dialogue
- language frames for speaking and listening
- jointly constructed extended writing:
    - e.g., co-constructing a written text based on a shared classroom experience
    - connecting writing assignments to content under study; supporting
- explicit connections to community and content

Written Language: The Gold Standard

Why this focus?

Writing skills play an increasingly important role in determining students' school and professional success, but developing advanced written language skills can be a particular challenge for ELLs. This challenge is due, in part, to the type and quality of writing instruction students receive. In fact, large-scale survey research indicates that many teachers report feeling under-prepared to effectively teach writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Kiuhara, Graham & Hawken, 2009).

What does written language instruction look like?

Whether students already know how to write in their home languages, or whether they are in the early stages of English writing development, instruction should be adjusted to refine and expand their competencies, and to help them acquire the academic writing skills they need in the content areas. Quality writing instruction during the classroom literacy core should be

sustained and extended (e.g., developing extended research pieces, essays, and stories), so that it is continually linked to oral language and reading instruction.

Strategies for promoting ELLs' written language development during the instructional core include the following:

- connect the ways in which students and their families use literacy at home and in the community (e.g., topics, styles, and cultural knowledge) with classroom writing themes
- provide different types of writing tools in the classroom
- promote different types of writing purposes, genres, and formats
- model writing activities using the language experience approach:
    - Write students' dictations about a shared classroom experience. Use the text produced from students' dictations as the basis for refining students' writing abilities.
- guide students' early writing by co-constructing predictable and rhythmic books (e.g., poetry, rhyme, and patterned language books)
- use writing in the service of deep text analysis, perhaps in tandem with literature circles
- interact with students (and have students interact with each other) through written communications:
    - For example, use dialogue journals. These journals are written conversations between the teacher and individual students. Although the purpose of dialogue journals is not to correct students' errors, it is recommended to recast them and use the correct model in your responses as a way to advance students' language proficiency.
- model language structures when jointly writing texts:
    - This method can be used to generate books for the classroom library such as modified patterned language books, stories for wordless picture books, recipe books, and scripts for readers' theater.
- teach the writing process (i.e., developing ideas, writing them down, getting feedback, editing, producing the final draft, and publishing):
    - During the first stages of the process, focus writing instruction on communication and meaning construction, as opposed to mechanics and correctness. Many ELLs may struggle with editing their own writings when correctness obscures the expression of meaning and the development of complex ideas.
    - During the latter stages of the process (i.e., editing, producing the final draft, and publishing) support ELLs as they edit their own writings. Try using writing rubrics and the traits model to guide students. Bear in mind, most writing rubrics do not account for the bilingual strategies that ELLs often use when they write. Encourage ELLs to focus on conventions (e.g., spelling, grammar) as the last step in the editing process.

    - Celebrate writing! Have students read their finished works aloud for their peers as each takes a turn sharing their writing during their writing celebration. Be sure to incorporate appropriate social, cultural, and linguistic adaptations.
- integrate oral language and vocabulary instruction into writing instruction by having students:
    - verbalize their thinking before putting it into writing, and share aloud after they have both thought and written about the topic
    - use new vocabulary and language structures in their writing

Word Reading and Spelling Skills: Word Work in Context

Why this focus?

Reading and writing words requires an awareness of the individual sounds in spoken words, knowledge of letter-sound relationships, decoding skills, and sight-word knowledge. Thus, word reading and spelling skills are platforms for both unlocking the message of a text and communicating through written language. Although effective reading comprehension and writing cannot be achieved through proficient word reading and spelling skills alone, they are certainly necessary for literacy success and thus are key components of culturally and linguistically responsive core instruction.

What does word reading and spelling instruction look like?

All efforts should be made to teach word-reading and spelling in interactive ways, and within the context of reading and writing activities, rather than in isolation. After all, for these skills to give reading and writing meaning, they need to be continuously linked to the context in which they will be used. The following are examples of word work activities that researchers have found effective when used with ELLs. These strategies are organized by three key components of reading and spelling skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight words.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate the phonemes or sounds in spoken words. When designing phonemic awareness instruction for ELLs, first identify what students already know in their home languages *and* in English. Then, provide explicit instruction to students with low levels of phonemic awareness (once a student has developed this skill, he does not require explicit instruction). Research shows that many activities that work well with monolingual learners should also help ELLs, including:

- singing songs
- reciting rhymes
- reading and rereading poems and books with rhythmic patterns
- making up alliterative sentences

- playing word games in which students manipulate sounds and syllables

When promoting ELLs' phonemic awareness, bear in mind that enhancing this skill in a student's home language can facilitate the skill in English.

Phonics is the understanding of sound-symbol correspondence. When ELLs have learned to read in another language first, the process of learning to read in English is facilitated. This facilitation can be particularly useful when the orthographic systems of the two languages are similar (such as Spanish and Portuguese) but can be more challenging when they are not (such as French and Japanese). Research shows many activities that work well with monolingual learners should also help ELLs develop phonics skills. Such activities include integrating the following practices into a rich unit of study:

- creating student-generated word lists with specific rhymes (e.g., night, flight, bright)
- sorting words according to their spelling patterns
- identifying rhymes during shared or independent reading
- searching for familiar letters and letter combinations in texts
- using letter cards, rhymes cards, and/or magnetic letters to build and break apart words

Sight words are the most commonly used words in English and, as such, readers encounter them frequently. Many of these words have irregular spelling patterns (e.g., said, where, the). When teaching ELLs sight words, teachers should connect instruction to books read in the classroom. Teachers can help ELLs recognize sight words with accuracy and efficiency using strategies including, but not limited to, the following:

- building words using magnetic letters or letter cards
- creating sight-word books
- rereading short, familiar texts
- creating an interactive word wall

Fluency: Reading with Ease, Not Racing Through Reading

Why this focus?

Fluency is the ability to read accurately and efficiently while maintaining meaningful phrasing. Bear in mind, fluency should not be confused with accent. Students can read fluently in English with a Spanish language accent, for example. Because fluent reading frees up the cognitive space needed to make meaning from text, culturally and linguistically responsive core instruction should include activities that promote this key reading skill.

What does reading fluency instruction look like?

Like word reading and spelling activities, it is important to build students' fluency in meaningful and relevant ways. Activities that build ELLs' reading fluency are appropriate for a wide range of students, including non-ELLs, so teachers can use them frequently, and can involve all of the students in class. Strategies such as the following will help build fluency:

- modeled fluent, expressive reading
- shared reading of big books and other shared texts
- repeated reading
- readers' theater
- choral reading
- partner reading
- reading along with audio books
- recording reading

Reading Comprehension: Putting it all Together

Why this focus?

For all readers—including ELLs—reading comprehension is a multifaceted process that requires a number of separate, but related, competencies. Comprehension is facilitated by fluent word reading, but it is not guaranteed by it. Instead, comprehension requires a mastery of a range of abilities as well as the knowledge necessary for both extracting and making meaning from text. Some of the challenges that ELLs may face in reading comprehension are related to language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and use of comprehension strategies.

What does reading comprehension instruction look like?

Providing instruction that enhances ELLs' reading comprehension means building background knowledge, highlighting key vocabulary, and interacting socially to make meaning. Strategies for building reading comprehension include, but are not limited to:

- reading thematically related texts, across genres (i.e., text sets):
    - reading aloud, modeled and shared reading
- modified guided reading (select books according to stage of development):
    - use guided reading format to model and build the multiple components of reading comprehension (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, word-reading skills, comprehension monitoring)

- reciprocal teaching (i.e., the teacher models using reading strategies when reading aloud, then leads students in a text-related discussion. As students become more proficient at applying the strategies, they take turns leading discussions about text content.)
- scaffolded retelling (i.e., students share and compare their retellings of text and provide feedback at the whole story level, at the phrase and individual word levels, and back to the whole story level; students use visual cues such as graphic organizers to clarify and consolidate their thinking.)
- literature circles (i.e., small groups of students who read or listen to the same book—or text set related to the same theme—and meet to discuss their understanding with others.):
    - include quality literature in which the children can see themselves
- reading responses incorporating art, music, drama, poetry

When implementing these reading comprehension activities, be sure to:

- draw on students' existing knowledge
- build students' background knowledge
- focus on key vocabulary [including transition words (e.g., therefore, first, however), content-specific words (e.g., petri dish, robber barons, hypotenuse), and all-purpose academic words (e.g., culture, impact, contribute, research)](e.g.,)]
- ask questions to promote understanding and prompt critical thinking and analysis
- provide students with multiple ways to show what they are understanding and learning (oral, written, role play, drawing)

Comprehension Strategy Instruction: More isn't always better

Comprehension strategy instruction is a part of content and language rich literacy curricula and important for literacy development. But we need to be mindful of how much strategy instruction is part of standard comprehension instruction. Many ELL students have strategies for reading text but lack the knowledge and language to make sense of what they are reading—so their strategies do not help them much. In fact, many ELLs have proficient word reading and good strategies, but also have underdeveloped language, vocabulary, and content knowledge. For this reason, reading comprehension instruction should target their language-learning needs. When vocabulary and content knowledge are similarly well-developed, their reading strategies will be much more useful to support comprehension.

Part II. Connecting to ELLs' Home and Community Identities and Languages

Making Learning Meaningful

Why this focus?

ELLs' home and community literacy practices and funds of knowledge should be valued as resources for literacy learning at school. Devising activities and projects that are related to students' lives at home or in their neighborhoods is likely to increase students' motivation and literacy success.

How do I make connections between ELLs' home/community and classroom learning?

This aspect of literacy instruction should permeate all of the above domains. Strategies for connecting school learning to students' homes and communities include, but are not limited to:

- storytelling about family and neighborhoods:
  - try compiling these stories in a book for the classroom library. They can include realistic elements like photographs and excerpts of interviews with family members.
- autobiographies and personal narratives:
  - try incorporating this writing project into a social studies unit
- books created in the home language (written, audio-taped):
  - try reading them with similar language background peers
- letters to family and friends (including those who live far away)
- research projects in the local community
- lessons or units that draw from students' local literacy practices and knowledge
- instructional classroom visits from family and community members who share knowledge and experiences; connect these conversations to content learning

Bilingualism as Resource

Why this focus?

ELLs draw on what they know about their home languages to learn to read and write in English. In other words, a student's home language is a scaffold around, or a "bootstrap" into, English. Students who capitalize on cross-language transfer learn to read and write in English more easily than students who do not use this strategy. There are many skills and much

knowledge that can transfer from a home language to English, and thus do not need to be re-taught. [e.g., vocabulary (cognates, or words that look similar in two or more languages and have similar meanings, such as democracy and *democracia*), print awareness and concepts of print, sound-letter correspondence, comprehension strategies, and background knowledge.] Knowledge of what literacy-related skills and experiences ELLs have in their home languages allows teachers to build on students' strengths and needs, promote metalinguistic awareness, and encourage this type of language and knowledge bootstrapping.

How do I make connections between ELLs' home language and English?

Teachers should help and encourage ELLs to identify similarities and differences between their two languages and apply them to learning to read and write in English. There is no need to re-teach children what they already know. Teaching for cross-language connections should be done throughout the day and across the curriculum. Some ways to promote it include:

- identifying cognates in books read, and creating a word wall with these examples
- highlighting the similarities and differences between the home language and English in relation to syntax, spelling, text structure, and punctuation
- using students' home languages to build background knowledge by previewing key concepts and challenging vocabulary, as well as reviewing key concepts – all in native languages when possible
- reading bilingual books to point out parallels and contrasts between the two languages (e.g., tone, text structure, word choice)

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Action

Digging deeper: Linking Language and Learning to Big Ideas

Miss Leslie's kindergarten class is studying a unit about things that grow. She and the children are just wrapping up a discussion about the similarities between sprouting plants on the nearby shelf and those in the book, *The Ugly Vegetable*. Using content-rich language, she then reminds her 5-year-olds about center time. "If you choose to go to the science table to make compost for our worm habitat, don't forget to add the leftover carrot sticks from the soup we cooked yesterday." Joseph waves his raised hand, indicating his choice. The science table is Joseph's favorite and Miss Leslie finds it is where he does some of his best learning. While Joseph makes his way toward the worm habitat and the other students walk to their chosen centers, Miss Leslie sits down in the writing area. Meeting with the students there, she uses questioning strategies she and her colleagues have been focused on as part of their ongoing professional development. Miss Leslie then joins Joseph and his peers who are mashing carrots, leaves, and soil together. She grabs the book on the table, *Wiggling Worms at Work*, and engages the students: "Hmm. What information do we still need about worms? What other questions do we have?..."

Revolutionary Instruction: Linking Language and Learning to Big Ideas

"Whoa, she cut a bullet out of her leg!" Javonne, a 4th grader, is amazed as he reads *The Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson*. "That's extraordinary. How does that violate what people used to think about women?" Ms. McCombs asks. She watches as Javonne's head turns toward the academic word wall, looking for a reminder of the definition of *violate*. Ms. McCombs had incorporated ideas from the reading curriculum into all of her teaching, including suggestions for using academic vocabulary in all contexts. As a result, Javonne and his classmates had become accustomed to referencing the word-wall resource throughout the day. During this unit on the American Revolution, the students have been studying the historical period from multiple angles and opening up opportunities to build language. During reader's workshop, the students have been examining biographies, learning about influential American colonists, and having discussions in-character about entering the war. During social studies, they have been learning about the key events and figures, and have had mock debates about whether to join the British, or fight against them. A writing project will conclude the unit; their task will be to write a biography, integrating information from multiple sources and weaving in some of the words they have studied along the way. Ms. McCombs will use these compositions to assess her students' ability to synthesize research in writing and their understanding of the academic words. She'll then present these data at the upcoming cluster meeting, where conversations about the literacy curriculum materials have been a great help during this first year with the program. Javonne's teacher holds her tongue, giving him a moment to process her question about the bullet wound and construct an answer. He responds: "Um, that goes against, I mean, that *violates*…"

The Language of Math

Frustrated by how much their ELL students were struggling with various math concepts, a group of teachers went to the students' homes and spoke with the students' parents. Amidst the lively Hawaiian Creole conversations between parents and children, the teachers noted that the children did, indeed, have mathematical knowledge; they just needed a new way to access the harder concepts that had been too difficult to understand in class. The teachers rearranged lesson plans, building on the math knowledge that they witnessed and organizing class work so the concepts taught first were the ones that built on students' strengths (e.g., counting rather than vocabulary related to position of objects). After teaching the math vocabulary in Hawaiian Creole, and incorporating activities students were familiar with outside of school (e.g. running a student store to understand money, teachers included cooking activities of native cuisine), the teachers saw dramatic increases in their students' math success. Tapping into student strengths and helped students overcome their weaknesses.

Content-Based Literacy Instruction for Young Readers

Mr. Evans looked forward to teaching her bilingual first graders an integrated social studies/ literacy instruction unit about shelters around the world. He wanted the students to get a feel for what it was really like to live in different places, and he was as excited as they were about the lesson plans. The students researched the reasons why shelters were designed in certain ways, and how the local weather, geography, topography, economy, and other factors affected living arrangements. They designed shelters together and brought items from their homes to furnish them. When the assistant principal, Mrs. Margolis, walked by one day when they were all talking and planning and working throughout every corner of the room, the constant buzzing of voices made her stop and say, "Such fun you're all having! Can I come in?" Later, Mr. Evans and Mrs. Margolis discussed the successful lesson. Mr. Evans said he was pleased with how collaboratively the students had worked in their small groups, and he thought that the volunteers, Spanish- and English-speaking parents who were in the room at the time, helped keep the kids focused and invested in the project (adapted from research by Arce, 2000).

Content-Based Literacy Instruction in the Upper Grades

Ms. Martinez looked around her 5th grade social studies classroom and smiled. Finally, she could see that her focus on helping ELLs better understand the material and engage in the learning process was paying off. From the start of school this year, she had been diligent about including systematic content-specific vocabulary lessons into the daily classroom work. She chose her words intentionally, focusing on upcoming unit vocabulary, but also including the common words in the social studies textbook that the linguistically diverse students struggled with every year. As she walked between the tables, she could hear a usually-reticent ELL student chime in during group work, and she determined that the time spent on defining and giving examples of how to use the novel words, plus the class time she had them devote to review and oral practice, made a real difference for those students she has been most concerned about. In years past, words such as *period*, *community*, and *distribute* would trip up these students, and yet these were words that repeatedly appeared—in some form and in different contexts -- in the reading she was assigning nightly. While their vocabulary needs were great, she felt as if this focus on building knowledge about often abstract words was helping kids better understand the concepts in these difficult pre-selected texts.

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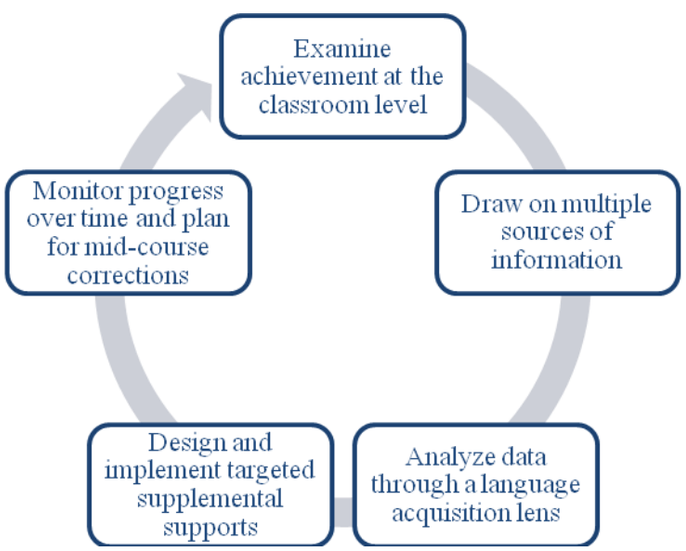
Serving Struggling ELLs: A Step-by-Step Approach

There are many complex factors that influence students' outcomes, including their opportunities to learn; ELLs who are struggling should not necessarily receive special education services. To ensure an accurate identification of student needs, educators and decision-makers need to be aware of common challenges that ELLs may encounter in the areas of literacy development, as well as the similarities and differences between normal language acquisition and a learning disability. When the RtI model is implemented fully and effectively, ELLs are referred for special education assessment and services *only* when they demonstrate insufficient progress over time despite targeted, high-quality classroom-level instruction and additional supplemental supports (such progress is measured against established, outside benchmarks). As such, within the RtI model, there is a systematic approach to determining when struggling ELLs need special education services. For this cohort, educators must determine that the issues presented run beyond those of second language learning and/or opportunities to learn.



1. Examine Achievement at the Classroom Level

The foundation of RtI for ELLs is high quality core, or Tier 1, instruction that is focused on promoting language and literacy development. Only once a rigorous, effective instructional core is in place—one that targets the student population's needs on a daily basis as part of a long-term plan—can we begin to disentangle the appropriateness of instruction for meeting students'

needs from LD. Therefore, in this model, an emphasis is placed on *school contexts* and the quality of instruction.

With this in mind, the first step in the identification process is looking at collective achievement and the effectiveness of the instructional core. Teachers should look at how many ELLs are struggling in their classrooms and their schools. If the majority of ELLs are making little progress and/or underperforming, the teacher should focus on improving core instruction so that it's more rigorous and targeted to student needs. When trying to understand the source of difficulty for a student who is struggling, and to consider how this child's performance aligns with classroom achievement, here are some questions to be asked:

- Are most of the student's peers—especially those with similar profiles— succeeding? (If not, immediately consider overall opportunities to learn in the school setting)
- Are students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds taken into consideration when planning instruction to support language development, content learning, and knowledge building?
- Are learning experiences connected to ELLs' background knowledge? Are ELLs provided with opportunities to work in pairs and small groups, to further develop their language skills and to apply their knowledge?
- Is the ELL students' understanding routinely checked and is this population provided with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways, including their native language, regardless of the type of program they are in (i.e., transitional bilingual education, dual language, or ESL)?
- Do whole class activities reflect the specific English proficiency levels of ELLs in the classroom?
- Do homework assignments match ELLs' current levels of English proficiency and provide additional practice opportunities for what was taught during class time?
- Are key terms, words, idioms, and phrases that ELLs need to learn explicitly taught and clearly displayed?
- Is instruction targeted to, and appropriate for, the student's level of English proficiency and learning needs?
- In what ways could the classroom environment and content be more conducive to student learning?

2. Draw on Multiple Sources of Information

If most English Language Learners in the class *are* thriving, the next step is to examine multiple sources of information regarding the student of concern. It is only with multiple indicators that we can accurately assess a child's risk or source of difficulty and tailor supports to his or her needs. Here, we discuss the need to examine ELLs' background variables, and further consider the multiple components of language and reading.

An ecological approach to information gathering. In order to make accurate decisions about ELLs' sources of difficulties, information from a number of levels must be gathered and examined, specifically: information about the learner, his or her classroom experiences, and his or her home and community context.

A. **Learner characteristics** include language, experiential background, values/norms, higher-order thinking skills, individual learning style, proficiency in both languages, how the students became bilingual (sequentially or simultaneously), content area strengths, and weaknesses in each language.
B. **Classroom experiences** include the ways in which instruction has been implemented with the student. Current classroom characteristics can be assessed though curriculum-based measures, classroom observations, and performance-based assessments.
C. **Home-community characteristics** include home language, adjustment to new environment, and family educational history. Teams can gather student background information through family interviews, review of records, portfolio assessments, and/or home visits.

Measuring the multiple components of reading and language. To identify LD students among the ELL student group, educators need multiple indicators that measure reading and language. It is not enough to simply use one global measure—whether it's a reading comprehension measure, an oral proficiency measure, or an early literacy screener—and deem a child's skills to be "low." Despite the claims of many testing publishers, it is unlikely that any one assessment can *effectively* serve many purposes; in reality, most assessments test one purpose well, especially for ELLs. Yet it is critical to expose students' full profiles as readers and language learners, to shed light on their relative strengths and weaknesses, and to allow for the creation of more appropriate instructional plans when necessary. To gather this crucial information, assessment batteries (preK-12) must include measures of code-based skills (i.e., phonological processing and phonics skills) *and* meaning-based skills such as listening comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and conceptual knowledge.

Second language acquisition is an uneven, developmental process, and therefore ELLs' understanding of different language dimensions will vary at given points in time. This means it is very important to measure the multiple dimensions of language, including:

Key findings from recent developmental science

1: ELLs and monolingual English speakers educated in similar settings develop comparable phonological processing skills, phonics skills, and word reading fluency skills. When an ELL student experiences difficulties with these skills despite appropriate, intensive instruction, the difficulty is most likely *not* due to the child's level of English proficiency.

#2: As they grow up, the most common source of reading difficulty for ELLs is underdeveloped oral language; preventing later difficulties means assessing and targeting language development early.

#3: For many ELLs, text-reading fluency is *not* a reliable indicator of reading comprehension. These findings reinforce the need to supplement text-reading fluency measures with assessments of vocabulary and/or other meaning-based skills.

- grammar/syntax
- morphological skills (understanding word forms and parts)
- semantic skills/vocabulary (understanding the meaning of words and phrases)
- phonological skills and pragmatics (understanding the social rules of communication)

3. Analyze Data through a Language Acquisition Lens

It is important to understand how certain elements of the second language acquisition process compare to learner characteristics associated with LD. While components of language acquisition can seem to mirror LD, they do not necessarily indicate LD. Some of the characteristics are listed in the table below:

Some Similarities Between LD and Language Acquisition	
Behaviors Associated with LD	***Behaviors Related to Acquiring a Second Language***
Difficulty following directions	Difficulty following directions
Difficulty with phonological awareness	Difficulty distinguishing between sounds not in native language
Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence	Confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when different than in native language Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in native language
Difficulty remembering sight words	Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings not understood
Difficulty retelling a story in sequence	May understand more than able to convey in **English**
Confused by figurative language	Confused by figurative language in **English**
Slow to process challenging language	Slow to process challenging **English**
May have poor auditory memory	May have poor auditory memory **in English**
May have difficulty concentrating	May have difficulty concentrating
May seem easily frustrated	May seem easily frustrated

4. Design and Implement Targeted Supplemental Supports

Once the ELL learning profile has been established using multiple indicators and sources of information, the collected data should be used to hone in on specific issues for intervention. An effective and comprehensive approach to promote ELLs' reading development necessarily includes targeted supplemental interventions offered to those who need more support. From the growing research base in this area, it is becoming clear that many intensive small-group interventions deemed effective with populations of monolingual learners are similarly promising for ELLs struggling with early literacy skill development.

5. Monitor Progress over Time

The purpose of progress monitoring is to ensure that instruction is adjusted to meet the needs of individual students and/or classrooms of learners. Once a plan for a struggling reader is in place, and additional supports are underway, it's necessary to use assessments to monitor the effectiveness of the supports, to determine whether a child is making gains as expected, and to ensure that any necessary mid-course corrections are undertaken. As discussed, if a child struggles persistently despite different supplemental approaches, formal evaluation for additional services may be needed (click here for *Assessment and Evaluation for Special Education – Tiers 2 & 3*).

Assessment and Evaluation for Special Education – Tiers 2 and 3

ELLs who have been provided high-quality instruction and research-based interventions through an RtI framework may *still* have trouble demonstrating adequate progress in targeted skills and competencies. These students will undoubtedly be referred to special education. Since there are no tests that can definitively tell us if the student has a learning disability (LD), it is important to gather a lot of information about the student in question. When the information is amassed, determining whether an ELL student has LD is, to a large extent, a process of elimination.

An Ecological Framework for Special Education Referral and Eligibility

Many factors, both individual and external, must be considered and ruled out as possible reasons for a child's struggles. As a result, we take an ecological approach to understanding the source of children's difficulties, including those of ELL students. An ecological model[1] views the importance of learner factors, classroom factors, and home/community factors in meeting the educational needs of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995).

For example, the over-representation of ELLs in special education—many of whom are identified as having LD—is not because they have disabilities, but because they have not received adequate opportunities to learn. Therefore, looking at the quality of instruction they receive is a necessary first step. Some ELLs are taught in contexts with too few opportunities to receive appropriate instruction matched to their needs, and too few opportunities to develop their language/literacy skills—some people call these "disabling contexts" because students' assessment results might qualify them for special education services but the results reflect inadequate opportunities to learn (click here for *Strong Core Instruction for ELLs – Tier 1*).

Determining Special Education Needs for Struggling ELLs

Whether or not an ELL student is going to be evaluated for special education services should be a decision made after a thorough analysis of the student's situation. We cannot, for example, distinguish between LD and language acquisition without first making sure that ELLs are receiving adequate opportunities to learn. We also cannot determine whether ELLs have LD without looking into their classrooms and comparing how they are doing with their peers. Going through the process of better understanding a student's full range of regular learning opportunities does, however, uncover gaps that need to be addressed (click here for *RtI Infrastructure – Coordinating a Team & Organizing Stakeholders*).

In some schools, despite well-intentioned teachers working with carefully constructed lesson plans, ELLs receive inadequate instruction both in classroom settings and in support sessions. Often this mismatch is caused by a lack of attention to a student's language proficiency,

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[1] [1] The ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995) supports the understanding of child development as a shared function of environmental influences (i.e. parents, teachers, neighbors) and child characteristics. The model is useful for considering direct and indirect environmental influences on developmental, or learning outcomes, including influences outside of the immediate context (e.g. the classroom).

or a missed opportunity to build on student background knowledge. When, instead, educators connect instruction to students' home lives and create accessible instruction that starts in contexts that students know well, there are fewer teacher recommendations for further RtI support and special education (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). As educators understand the role that English language learning plays in academic development, students' learning opportunities are greater and more effective.

To begin the improvement process, teachers should look at how many ELLs are struggling in their classrooms. If the majority of ELLs are making little progress, the teacher should focus on improving the core instruction. If most ELLs are doing well and only a few are struggling, the teacher should look more closely at what is going on with those individual students and consider that they may need additional targeted support. When a child shows signs of struggling, the first step should be to observe in her classroom. Teachers should ask the following questions:

- Is instruction targeted to and appropriate for the student's level of English proficiency and learning needs?
- Is instruction of high quality?
- Does the classroom environment seem conducive to learning?
- Are most of the student's classroom and/or grade-level peers succeeding?
- Is the student's cultural and linguistic background taken into consideration when planning the instruction?

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

- Is consideration given to the child's **cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, educational** and **experiential** background?
- Are multiple assessments used?
- What tasks *can* the student perform and in what contexts?
- Does the student differ from classroom and/or grade-level peers in rate and level of learning?
- Are the child's parents involved as valued partners? What is their perspective?

Draw on Multiple *Sources* of Information Using Multiple Tools

As is true for all students, but especially for ELLs given the complexity of second (or even third) language acquisition, it is important that practitioners draw on data from multiple sources to inform decisions, and that multiple tools are used to uncover critical information.

To begin, educators need to be aware of common challenges that ELLs may encounter in the areas of literacy development, and be knowledgeable about the similarities and differences

between typical language acquisition and a learning disability. Interestingly, we know that ELLs with LD exhibit difficulties in their first language as well as in English. Considering how a student became bilingual can also be helpful in more fully understanding a student's needs. When students are sequential bilinguals (having learned one language and now learning another), it is not hard to determine whether difficulties are evident in both languages. When students are simultaneous bilinguals (learning two languages at the same time), it is much more challenging to determine if difficulties are the result of language acquisition or LD.

Consideration of Influencing Factors

To uncover the many factors influencing educational outcomes for an ELL student, there are different categories of information to analyze. RtI problem-solving teams must ensure the collection of data in these areas (Hoover, 2009):

I. Learner characteristics

A. ***What we're looking for***: Language background, acculturation, educational and experiential background, values/norms, and higher-order thinking skills.
What we use*:* Family interviews, review of records, portfolio assessments, and home visits. For example, a student might be demonstrating difficulties that are not related to LD or opportunities to learn, but instead to a physical (e.g., blood sugar levels, vision problems), social (e.g., bullying), or emotional (e.g., anxiety) issue that must be addressed.

B. ***What we're looking for:*** Students' academic strengths and weaknesses.
What we use*:* Curriculum-based measures and other formative measures (e.g., end of unit test, running record), classroom observations, and standardized assessments with external benchmarks.

C. ***What we're looking for****:* Proficiency in both languages.
What we use*:* Language samples, running records, and if available, standardized measures with external benchmarks in the native language.

II. Classroom and school characteristics

A. ***What we're looking for*:** Areas of instructional strengths and weaknesses as well as the match between instruction and students' needs.
***What we use*:** Classroom observations—with attention to time allocation and amount of rigorous instruction targeted to address student needs—and classroom-and school-level trends in student data.

Spotlight on multiple indicators of progress

Because no one assessment can offer a complete and accurate picture of a child's learning profile, within an assessment battery, different types of testing tools are needed and each tool serves a clear and specific purpose. Gathering many types of information is especially important for ELLs because many common standardized assessments were not normed with this population. While it is essential to use assessments with an external benchmark when investigating an ELL's sources of difficulty, these should be supplemented with other types of information. For a brief overview of different types of assessments (i.e., formative, screening, progress monitoring, and outcome) see the Lead for Literacy Memos. For a more comprehensive understanding, see Making Assessment Matter by Lesaux and Marietta (2011).

Note: While comparing ELLs to native-speaking classmates may seem unfair, in the end, to only measure them against other ELLs means they can be categorized as above average while still being well below their national peers. In the end, these students need to have their progress celebrated, but they also need to have high expectations set to help them compete, eventually, against *all* of their peers as they move on to college and careers. This demands they have multiple layers of testing, using a variety of assessment tools, throughout their school years.

Distinguishing between LD and Language Acquisition

Professionals must continuously consider these factors to accurately determine tiers of instruction, interventions, learning differences from learning disabilities, and whether to consider a referral to special education (Hoover, 2009). There is an understandable confusion over whether a student's difficulty is based on the second language acquisition process, or due to a learning disability—both have overlapping behaviors that can be misinterpreted. The table below notes the similarities:

Some Similarities Between LD and Language Acquisition	
Behaviors Associated w/ LD	***Behaviors when Acquiring an L2***
Difficulty following directions	Difficulty following directions
Difficulty with phonological awareness	Difficulty distinguishing between sounds not in native language
Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence	Confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when different than in native language Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in native language
Difficulty remembering sight words	Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings not understood

Difficulty retelling a story in sequence	May understand more than can convey in English
Confused by figurative language	Confused by figurative language **in English**
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May have poor auditory memory	May have poor auditory memory **in English**
May have difficulty concentrating	May have difficulty concentrating
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Aspects of Language Acquisition that Can Mirror Disabilities

ELLs may share some common challenges when learning literacy skills in their second language. When the student's language does not include English phonemes, awareness of those phonemes can prove challenging for ELLs. It is very difficult to distinguish auditorily between sounds not in one's language, or to pronounce such sounds. Teachers may mistake these challenges for deficits in auditory discrimination or phonological awareness without realizing they may be natural to the language acquisition process. Having an understanding of which phonemes exist in the student's language and knowing the common challenges of learning English for students who speak a particular native language might help clarify misunderstandings.

Similarly, ELLs may struggle with decoding, especially if their native language orthography is very different than English. Letters can look the same across languages despite having very different sounds. Learning how the letters correspond to sounds can be abstract and confusing. Also, ELLs are at a disadvantage when trying to figure out how to decode new words using context clues if the meaning of these words is not understood.

New vocabulary can present special challenges. ELLs might be confused by figurative language, common words such as pronouns, words with multiple meanings, and false cognates. ELLs may also be good word callers without understanding the meanings of words. It is important for teachers to distinguish between words that students understand in their native language and just need the English label for, and words whose concepts need further explanation.

Like their monolingual peers, reading comprehension for ELLs is affected by oral language proficiency, variations in text structure, ability to use comprehension strategies, interest, and cultural differences. When serving this population of students, it is particularly important for teachers to incorporate into their practice different ways for ELLs to show their understanding and focus on the content rather than the form of student responses.

Decision-Making Model for ELLs – a Checklist

When practitioners are making decisions for ELLs, the focus should be to develop a profile that includes information about the student's strengths as well as areas of need. The following checklist will help teams confirm that ELLs' learning opportunities are meeting ELLS learning needs:

- ☐ Learning environment reflects the sociocultural process of language and content learning.
- ☐ Learning experiences connect to relevant issues in ELLs' lives.
- ☐ Learning experiences connect to ELLs' personal, cultural, language, and world experiences.
- ☐ ELLs are provided with opportunities to work in pairs and small groups.
- ☐ ELLs are provided with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways, including their native language, regardless of the type of program they are in (i.e., transitional bilingual education, dual language, or ESL).
- ☐ Group work activities engage ELLs in multiple opportunities to apply the language of content.
- ☐ Learning environment reflects the developmental process of language and content learning.
- ☐ Whole class activities reflect the specific English proficiency levels of ELLs in this classroom.
- ☐ The paired and small group activities reflect the specific English proficiency levels of ELLs in this classroom.
- ☐ Homework assignments match ELLs' current levels of English proficiency and provide additional practice opportunities for what occurred during class.
- ☐ The overarching as well as day's content and language objectives are visibly displayed in clear, simple, student-friendly language.
- ☐ ELLs' understanding is routinely checked.
- ☐ Key terms, words, idioms, and phrases that ELLs need to learn have been taught and are clearly displayed.