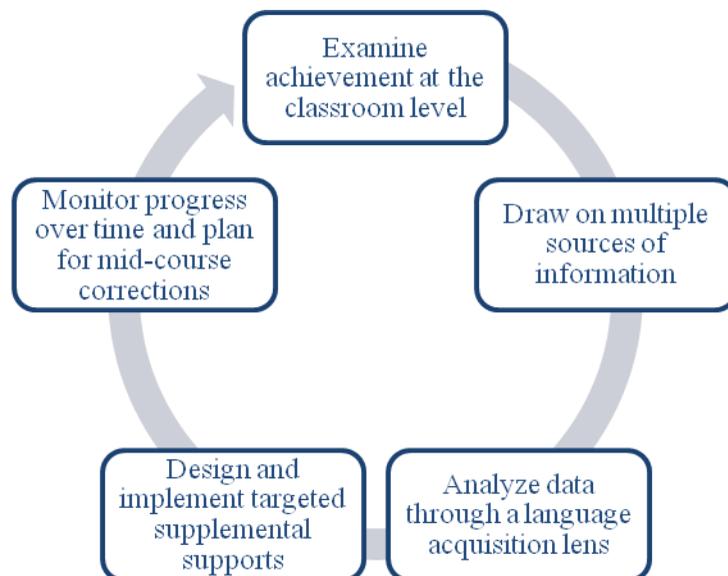


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## Serving Struggling ELLs: A Step-by-Step Approach

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 through 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:

<b>Some Similarities Between LD and Language Acquisition</b>	
<i>Behaviors Associated with LD</i>	<i>Behaviors Related to Acquiring a Second Language</i>
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 <b>English</b>
Confused by figurative language	Confused by figurative language in <b>English</b>
Slow to process challenging language	Slow to process challenging <b>English</b>
May have poor auditory memory	May have poor auditory memory <b>in English</b>
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*).