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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 model¹ 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,

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	
<i>Behaviors Associated w/ LD</i>	<i>Behaviors when Acquiring an L2</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 can convey in English
Confused by figurative language	Confused by figurative language in English
Slow to process challenging language	Slow to process challenging English language
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

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.