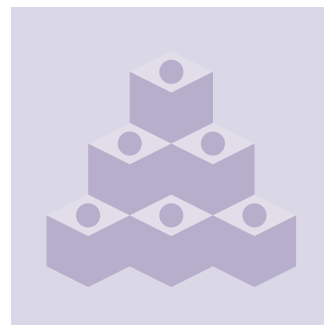
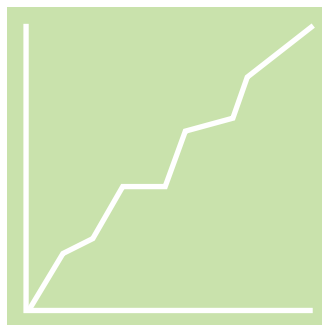


RTI for English Language Learners: Appropriately Using Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools to Improve Instructional Outcomes



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National Center on Response to Intervention
<http://www.rti4success.org>



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Introduction

This brief provides a framework for using Response to Intervention (RTI) with students who are English Language Learners (ELL) from Hispanic backgrounds. The first section examines the characteristics of these students; defines the RTI process; and then models how students' linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds can guide appropriate screening, progress monitoring, and goal setting that will help promote English literacy. Although the majority of ELLs in the United States are Hispanic and come from Spanish-speaking homes, students classified as ELL speak more than 350 languages (Ethnologue, 2009). This brief provides an example of the RTI framework for a student whose native language is Spanish; however, the same framework may be applied with all ELLs, taking into account other culture-specific factors. Teachers will find it helpful to learn more about their students' native languages to understand the specific challenges they will face based on the similarities and differences between their native language (L1) and English (L2). Finally, this brief discusses the crucial need for systems-level changes to ensure educational equity for ELLs and other diverse student groups.

Hispanic ELLs

Every region of our country is experiencing a shift in racial and ethnic composition, and this shift is projected to continue over the next few decades. Non-Hispanic Whites currently are 67% of the population; by 2050, it is projected, they will be only 47% of the U.S. population. Within this same time span, the Hispanic population is expected to triple in size to 29% of the total, the Black population will increase slightly from 12.8 % to 13.4%, and the Asian subgroup will increase from 5% to 9% (Passel & Cohn, 2008). This population transformation will dramatically alter how schools meet the needs of every student. Educators will have to be prepared to meet the needs of the increasing diversity of students to prepare all children to become productive members of our country. It is especially crucial to understand the particular needs of students who come from homes where English is not the dominant language. The largest group is those whose home language is Spanish (Ethnologue, 2009). The Pew Hispanic Center (Fry & Gonzales, 2008) reports that Hispanic students accounted for 60% of the total growth in public school



populations during 1990 to 2006, and this group is projected to increase by 166% by 2050. Knowing how to best educate these students must become a national priority, because the current dropout rate for Hispanic students stands at 22%, three times the rate of non-Hispanic White students (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

What Do ALL Teachers Need to Know About ELLs?

Because of the demographic changes in schools, every teacher must acquire the following knowledge and skills to deliver appropriate instruction and ensure positive educational outcomes:

1. Understand that education is a social entitlement achieved only when we provide equitable educational opportunities with high expectations for all students.
2. Understand the linguistic, cultural, and experiential context of every student and how to incorporate this knowledge systematically into curriculum and instruction.
3. Plan and adapt appropriate assessment and instruction based on students' unique backgrounds.

Stages of Second Language Proficiency

ELLs typically show high levels of language growth in L2 in the initial years of instruction, but this growth levels off as content becomes more difficult. This section describes the variety of ways in which ELLs experience their second language and provides an overview of five stages of development from initial exposure to proficiency.

Primary language. By definition, ELLs come from homes where a language (or languages) other than English is spoken or is spoken in addition to English. Pinker (2007) states that typical first language development occurs when children are exposed to language from birth to about age six, emphasizing a common theory in language acquisition called the “critical period.” For ELLs, the amount of language



input during this time in their native language (L1) and English (L2) varies. “Second languages develop under an extremely heterogeneous set of conditions, far more diverse than the conditions under which children learn their native language” (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994, p. 2). Thus, ELLs may not have the opportunity to develop fully either their L1 or L2 due to variability in language exposure in either language. When children’s primary language development is interrupted in some way, development may be diminished. As such, it is important to know when children were exposed to or learned a second language and to assess their proficiency in both L1 and L2.

Simultaneous bilinguals are exposed to and learn both languages concurrently, beginning at or shortly after birth, and often develop full bilingualism (Valdés & Figueroa, 1996). Research has demonstrated that simultaneous bilinguals progress through early language milestones at the same ages as their monolingual peers (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Kohnert, 2008). Simultaneous bilinguals may demonstrate language strength in one language or the other depending on the context (e.g., home, school).

Sequential bilinguals, on the other hand, are exposed to a second language before their L1 is completely developed (Valdés & Figueroa, 1996). “Early sequential bilinguals have experience with a single first language beginning at birth and begin to acquire a second at some point during childhood” (Kohnert, 2008, p. 65). Sequential bilinguals are essentially monolingual speakers of L1 until L2 is introduced. The hallmark of this profile is variability of language proficiency in both languages determined by the extent of L1 development before L2 introduction. Development of both languages appears to be dependent on the child’s continued experiences in L1 so that L1 can support L2 development (Kohnert, 2008). Therefore, the stronger or more developed L1 is before learning L2, the better the developmental process will be for both languages (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006). Therefore, if native language (L1) instruction is available in elementary schools, it may be helpful to begin literacy instruction in L1 and concurrently provide ELLs with a strong program of English language development (ELD).

Language proficiency. Once children enter school, their language ability in the instructional language will set them on a path either for success or for challenges. Upon enrolling their child in school, parents complete a federally mandated Home Language Survey on which they report whether a language other than English is used in the home and whether that use could affect the student’s level of English



proficiency. If so, a state-approved language proficiency test is administered to identify children who need systematic ELD through Title III. An ELD program alone, which may be delivered daily through a pull-out or push-in model, is not sufficient for students' language to catch up to their English-only peers (Thomas & Collier, 2002). All aspects of instruction must be adapted to the language proficiency of each ELL. To do so requires understanding of how students progress through the second language continuum.

The second language continuum. The development of language proficiency for ELLs is viewed as a continuum of stages (generally five). The overall goal is to provide support in the instructional language so that students can work toward grade-level standards. Each language proficiency stage is described briefly below. It is imperative to remember that reading instruction, especially in foundational skills like phonemic awareness and phonics, can begin immediately upon school entry, either in L1 or L2, or in both (Gersten, et al., 2007). In other words, beginning reading instruction in English does not need to wait for the student to develop proficiency in English.

At the **first stage**, Preproduction/Entering, students initially may be silent and are dependent upon modeling and visual aids. Gradually, children begin speaking words, can answer simple questions, and use repetitive phrases. The focus should be to make language understandable or comprehensible to students rather than to require oral production from them. Students can be asked to point to the correct answer, to draw their response, or to use many other nonverbal ways of responding.

At the **second stage**, Early Production/Beginning, students will begin speaking in short phrases and use common expressions but still understand much more than they can produce. Teachers can use books with repetitive text for language practice, choral readings, and songs or chants to encourage language participation.

During the **third stage**, Speech Emergence/Developing, children generally have acquired good social language; however, they continue to have difficulty with syntax, grammar, and academic (textbook and test) language. They need explicit instruction and rehearsal in language structures and vocabulary found in the curriculum (Dutro & Moran, 2003). In other words, the instructional focus should be first on the new language in the curriculum and then the new context.

At **stage four**, Intermediate Fluency/Expanding, students use more complex language and make fewer errors in speech. They may continue to have difficulty with



decontextualized, academic language, and they are not yet considered fluent English speakers. Explicit instruction in language use and vocabulary continues to be appropriate, with a focus on supporting students in reaching curricular benchmarks.

Finally, at **stage five** or Advanced Fluency/Bridging, students are considered to be fully proficient. While students typically exit from ELD programs at this stage or earlier, they generally continue to need language support and close monitoring for a period of time as they continue to develop the academic language already known to their same-aged, English-only peers.

To summarize, research demonstrates that progressing through the five stages of second language development may take 6 years or longer (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Therefore, when an ELL struggles, we must first consider whether the instructional and language demands are appropriate for his or her language proficiency level and, if not, provide appropriate instruction, before considering intrinsic factors as causal.

Background Experiences

The time spent in asking specific questions about a student’s background will yield benefits in planning assessment and instruction. The formal and home literacy experiences of ELLs will also provide insights about their instructional needs.

Country of origin. The majority of ELLs (52%) are born in the United States and are second generation Hispanics (Fry & Passell, 2009). Differences in generational language patterns and use have been identified (Valdés & Figueroa, 1996). First-generation students who immigrated to the United States generally have more highly developed L1, depending on their age upon arrival. Second-generation students, born in the United States., may struggle in both L1 and L2 because they frequently hear a mixture of two languages in the home before starting school. Their parents may, by necessity, continue to speak the native language in the home and may not use English sufficiently to support their children’s development of English. Third-generation students often do not speak the heritage language much, if at all, and are generally considered native English speakers. Such children, however, remain within the definition of “bilingual” and should not be treated as if they were monolingual English speakers, because they may have had some, perhaps even significant, exposure to the native language. Conversely, it cannot be assumed that children with Hispanic surnames are in fact ELLs. By the third generation, families often



want their children fully “Americanized” and to speak fluent English with no accent. Sometimes, to recover stronger ties to their heritage, Third-generation individuals later choose to learn Spanish formally as a foreign language in school.

Studies show that, along with generational differences in language use, first- and second-generation students tend to come from homes with lower socioeconomic status (SES) than third-generation students do (Fry & Passell, 2009). Seminal research by Hart & Risley (1995b) highlights significant differences in vocabulary and language between individuals from low SES backgrounds and those from middle-class backgrounds. Consequently, SES factors may strongly affect language development in sequential bilinguals.

The majority of the Spanish-speaking immigrant population in the United States comes from Mexico. Immigrants also come from Central and South America and the Caribbean; therefore, they have many regional and dialectical differences. A third, indigenous language may be spoken as well. Because of the cultural and linguistic differences between and within Spanish-speaking countries and their peoples, it is important to consider the heterogeneity of ELLs in instructional planning.

Educational experiences of the student. It is important for teachers to investigate students’ formal educational experiences to understand what they have had the opportunity to learn in L1 in terms of both skills and experiences. All children bring a variety of resources to school, although these resources may differ from those of U.S. middle-class children (Freire & Macedo, 1987). These diverse experiences, described as *funds of knowledge*, may include oral storytelling, traditional cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). Therefore, to build a foundation for culturally responsive practice, teachers should acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and the background experiences that children bring to school (Gay, 2000).

Students who have developed oral and literacy skills in L1 frequently acquire academic English within 1–3 years and can transfer many L1 literacy skills to support their developing English language and literacy (Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, Humbach & Javorsky, 2008). This concept of common underlying proficiency (Cummins, 1981), also known as “linguistic transfer,” explains that much of what students build in their L1 remains accessible in L2. A student’s age alone, however, is not a reliable indicator of prior educational experiences. For example, a 14-year-old student from an urban environment with consistent educational opportunities



in his/her home country has significantly different experiences than a 14-year-old living in a small village receiving instruction from an itinerant teacher. The student who has had inconsistent instruction, often known as interrupted education, may need instruction in foundational skills that are already developed in the student whose instruction was more consistent.

In general, second generation students receive most or all of their education in U.S. schools. They are likely to be sequential bilingual students and, if their L1 was not fully developed prior to the introduction of L2, they may struggle in school due to an incomplete foundation in either language. These students, regardless of age, may benefit from initial literacy instruction in L1, a solid program of ELD, and direct instruction on how to transfer literacy skills learned in L1 to English literacy (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Response to Intervention and English Language Learners

This section describes the purpose and rationale for implementing RTI, its critical features, and unique considerations as schools determine how to implement screening and progress monitoring within the RTI framework to best serve ELLs.

The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) describes RTI as follows:

Response to Intervention integrates student assessment and evidence-based instructional interventions within a multilevel prevention framework in order to maximize student achievement and reduce behavior problems (NCRTI, 2010).

RTI's focus on effective, research-based instruction in the general education classroom emphasizes the importance of providing high-quality, linguistically and culturally responsive core curricula as a precursor to the identification of students with learning or behavioral challenges. An additional consideration for ELLs includes the language of instruction, as evidence suggests that instruction in students' primary language (L1) may confer a benefit in English reading development (Goldenberg, 2008). Therefore, implementation of RTI requires a clear understanding of this research as the context within which appropriate decisions should be made regarding standards for growth, progress, and movement across levels. The sections below



provide a general discussion of RTI implementation specifically within the context of improving reading outcomes for ELLs.

The RTI components of coordinated prevention and early intervention hold promise for improving the outcomes of ELLs and their monolingual English peers primarily because they involve evaluation in curriculum-based academic skills as opposed to the measurement of decontextualized concepts that are characteristic of standardized testing (Kovaleski & Prasse, 2004). An additional benefit to ELLs may also result from RTI's focus on preventing and responding to reading difficulties through the use of research-based practices, similar to the benefits of RTI that have been demonstrated for students in general (Gunn et al., 2005; Riedel, 2007). Essential components of RTI include the following:

- Using screening and formative assessment data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes
- Monitoring the effectiveness of instruction (i.e., progress monitoring)
- Implementing multi-leveled evidence-based instruction that is matched to students' instructional needs
- Data-based decision making for instruction, movement within the multi-level system, and disability identification (in accordance with state law)

The following sections address screening and progress monitoring, primarily with special considerations for applying these concepts with ELLs.

Formative Assessment—Screening and Progress Monitoring

Students who need additional instructional supports are identified through the use of universal screening measures. Struggling students are identified by implementing a two-stage screening process. Screening tools must be reliable and valid, and demonstrate diagnostic accuracy for predicting which students will develop learning or behavioral difficulties. Screening assessments are brief, conducted with all students or targeted groups at each grade level, and are followed by additional, more in-depth testing or short-term progress monitoring to confirm a student's need for additional instructional support.



Unlike screening, progress monitoring occurs at least monthly and is used to assess students' academic performance over time, to quantify student rates of improvement or responsiveness to instruction, and to evaluate instructional effectiveness. Progress monitoring can be implemented with individual students, groups of students, or an entire class. It is important that progress monitoring be conducted with attention to issues regarding the reliability and validity of the assessment instrument. With respect to the use of these instruments with ELLs, reliability tends not to pose any particular difficulty for most instruments, especially if they have been developed carefully and in accord with rigorous psychometric procedures. Conversely, whether an instrument remains a valid indicator should be of central concern, because factors such as variable language proficiency and experience with the culture and classroom setting may strongly influence performance (Ortiz, 2008; Ortiz & Dynda, 2005). Therefore, it is critical to assess the validity of these measures with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Should the Same Screening and Progress Monitoring Assessments Used with Monolingual English Students Be Used with English Language Learners?

Evidence to support the use of screening and progress monitoring tools is emerging, and the literature mainly shows that these instruments and methods can have documented effectiveness with both ELLs and their monolingual English peers (Klingner, Artiles, & Bareletta, 2006; Vanderwood & Nam, 2008). Both the RTI (Gersten et al., 2007) and ELL (Gersten et al., 2008) practice guides from the Institute for Education Sciences indicate that screening and monitoring students' performance in English language phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading are helpful to plan instruction for ELLs. The IES practice guide for ELLs reports that 21 studies demonstrated that measures of phonological processing, letter and alphabetic knowledge, and reading of word lists or connected text are reliable means of determining which ELLs are likely to benefit from additional instructional assistance in these areas to support reading (Gersten et al., 2008). Studies have consistently shown a correlation between measures of phonological awareness (e.g., Riedel, 2007), alphabetic understanding (e.g., Fien et al., 2008; Riedel, 2007; Vanderwood, Linklater, & Healy, 2008), and oral reading fluency (e.g., Crosson & Lesaux, 2010; Riedel, 2007; Vanderwood et al., 2008; Wiley & Deno,



2005) with measures of reading comprehension for ELLs spanning kindergarten, and first, second, third, and fifth grades. Thus, growing evidence indicates that these tools are appropriate to identify ELLs who may be at risk for reading failure; thus, additional instructional support can be provided. Although these tools may well be appropriate for use with ELLs, additional considerations exist regarding the meaning of these tools; to inform decisions, other data should be collected, as described below.

Is Additional Screening Information Needed for English Language Learners?

Screening information is certainly useful in evaluating ELLs who may be at risk for reading problems, but other data are necessary to bolster such conclusions. For example, Linan-Thompson and Ortiz (2009) note that special consideration must be given to students' performance in their native language. Students with strong native language literacy skills may require different instructional supports than students with the same English instructional profile and weak native language literacy skills. Second, Al Otaiba and colleagues (2009) documented that Hispanic students requiring ELD/ELL services demonstrated lower performance on Oral Reading Fluency measures in comparison to their Hispanic peers not receiving EDL/ELL services; this result may have been due to language proficiency and vocabulary differences. Crosson and Lesaux (2010) demonstrated that overall reading comprehension was influenced strongly by both fluent reading of text as well as measures of oral language proficiency including vocabulary and listening comprehension. Students with lower language proficiency in English are likely to need substantial language support in addition to strong reading instruction to achieve reading comprehension at expected levels. Collecting language proficiency data in addition to using the reading screening measures will help to determine the extent and kind of reading and language support students will need to meet important reading goals.

The following are recommendations for ensuring appropriate use of screening tools with ELLs:

1. Use tools with demonstrated reliability and validity to identify and monitor students' need for instructional support in reading in both L1 and L2.
2. Assess students' language skills in L1 and L2 to provide an appropriate context regarding evaluation of current levels of performance.



3. Evaluate the potential effect of the process of L1 and L2 acquisition on current performance.
4. Plan instruction based on what is known about the student's current level of performance and his or her literacy experiences in L1 and L2.

Case Study: Part I

The following case study illustrates the recommendations from the previous sections, using screening and progress monitoring with Yesenia, a Spanish-speaking ELL.

Yesenia was born in the United States to parents who immigrated from Central America. She attended Head Start for 1 year; there, she had some instruction in Spanish and some exposure to English as well. She later attended a bilingual kindergarten class where she received native language instruction before moving to a school with an English as a Second Language (ESL) only model (no Spanish support) at the beginning of first grade. In the current English-only program, she receives traditional ESL services in a pull-out model where curriculum is decontextualized (i.e., not connected with classroom instruction). Her language proficiency scores on the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey–Revised (WMLS-R; Woodcock, Muñoz-Sandoval, Ruef, & Alvarado, 2005) indicate she is a level 3 in English and level 3 in Spanish (described below). Although the scores appear that she has equal language proficiency in L1 and L2, it is possible she is still slightly more dominant in Spanish, the language of her home and the language which her parents speak to her most frequently. In addition, the Spanish instruction in kindergarten bolstered her native language development and helped create a good foundation before to the change to the English-only program.

Screening Recommendation 1: Use tools with demonstrated reliability and validity to identify and monitor students' need for instructional support in reading in both L1 and L2.

Yesenia's linguistic and educational experiences show that it makes sense to screen in both English and Spanish. Her mixture of exposure and instruction in both languages complicates the use of established expectations for development and growth. Therefore, to screen Yesenia's reading development, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) (Good & Kaminski,



2002) and Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura (IDEL) (Baker, Good, Knutson, & Watson, 2006) were selected because they can be used to evaluate reading in her native language (IDEL) and English (DIBELS); they both have been demonstrated to be reliable predictors of ELLs' reading comprehension in English (Fien, et al., 2008; Riedel, 2007; Vanderwood, et al., 2008) and Spanish (Baker, Cummings, Good, & Smolkowski, 2007). Riedel (2007), for example, showed that first-grade ELLs' performance on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF), and Oral Reading Fluency at the beginning and middle of the year predicted students' performance on reading comprehension measures at the end of first grade. Vanderwood (2008) and Fien and colleagues (2008) also demonstrated that NWF predicted reading outcomes for ELLs on measures of reading comprehension and overall reading proficiency; this result indicated that student performance on these measures can help identify which students are likely to need additional support to reach critical reading benchmarks. Likewise, research with the IDEL provides support for several of its measures and their relation to first-grade Spanish-speaking ELLs' performance on Spanish text comprehension: *Fluidez en la Segmentación de Fonemas* ($r = .51$), *Fluidez en las Palabras sin Sentido* ($r = .63$) and *Fluidez en la Lectura Oral* ($r = .73$) (Baker, Cummings, Good, & Smolkowski, 2007).

Screening Recommendation 2: Assess students' language skills in L1 and L2 to provide an appropriate context regarding evaluation of current levels of performance.

The WMLS-R was used to assess Yesenia's language proficiency in Spanish and English. The WMLS-R measures and classifies academic language in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Scores are reported in standard scores, percentile ranks, as well as six levels of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1984). The CALP levels are described as Level 1: Negligible; Level 2: Very Limited; Level 3: Limited; Level 4: Fluent; Level 5: Advanced; and Level 6: Very Advanced. Yesenia scored at Level 3 (Limited) in both English and Spanish, implying relatively equal proficiency. However, her higher comfort level in speaking Spanish, the fact that Spanish remains the language of the home, and the somewhat recent introduction of instruction in English all suggest that she may be slightly better developed (or dominant) in Spanish than in English at this time. Table 1 describes language skills at this level.



Screening Recommendation 3: Evaluate the potential impact of the process of L1 and L2 acquisition on current performance.

Although it is possible to evaluate reliably Yesenia’s current level with respect to her early literacy skills, it is also important to consider the extent to which factors related to L1 and L2 language acquisition may have affected her progress. In general, the purpose of identifying students’ level of performance is to improve skills beyond their current level. That is, an “at-risk” student is “at risk” irrespective of the reason. For ELLs, however, performance that indicates “at-risk” status and the need for more intensive instruction may well be due to ineffective instruction (e.g., when delivered only in English without adjusting for a student’s current English proficiency level) with results that could mimic an intrinsic learning problem. For example, in an investigation of the reliability of English passages with ELLs, Baker and Good (1995) found that ELLs improved at a slower pace than native English speakers. Such differences may reflect experiential and educational dissimilarities that manifest in differential responses to instruction. In short, an ELL’s linguistic and educational experiences should be carefully considered in designing appropriate instruction and interventions, and it should not be assumed that slower growth must be due to a learning disability.

Screening Recommendation 4: Plan instruction based on what is known about the student’s performance and literacy experiences in L1 and L2.

A review of results from a screening of Yesenia’s basic reading skills suggests that she is at *some risk* in English (Table 1) and that she may need extra support to reach her English reading goals. Yesenia also is *low risk* with respect to her native language skills in reading (Table 2), demonstrating that she has learned some of the foundational skills in her L1. Because Yesenia has established some skills in her native language, she should receive explicit and systematic instruction at the Tier 1 level (core curriculum) as well as learning to transfer what she knows in Spanish to English by teaching her which skills transfer (e.g., phonemic awareness, many consonant sounds, and some comprehension strategies). It should be noted, however, that the degree of linguistic transfer that can be expected in this case is limited to the skills she has already learned, because the teaching for transfer relies on a solid foundation in literacy in the native language. More advanced literacy skills often are



not achieved until after several years of formal education (Cummins, 1984). She also should be taught what skills differ between English and Spanish. For example, English has different and more complex rules for decoding (like the vowel-consonant-e rule), and English stories are sometimes structured differently than Spanish ones. A more intensive, secondary level of intervention in reading likely is not necessary for Yesenia at this time, because she is *low*

Table 1. First-Grade Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)

	Decision Criteria— Beginning of Year		Score
Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)	At Risk	0–24	27
	Some Risk	25–36	
	Low Risk	37+	
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF)	Deficit	0–9	30
	Emerging	10–34	
	Established	35+	
Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF)	At Risk	0–12	11
	Some Risk	13–23	
	Low Risk	24+	

Table 2. First-Grade Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito in la Lectura (IDEL)

	Decision Criteria— Beginning of Year		Score
<i>Fluidez en nombrar letras (FNL)</i> Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)	At Risk	0–19	41
	Some Risk	20–34	
	Low Risk	35+	
<i>Fluidez en la Segmentación de Fonemas (FSF)</i> Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF)	Deficit	0–34	53
	Emerging	35–49	
	Established	50+	
<i>Fluidez en las Palabras sin Sentido (FPS)</i> Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF)	At Risk	0–24	39
	Some Risk	25–34	
	Low Risk	35+	



risk in reading skills in her native language. Because Yesenia’s language of instruction will be English, it is critical to provide instruction that focuses on developing content vocabulary, oral language, and language structure development in English. However, her family and community should be encouraged to continue supporting her native language development (to the extent that they are able), especially because, as noted previously, development of the native language may have a positive effect on her oral language development in English (Goldenberg, 2008; Kohnert, 2008). Unfortunately, because ELLs are often from lower SES backgrounds, the parents’ ability to maintain grade-level, academically based language models in the native language is often limited and may hinder growth for students like Yesenia.

Considerations for Progress Monitoring English Language Learners

Progress monitoring of ELLs is not a difficult task in and of itself. It is complicated, however, by the instructional burden placed on ELLs who are expected to learn a new language while at the same time mastering grade-level content presented in that new language. By comparison, English speakers are asked only to master grade-level content in the same language they have already learned. As noted previously, differential growth rates have been identified between ELLs and English speakers, and these differences may well be due to the added requirement of learning a language “on the fly” while trying to benefit from classroom instruction. In addition, language proficiency is sometimes viewed as a threshold skill that exists largely independent of formal learning. Once a certain level of proficiency in English has been reached, the student is, for all intents and purposes, comparable to his or her native English speaking peers. Such misconceptions are counter to research that demonstrates the dramatic effect that differences in early language experience can have on later academic achievement. For example, Hart and Risley (1995b) found that even simple differences in how much parents speak to their children creates gaps in exposure to language that reach up to 30 million words by the age 3. Furthermore, they found that differences in the number of words children hear by age 3 strongly predict academic achievement 5 years later in third grade. Such differences may be even more magnified in the case of ELLs compared to native English speakers, and these differences highlight the difficulty in determining exactly what constitutes progress and growth for ELLs.



In addition to aspects described above, one of the first considerations for ELLs is whether progress should be monitored in all languages. If ELLs receive reading instruction in their native language, then it is critical to monitor progress in their native language. If an ELL is not receiving reading instruction in the native language, there may be no need to monitor progress in any language but English. In either case, the point is to monitor response to instruction, regardless of the language.

Progress monitoring of ELLs should occur for all students who demonstrate risk in English reading instruction, with more frequent monitoring for those students whose progress is lower than expected. The high rate of reading failure among ELLs warrants careful attention to their progress so that instruction can be altered if students do not reach expected rates of progress. Significant care should be paid to ensure that decisions regarding growth, or lack thereof, are appropriate. For example, Gersten and Woodward (1994) suggested that curriculum-based measures could be used to develop growth rates for ELLs, but then speculated that ELLs generally continue to make academic progress toward grade-level norms, whereas ELLs who have learning disabilities do not. In contrast, some research suggests that students who receive ESL/ELL services or English only, peak academically at about fourth grade and then begin to fall farther and farther behind their native English-speaking peers every year they remain in school (Thomas & Collier, 1997; 2002). Therefore, it is important that slow growth not be considered a decisive indicator of a learning disability, because the growth rate may also be related to differences in learning due to language acquisition.

A final consideration in the evaluation of student progress for ELLs involves the notion of “true peers.” True peers are defined as students who have the same or similar levels of language proficiency, acculturation, and educational backgrounds (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Using true peers as a comparison requires collection of detailed information that is not ordinarily part of the progress monitoring with English-only students. Standards for progress and growth rates for students from English-speaking backgrounds are well known and established, but the same cannot be said for ELLs. Nevertheless, the basic idea is that if a particular student achieves less growth than his/her true peers, instruction should be intensified for that student. Likewise, if an entire group of students with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds is struggling to make progress, intensified instruction is needed for the whole group to ensure they make adequate progress. The following are recommendations for using progress monitoring tools for ELLs:



1. Monitor student progress in all languages of instruction.
2. Set rigorous goals that support students toward meeting grade-level standards.
3. Evaluate growth frequently, increasing intensity of instruction when growth is less than expected.
4. Evaluate growth as compared to that of true peers.

Case Study: Part II

After screening is used to identify an appropriate instructional program for Yesenia, her progress should be monitored to determine instructional effectiveness.

Progress Monitoring Recommendation 1: Monitor student progress in all languages of instruction.

Since Yesenia is being taught only in English at this time, her progress was monitored in English, but not Spanish. Because her literacy development is now based on English language instruction and because no native language instruction is being provided, there is little reason to assess her progress in Spanish literacy skills. Accordingly, the critical measure for the beginning of first grade assesses phonics skills through NWF, so the DIBELS NWF measure was used to monitor Yesenia's progress in instruction (Figure 1).

Progress Monitoring Recommendation 2: Set rigorous goals that support students toward meeting grade-level standards.

The literacy goal for middle of first grade is 50 sounds correct per minute. Research has shown that ELLs can benefit and make substantial progress when provided explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics in English, regardless of their English language proficiency (e.g., Gunn, Smolkowski, Biglan, Black, & Blair, 2005; Haagar & Windmueller, 2001); therefore, the typical goal on NWF was chosen for Yesenia. Note that although ELLs can make solid progress on phonological processing skills, their overall literacy development may suffer from having a smaller vocabulary than native English speakers. Because ELLs have less experience with and exposure to English,



they have correspondingly lower vocabularies and thus may not be able to work with the same level of text as their grade-level peers who are native English speakers.

Progress Monitoring Recommendation 3: Evaluate growth frequently, increasing intensity of instruction when growth is less than expected.

Yesenia's progress-monitoring graph (Figure 1) shows that, after implementing the Tier 1/Core Curriculum + Teaching for Transfer and monitoring her progress weekly, Yesenia's growth does not appear to be on track to meet the middle-of-the-year goal (i.e., she has three consecutive progress monitoring points that are below her aim line). This growth indicates Yesenia is likely to need additional instructional support to reach her goals. Therefore, it is important to examine her instruction and the assessment data with respect to language and reading skills to determine how instructional support can be intensified. Yesenia's language proficiency during the screening assessment indicated that she was at a Level 3 (on a five-point continuum) in English, which pointed to a need for continued rigorous English oral language instruction to maintain her development in English proficiency. Because her progress on NWF was below what would be expected to meet the middle-of-the-year grade-level standard, the intervention was adjusted, not only in regard to improving reading skills but also to ensure additional instructional time with oral language and vocabulary via teaching of content-based vocabulary before the lesson. In addition, Yesenia was given additional peer practice in using the new academic language and vocabulary (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). After the change in instruction, Yesenia's growth improved (Figure 1), indicating that the current level of support likely was adequate to help her meet middle-of-the-year reading goals. The intensified level of language and reading instruction should continue, and her progress should be monitored to ensure that she continues to make good growth toward meeting grade-level goals.

Progress Monitoring Recommendation 4: Evaluate growth as compared to true peers.

As illustrated in the progress-monitoring graph, Yesenia responded to instruction and was on track to meet the middle-of-the-year reading goals after implementation of the more intensive reading and language support. If Yesenia



had continued to struggle, it would have been helpful to evaluate her growth as compared to peers with similar educational backgrounds and linguistic experiences. Because Yesenia had native language instruction in kindergarten and was switched to English only in first grade, finding closely matched peers may prove difficult. Nevertheless, if her growth was consistent with such peers, instruction should be intensified and ensured as being culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Conclusion: Critical Need for a Systemwide Process and Professional Development Plan

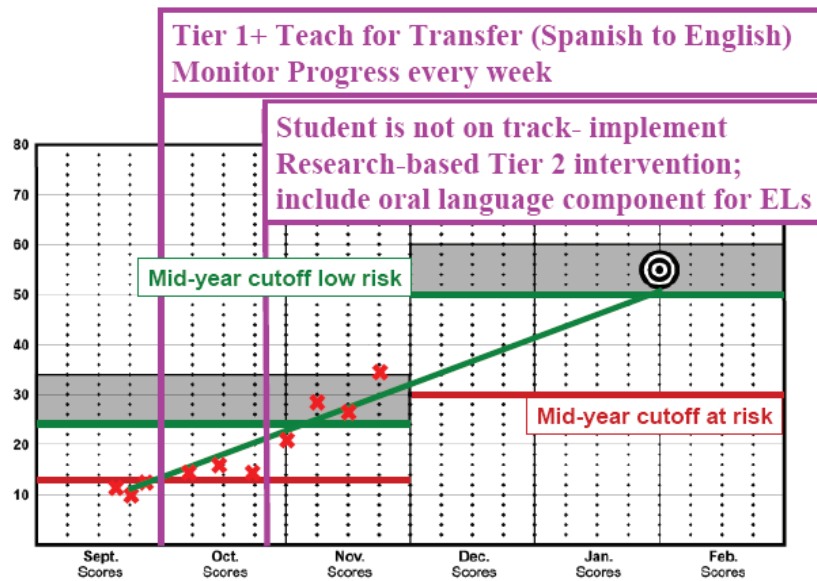
Regardless of the tools for screening and progress monitoring used within an RTI model with ELLs, these tools' effectiveness will depend significantly on the ability of educators to develop a level of expertise and proficiency in their use along with skill in investigating each child's experiential, linguistic, and cultural background—the very components that form the context within which plans must be made for appropriate instruction and intervention. Consequently, professional development and schoolwide commitment to improving assessment and instruction are necessary to help develop teachers' knowledge and provide the support needed for them to implement these procedures effectively. Teachers must have the time, resources, and support—both in training and collaboration time—to implement RTI effectively to improve student outcomes.

In applying an RTI framework with ELLs, particularly screening and progress monitoring, the need for additional teacher training and knowledge is greatly increased. Factors such as first and second language acquisition, methods and programs for instruction in the native language, the interaction between linguistic, cognitive, and academic development are all areas to be mastered so that evaluation of ELLs, whether via screening or progress monitoring, can be applied equitably and appropriately. Kovalski and Prasse (2004) noted that fairness in the assessment process, particularly for language minority students, is one of the potential benefits of RTI. If RTI is to fulfill this promise, it will be necessary to provide a firm grounding in how



language and culture interact with education and cognition to produce the development, growth, and high achievement desired for ELLs.

Figure 1. Yesenia—Nonsense Word Fluency



Note: Adapted from DIBELS/IDEL Research Team; DIBELS Essential Training Materials, 2006



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