Effective Instruction for English Language Learners
April 20, 2010 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM

About this Talk
Join Jana Echevarria, Ph.D., and Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D., of California State University, Long Beach, during our next RTI Talk as they answer your questions about effective instruction for English language learners.

Transcript

Angela Harris
I teach pre-k students who are 100% All American...but that is Native Yupik Eskimo's. Their academic English and expressive language skills are "low." Most 4 year olds speak in 1 word sentences due to cultural/family reasons. Our school district keeps buying into different programs...SIOP remedial reading programs....Would it not be better to just have a district-wide preschool program to teach all the students in the district? (Early intervention rather than wait till they fail?) Our district is not doing well. The entire district is ELL.

Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.
It is not unusual in education to have multiple, sometimes competing, programs occurring simultaneously. Teacher change takes time and practice, so it is difficult when changes are made frequently, before a program takes root. This approach is not as effective as having a focused, school-wide or district-wide program that is implemented well. In our own research, we have seen that the greatest student achievement gains came as the result of effective professional development and teacher implementation that was learned and practiced over time. Perhaps the most important influence on learning is the teacher-child relationship. Caring teachers who have high expectations for English learners, and respect for their culture, contribute to academic achievement.

Whichever program the district adopts, it must be research validated and provide maximum opportunity for children to hear, see, and practice using academic language in meaningful ways. Students should be exposed to high-quality literature that is age appropriate and interesting to them. Reading activities should involve lots of opportunities to develop oral language skills by talking about the text and relating it to their own lives.

Kendra Wagner
We are a school with students who speak over 50 languages, K-5. DIBELS does not seem to have a sensitive enough Progress Monitoring Tool to measure syntax, comprehension, and phonics knowledge all at once. MAZE is something we are looking into, but leaving these students to do
only Nonsense Words does not seem to warrant the time it takes. All the PM tools I have looked at for ELL are only 3X a year. Do you have any suggestions?

Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.
The question of assessment and progress monitoring tools is one that comes up often, particularly when we are talking about ELL. I think I might need more clarification on the exact issues with DIBELS, but here are my initial comments on your question. Progress monitoring tools should assess skills that are related to overall academic achievement, in reading the most effective measure for this is Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) (Wayman et al., 2008). ORF has the strongest relationship to more general reading assessments and standardized assessments and has the most research support.

However, for younger students who cannot read or are just beginning to read, we want to also be able to measure their progress on measures related to reading. This is when measures like letter naming fluency, phoneme segmentation and nonsense word fluency from DIBELS are useful. Word identification fluency is also a strong measure (Fuchs et al., 2004). MAZE fluency passages are generally used to get a sense of a student’s reading comprehension skills; however, they are not as strongly related to general reading outcomes until students are in the 4th grade (Espin, 2006).

These measures are used for decision making in RTI, particularly if a student needs to continue intervention or if an intervention is not working for the student, but often for instructional purposes teachers will need to dig a bit deeper to understand the specific phonics skills a student needs, syntax issues, and specific comprehension skills such as knowing main idea or making predictions.

Starlet Miles
What strategies or tips would you recommend for classrooms that host five or more languages?

Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.
When instruction is delivered in English, the number of languages represented becomes less important than the kind of teaching techniques that are used. English learners benefit from instruction that takes place in a supportive learning environment and from instruction that has features that have been shown to increase achievement. A few of these features include a focus on clear learning objectives for both content learning and language development. Objectives that are posted for students to see allow students to be aware of what is expected. Also, explicit vocabulary development is critical for English learners, but it must be made meaningful for them. Students should have multiple exposures to new words and see those words used in context. Finally, effective teachers make connections to what students know and what is important to them.

Starlet Miles
Q | How does the RtI structure of "Tier 1-2-3" in the school interface with the regular ESL program for English Language Learners (ELLs)?

A | Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.
Students should not be provided intervention based on English Proficiency Level but instead should be screened in the academic area and then provided instruction and intervention at the tier that they need. It is important that English Proficiency groupings are not used for this purpose. EL can benefit from instruction and interventions regardless of proficiency so we want to make sure the students receive the academic support they need. For EL who struggle academically and need Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions, this should be in addition to English Language Support they receive.

Q | Starlet Miles
Does the school provide ESL services to ELLs on a daily basis along with RtI strategies?

A | Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.
RTI is a school-wide model or framework and EL need to receive the services and interventions that are appropriate to meet their needs. Depending on the intervention needed and level of English Proficiency this may or may not need to be done daily. These decisions need to be made on an individual student level. Additionally, if teachers at the school site are using evidenced-based sheltered instruction, such as SIOP, there may be less of a need to provide extra services. This too would depend on state and district mandates as well as the level of fidelity with which teachers implement the sheltered instruction.

Q | Starlet Miles
Which types of teachers (general education, reading specialist, or ESL) provide RtI interventions?

A | Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.
Any of these teachers can provide Tier 2 and 3 interventions to students, additionally special education teachers are often used to provide interventions. Again you want to have highly-qualified, strong teachers delivering the interventions.

Q | Starlet Miles
How much of a background in second language acquisition do the RtI teachers need to possess?

A | Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.
It is critical that teachers understand the factors that affect second language acquisition, the influence a second language has on learning, and what we know about best practices for learning
through a second language. Having this kind of background will help teachers in general education (Tier 1) and those who deliver intervention (Tiers 2 and 3) to better meet the needs of their English learners. Research indicates that English learners require accommodations to maximize learning and having an understanding of the second language process equips teachers to be thoughtful and strategic in teaching English learners.

**Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.**

Really all teachers should think of themselves as RTI teachers because if the whole school is using the model, then all teachers are teaching at one or more tiers. I think though in the questions you mean the teacher directly providing the interventions, is that right? In this case, the more knowledge these teachers have about 2nd language acquisition the more likely they are to be able to meet individual student needs. We definitely want to consider using the strongest teachers to deliver interventions to struggling students because we want the interventions to be as individualized as possible.

**Melanie Beauchamp**

What suggestions do you offer on dealing with mainstream/content area teachers who do not buy into RtI and differentiated instruction?

**Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.**

I am assuming this question is related to middle and high school teachers. One of the greatest challenges to implementing a school-wide model like RTI is getting all teachers to buy into the model. I think in this case that it is important to determine some "basic" teaching methods all teachers can do to help all students learn. One of the most basic is using content and language objectives and writing them on the board for students to read.

Picking one or two strategies a semester can ease teachers into the process. Another problem can be that these teachers may not see how it is possible for them to actually differentiate for students, they might not know what that means exactly. Professional development (PD) is a huge piece of RTI. All teachers need to be provided the tools they need to meet the needs of their students. PD is an important component at middle and high schools as well at elementary schools.

**Mrs. Clark**

I believe we have enough supplemental *materials*. I think the "supplemental material" money should be used on supplemental *instructional time* to pay educators to help students after school with their homework instead of doing "intervention programs". Intervention *programs* put additional burdens on students because they reduce the amount of time students have available for completing homework. Is there any way to work around this situation?
Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.

It can be tempting to look to materials as the solution to helping English learners and struggling students achieve. However, regardless of the materials used, the teacher remains the most important factor in teaching. Funds often have restrictions on how they can be used but, in principle, providing additional academic engaged time for students would be a wise use of resources. The question does imply, though, that homework is something separate from and unrelated to intervention. In effective RTI programs, ELL students receive high-quality classroom instruction that is differentiated for their language proficiency and skill level.

Homework reinforces the skills and concepts taught in daily lessons. Nearly all school work requires a grade-appropriate level of literacy and students who are behind in those foundational literacy skills will have difficulty completing assignments. The students who have difficulty attaining specific skills associated with literacy development (or math) receive supplemental instruction (Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention). The results of progress monitoring identify the particular skills that are the focus of intervention. The intent is to give students an extra dose that is more intensive and in a smaller teacher-student ratio setting so that they acquire those skills and no longer need intervention. The purpose of intervention is to fill in those gaps so students can be successful in class and with homework.

Barbara Chesley

How can a classroom teacher meet the needs of an ELL student in math? Many math terms have multiple meanings. Although math has many concrete operations, problem solving involves reading and using two or more strategies before solving. Students need to be able to connect to the real life situations described in a problem. This is a high level skill even for an English speaking student. What are your recommendations and how can RTI serve both student and teacher?

Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.

Teaching high-level math processes and concepts, as you mention, is challenging with all students but especially so with English learners. First, the academic language of math needs to be taught explicitly and systematically for each lesson, and reviewed periodically. Students are better able to understand math concepts if they know the language associated with those concepts. Secondly, teaching the actual operation, concept or problem-solving process requires step-by-step, clear instruction with lots of modeling and practice. The, I do it, we do it, you do it together, you do it alone, approach is excellent for teaching math.

RTI is intended to provide high-quality instruction in the general education classroom. When students are missing key skills that are foundational to math, then they receive Tier 2 intervention in those skills because Tier 2 is for building targeted mathematics proficiencies. So, if a sixth grade student does not know her multiplication facts, she would receive intervention on fluent retrieval of those facts because that skill is a common underlying skill for many mathematics processes. An excellent resource from the What Works Clearinghouse is called: Assisting Students Struggling with
**Stephanie Tatel**

Is explicit phonics instruction (i.e., Fundations) proven to be effective with an ELL with very limited oral language (both in English and Spanish)? Given that we have finite minutes in the day, is it time well spent? Or would he gain more from a language experience intervention (if there is such a thing)?

---

**Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.**

I am not familiar with the particular program that you are referring to; however, ELLs with limited oral language proficiency can benefit from explicit reading instruction, including phonics. It is important though that the students also receive support in language development at the same time. We do not want to put reading instruction on hold but we also do not want to leave out language support. So really the answer is, they need both and can benefit from both!
progress monitoring of ELLs with no instructional background in their native language?

**Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.**

One of the biggest concerns in RTI is regarding assessments, and this is particularly true when we are talking about ELLs. Of course we want to choose measures that are reliable and valid especially if we are using the measures to determine if a student is "responsive." Research on Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) has shown that it is an effective tool for ELLs, even in English. Additionally, there has been research on the DIBELS measure of Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) that shows that it is also a strong predictor of later English reading achievement for ELLs (Vanderwood et al., 2008). For many of these measures the benchmark cutoff has not been established so it is important for schools and districts to create local norms and establish cutoffs that may be more appropriate given the population of students the specific school or district serves.

**Al Passarela**

Much of the focus on Instruction for English language learners has been focused on Hispanic children, seeing as they represent the largest group of LEP students. Are there new initiatives aimed at new English language learners, such as Haitian youth, who do not speak Spanish?

**Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.**

While the overwhelming majority of English learners in our schools are Spanish speakers, there are many other language groups represented in schools, some with high concentrations. These students would benefit from the same kinds of instructional approaches that are used with all English learners. The focus should be on high quality research-based instruction that systematically develops students' academic language while at the same time makes lessons comprehensible for them. Students' language and culture should be respected, families welcomed as partners in their child's education and all staff should hold high expectations for English learners, regardless of their language background.

**Eleni Pappamihiel**

Problem: a student has recently exited ESL but still struggles to a degree with reading comprehension. Considering that we know it can take 5-7 (or more) years to acquire CALP in English, are we so far off to make the argument that, even though the child has exited ESL, it could still be a language issue. How can RTI help us distinguish between LD and continuing CALP ESL issues?

**Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.**

One of the benefits of RTI for English learners is the emphasis on searching for instructional solutions for students, not labeling them as having a problem or disability prematurely. We know that in the right situation with the right kind of instructional support, students will learn and thrive.
Progress monitoring provides information on how appropriate instruction is for the individual student. If the student was formerly an English learner and continues to struggle with comprehension, chances are that she needs more systematic English language development.

Just because a student meets the criteria for exiting ESL doesn't mean that she has all the academic English needed to be successful in school. The way to distinguish between ESL/academic language issues and a learning disability is to use a "case study" approach. Pinpoint the areas of weakness, provide focused intervention on those specific skills and monitor progress. If the student makes steady progress, however slow, then it would indicate the student needs more time and language support and most likely does not have a learning disability.

Also, the family should be involved, especially at this point in the process. Do they see the student as having a problem? Was the child's first language development normal? These are important considerations when contemplating special education services for English learners. Finally, remember that students spend the majority of the day in the general education classroom. We need to make sure that as a former English learner she is provided high quality instruction that consistently supports her language needs. We discuss these issues extensively in our book, RTI and English Learners: Making It Work. [For more information, see: Echevarria, J. & Vogt, M. (in press) RTI and English Learners: Making It Work. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.]

Jeanette Rory
How do we provide budget-friendly professional development to ELL teachers to help them understand the RTI framework?

Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.
RTI is a school wide model. The success of RTI depends greatly whether or not all staff are informed and part of the process. It is great that you are including your ELL teachers in the model and want to provide them PD. Some of the PD you provide will be dependant on the role that they serve in the model. However, they will need to understand what RTI is and how the model at the school or district functions. Additionally, they are probably going to play a large role in Tier 1 instruction for their students. When we think about RTI for ELL, Tier 1 instruction must include strong content area instruction plus language development support. These teachers are likely to have had lots of education and training in this area so it is likely that you will want to focus on the role they play in consulting on cases when students might need interventions, how to help teachers interpret data, considering language, and provide other teachers advice and support on how to meet the language needs of ELL during intervention.

Joel Murphy
How does dual language classes fit into the RTI process? What kinds of interventions can we
provide in a dual language setting?

Jana Echevarria, Ph.D.

This is an interesting question! One important way to distinguish a disability from an English language development issue is that a student cannot have a disability in one language but not the other. If a student in a dual language program is making good progress in Spanish but is struggling academically in English, for instance, then that would indicate the student requires more scaffolding or support instructionally and more high quality English language development. The issue is the instruction. If, however, the student displays difficulties in comprehension or fluency in both languages, then he would benefit from intervention that focuses on those specific skills. The language used in intervention would be the student’s dominant language, the one he is more proficient in. In sum, the same process would be used for students in a dual language program with consideration given to the language used in intervention.

Dean Richards

What are the big ideas to keep in mind when assessing ELLs? How would you analyze the data in comparison to L1 peers?

Catherine (Cara) Richards-Tutor, Ph.D.

This is a great question! When assessing ELL the big ideas to keep in mind are:

1. What is the purpose of the assessment?
2. Are these measures reliable and valid for these students?
3. Using more of a problem solving approach rather than specific cut scores when making decisions about interventions for EL.

The second part of your question really relates to all three big ideas. First, it is important to know what the assessment is going to be used for. For example, is it just to inform the teacher if the intervention is working, is it to determine which students are at-risk, is it to determine special education placement, or all of these? These questions will help you answer which assessments are best for which purpose. Second, it is important to use reliable and valid measures particularly when using the assessments to make decisions about whether a student needs intervention support or if they are responsive or not responsive to intervention.

CBMs are probably the best measures for this purpose. For EL, CBMs that have pre-set benchmarks may or may not be adequate for EL. It is probably best in this case to establish local norms for a school or district. These norms can include L1 peers as well. However, you may want to look at the norms by disaggregating the ELL students to see if there are real differences. Third, for EL it is probably best to use more of a problem solving approach when making decisions about a student. Therefore, benchmark cutoffs are not the only data used to make decisions about the student. ELL teachers, special education teachers, and other specialists are important to have in this
That concludes our RTI Talk for today. Thanks to everyone for the thoughtful questions and thanks to our experts, Dr. Jane Echevarria and Dr. Cara Richards-Tutor, for their time today.

Please take a few moments to give us your feedback by taking our survey!

**Related Reading from RTINetwork.org:**

- [Response to Intervention in Reading for English Language Learners](#) by Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D., and Alba Ortiz, Ph.D.
- [Response to Intervention and the Disproportionate Representation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Special Education](#) by John L. Hosp, Ph.D.
- [Classroom Reading Instruction That Supports Struggling Readers](#) by Carolyn A. Denton, Ph.D.

**Additional Resources:**

- [Color?n colorado](#)
- [The International Reading Association](#)
- [National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems](#)
- [National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition](#)
- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)

- State Test Score Trends Through 2007-08, Part 6: Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners?