

## RTI with English Language Learners

February 12, 2013 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM

### **About this Talk**

THE TALK HAS CONCLUDED.

SCROLL BELOW FOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.

In response to popular demand, the RTI Action Network is offering an RTI Talk on implementing RTI with English Language Learners (ELLs). Join Janette Klingner, Professor of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder in the Department of Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity, during our next RTI Talk as she answers your questions regarding how RTI can help English language learners (ELLs) and provides tips across tiers on how to implement RTI with respect to ELLs.

Read more about [Janette Klingner, Ph.D.](#)

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### **Transcript**

**Q Philip Farson**

In my district, it is the opinion of the administration that what ELL services provides is something that is just good teaching - hence a Tier I service. And if Tier I, why do we need an ELL program?

**A Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

I am not sure exactly what you are asking (sorry!). ELL services are certainly more than "just good teaching" (in the sense that they involve more supports to make sure language is comprehensible and more scaffolds to help with language production, etc.). But these should be built into core instruction--similar to the way we think about "access to the curriculum" for students with disabilities. The reason that there should also be a designated time for English language development (besides that it is actually a legal requirement--districts have been sued for not providing this) is that ELLs' English acquisition is accelerated when they receive this instruction.

**Q Teresa Jensen**

3 years ago, 3 children (1 girl and 2 boys) were adopted from Ukraine. They only spoke Ukrainian at the time. The parents only speak English. None of the children have their Ukrainian language any longer. The two boys seem to be doing well. But the girl has had many challenges with speech and language. You say to surround them with their own language. But if this hasn't happened, what kind of harm does it do for the child and what can be done now to help the child now?

**A Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

**A** Good question. Sometimes it is not possible to "surround them" with their first language. The principle of surrounding them with language still applies, though, and doing as much as possible to make sure it is comprehensible (just as we do with young children acquiring their first language). That the girl you describe is experiencing more challenges than the two boys is cause for concern. It is hard for me to say for sure without additional information, but I would consider doing a more comprehensive evaluation of the girl's strengths and needs.

**Q** **Dainery Fuentes**

If a student is ELL, how can he learn from a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention done in English only?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

The language of instruction of Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions should match the language of instruction in Tier 1. There are some excellent research studies on this very topic by Sharon Vaughn and Sylvia Linan-Thompson. They conducted intervention research studies in both Spanish and English (depending on the language of instruction in Tier 1), with excellent results. In any case, interventions should always be culturally and linguistically responsive, matched to students' language, literacy, and learning needs. So if an ELL is learning to read in English and is at a beginning level of English proficiency, then instruction needs to support his understanding.

**Q** **Kelly McCrossin**

I hear frequently that 15 to 20% of students should be receiving Tier 2 supports. We have a lot more than that at our school. What should we do?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

First of all, it is helpful to keep in mind that this percentage isn't a hard and fast rule, but rather a guideline. That said, if many more ELLs than 20% are not making progress, then it is important to look at the quality of their instruction to make sure it is appropriate. Has the instructional program been validated with students like those in the class? Is instruction at an appropriate level for students? language and learning needs? Is the program well-implemented? Are teachers sufficiently differentiating instruction to meet diverse student needs? Is the environment conducive to learning? Also, it makes a difference whether one is looking only at benchmarks to determine who should receive Tier 2 or 3 supports, or at benchmarks plus rate of progress. It is important to consider rate of progress in addition to absolute benchmarks because research suggests that ELLs do not necessarily reach benchmarks (when learning to read in English) in the same time frame as their monolingual English speaking peers (see work by Sylvia Linan-Thompson). Also, if ELLs are making good progress in Tier 1, that suggests the instruction is meeting their needs.

**Q** **Conni Wittorp**

What percentage of ELL are identified with Specific Learning Disabilities following the RTI process?

**A** *Janette Klingner, Ph.D.*

I do not know the specific percentage off of the top of my head, but I do know that the percentages vary a great deal across states and even across districts within states. Overall, the percentage seems to be dropping, though. Experts currently say that the percentage of students in the overall school-aged population with LD should be between 4 and 6% (so less than we used to think). The percentage of ELLs should not be any higher than that (or we have overrepresentation).

**Q** *Jim Maloney*

For Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, we provide scripted interventions for our teachers to use that are based on research. Many times our ESL teachers tell us that these interventions are not appropriate for the beginner level ELL student. Should we abandon this intervention?

**A** *Janette Klingner, Ph.D.*

I would be willing to bet that the research on which these interventions are based did not focus on ELLs. That happens frequently. We are told that a practice is research-based, that "it works," without consideration for the population included in the research sample or the context in which the research was conducted. Research findings should not be generalized beyond the population or context addressed in the research studies. So it is likely that your ESL teachers are correct that these practices are not appropriate for their students—that they do not include enough support in oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension, and that there isn't enough emphasis on making sure instruction is meaningful and relevant for the students, or actually at the right level for their language, literacy, and learning needs. However, whether or not you should abandon or adapt the interventions is a good question. Ideally, we should be using instructional practices or interventions with ELLs designed specifically to meet their needs (taking into account the second language acquisition process). Yet there has not been a lot of research on interventions for this specific population (especially for beginner level ELLs). Some researchers have shown that savvy, knowledgeable teachers can adapt even scripted programs (such as Open Court) for their ELLs by focusing more on oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension (see articles by Diane Haager, Russell Gersten, Anne Graves, and Scott Baker).

**Q** *Amy F*

How do you avoid a deficit perspective when examining and analyzing data and determining instruction? How do you use the skills and knowledge ELL children bring as asset within the RTI?

**A** *Janette Klingner, Ph.D.*

Great question. Keeping in mind (and reminding others) that bilingualism is an asset can help. I like to tell folks that in President Obama's blueprint for educational reform, it frequently emphasizes how important it is to graduate students from high school who are bilingual and multicultural and ready to compete in a global economy. I ask, "If we think of that as our goal, who has a head start and who is at risk?" Instead of just looking at what a student can't do, look at what they can do. Look at the instruction ELLs are receiving and the learning environment to determine if they are

**A** culturally and linguistically and responsive and appropriate. If most ELLs are not thriving, then most likely the challenge (or problem) is with the instruction and a lack of fit between the instruction and students' needs, not the students themselves.

**Q** **Pam DeRiso**

When is it appropriate to evaluate a second language learner for a reading disability when he/she began kindergarten as a non-English speaker?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

Every case is different, and students vary a great deal in how long it takes them to acquire English (for a variety of reasons), so it is hard to set a hard and fast rule. I would say that first it is important to establish that the instruction the student is receiving is appropriate for his or her language and learning needs. Are most of the student's true peers succeeding? It is hard to make judgments about a student's learning when instruction isn't appropriate. RTI is based on the idea of looking at response to research-based instruction and interventions that have been found to work with similar students. As with earlier identification criteria, RTI stipulates that we must establish that a student truly has received an adequate opportunity to learn and that his or her difficulties are not due primarily to a lack of appropriate instruction. Unfortunately, this essential step is often left out. So, what I recommend is that you look at how other students in the class are doing (similar students, with similar backgrounds). If most are thriving, then it is appropriate to look more closely at individual students who are not doing well. If most students are struggling, then the focus should be on changing instruction to be more appropriate (see Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008 and Klingner & Eppolito, in preparation). If you are in a situation where there are very few ELLs (so, few true peers?), then it is more challenging to determine how well ELLs are doing overall. It helps to talk with the student's parents/caregivers to find out how the student is doing in comparison with siblings, relatives, and others in the community. Also, using test-teach-retest methods can help. It's important to remember that there should be no greater percentage of ELLs who are struggling (in other words, not making progress) than their monolingual peers WHEN instruction is appropriate. They are every bit as smart and capable of learning (see my case study of Marta for an example in Klingner & Eppolito, in preparation).

**Q** **Donna WrightBauer**

How do we help parents of ELL students to support their children at home?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

Although some may think it is counter-intuitive, the research is clear. The best way the parents/caregivers of ELLs can help at home is by surrounding them with language—the home language—and read to them in their home language (even when instruction in school is in English). The worst thing to do is to tell parents not to speak their home language and to try and converse in English only. That stunts language usage and can actually be harmful.

**Q** *Brenda Herrera*

How can we know when the student is behind grade level due to the lack of English proficiency rather than a learning disability?

**A** *Janette Klingner, Ph.D.*

Please see my response to Pam's question. Also, it is important to consider that there are no tests that can definitely tell us whether an ELL has LD. The characteristics typical of someone acquiring English as a second or additional language can mirror those of students with learning disabilities. Therefore, it is essential to consider a variety of factors. To a large extent, determining whether an ELL has LD is a process of elimination. Many intrinsic and extrinsic factors must be considered and ruled out as possible reasons for a child's struggles. There are multiple possible explanations for every behavior. It is important to understand the second language acquisition process, to know possible characteristics associated with LD, and to look at the quality of instruction in students' classrooms to determine whether they truly have received an adequate opportunity to learn (see Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008 and Klingner & Eppolito, in preparation).

**Q** *nancy silverman*

Couldn't the speech-language pathologist be a useful resource when determining language difference from language disorder?

**A** *Janette Klingner, Ph.D.*

Yes, certainly, when the speech-language pathologist understands the second language acquisition process and how similar behaviors can be due either to acquiring a new language or to a disorder. Also, it helps when the speech-language pathologist is bilingual.

**Q** *Ligaya Dayanghirang-Honofre*

Despite of English as the child's first language, would you consider cultural diversity a significant attribute for why a child experiences difficulty in learning reading and its sub-skills, particularly comprehension and synthesis? Have research studies on the effects of culture as a basis in learning reading in ELL classes been conducted already? If so, do these studies support the need? What are the RTI strategies implemented to help struggling readers?

**A** *Janette Klingner, Ph.D.*

I would not say it is 'cultural diversity' by itself that leads to students' difficulties. Rather, often there is a mismatch between how the student has been socialized to learn and the ways of teaching in school (and what is valued). For a classic study on this, see Shirley Brice-Heath's 'Ways with Words' and 'What No Bedtime Story Means.' It is important for instruction to build on what students already know and can do in an additive fashion and to be at an appropriate level for their language and learning needs. I suggest reading more about culturally responsive teaching (for another classic example, see Gloria Ladson-Billings' 'The Dreamkeepers' and also works by

**A** Geneva Gay, Lisa Delpit, and others). See the [NCCRESt website](#) for a Practitioner Brief on Literacy Instruction by Tandria Collins and also other practitioner briefs.

**Q** **Levonne Coughlin**  
Can you recommended progress monitoring tools for comprehension?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**  
For students reading in English or a first language? Oral reading fluency (ORF) assessments are often thought to be a proxy for reading comprehension and therefore are a popular progress monitoring tool. Yet, research by Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez and Nonie Lesaux indicates that we do not see the same relationship between fluency and comprehension among ELLs reading in English as we do for monolingual or fluent English speakers. They can be good word-callers and read quickly without understanding what they are reading?in fact, when their comprehension increases, the speed at which they read often goes down. ORFs can still provide useful information, but should be considered a starting point for collecting additional information, not by themselves indicators of what instruction should entail. ELLs with the same ORF score can have widely different needs. DRAs (Developmental Reading Assessments) are useful for providing additional information. Comprehension is assessed through story retelling and comprehension questions with graded reading passages.

**Q** **Lenoa Great Smith**  
Our team has just reviewed a K-5 ESL student who did not speak in Spanish or English until he was 4 years old -- he did not speak at all until age 4. Should we recommend testing now or wait for him to complete the customary 2 years of English immersion before conducting an EC evaluation?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**  
First, there really isn't a "customary" two years of English immersion before a comprehensive evaluation can be conducted (though I understand that many people think that). Please see my responses to other questions about the evaluation process. Also, it is important to keep in mind that RTI is not meant to prevent referrals of students who have obvious special education needs. RTI is primarily for determining which students have learning disabilities and should be followed for that purpose (see IDEA, 2004), but in the case of more severe needs, students can be referred for a comprehensive evaluation much sooner. Parents can request an evaluation at any time.

**Q** **Philip Farson**  
In my position I meet many people who feel that RTI obviates the need for ELL support services specific to ELLs. Is this a tenet of RTI, and if so, why?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**  
This couldn't be further from the truth. ELLs are absolutely entitled to support in English language

**A** development, as well as Sheltered English and other supports in Tier 1 (Core) Instruction throughout the day. ELLs should receive support with English acquisition during a designated period of the day. Whatever reading interventions ELLs receive should have been validated with similar students and be appropriate to their language and literacy needs (but these do not take the place of support with English language acquisition).

**Q** **Bob**  
In what ways is learning to read in English as a second language different than learning to read in a first language?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**  
Although there are many similarities between learning to read in English as one's first or a second language, there also are key differences (August & Shanahan, 2006). When the differences are downplayed, teachers and others might misunderstand why ELLs are not progressing as rapidly as their English-speaking peers when taught with the same methods. ELLs share common challenges when learning to read English as a second or additional language that can mirror the characteristics of LD. As noted above, phonological awareness tasks become much more challenging when a student's first language does not include the English phonemes addressed in the task. It is very difficult to distinguish auditorily between sounds not in one's first language, or to pronounce them. Teachers, speech and language pathologists, or psychologists sometimes misinterpret why an ELL cannot hear the differences between sounds and erroneously conclude that the student has deficits in auditory discrimination or phonological awareness. Having an understanding of which English phonemes do not exist in the student's language can diminish the chances of making this error. To more accurately assess the student's phonological awareness, use phonemes the student knows. Also, provide explicit instruction in unfamiliar English phonemes. Also, keep in mind that the order of phonemes in a word matters. It is more difficult to distinguish and manipulate phonemes presented in an unfamiliar order. Similarly, ELLs may struggle with decoding, especially if their native language orthography is quite dissimilar from English orthography. Letters can look the same across languages but have very different sounds. For example, although most consonants in English and Spanish have similar sounds, vowel sounds differ. The process of learning sound-symbol correspondence can seem 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. Teachers should look for ways to make instruction meaningful rather than abstract and to help students make connections between new learning and prior knowledge. Vocabulary can present special challenges for ELLs. ELLs are more likely to be confused by figurative language, common words such as pronouns and conjunctions, words with multiple meanings, and false cognates. ELLs may be good word callers without understanding the meaning of what they are reading. It is important for teachers to differentiate between words that students understand in their native language for which they simply need English labels and words for which they do not understand the underlying concepts and would benefit from additional instruction. Explicit instruction with multiple opportunities for practice in meaningful contexts can help. Reading comprehension for ELLs is affected by many factors,

**A** including their oral language proficiency, ability to use comprehension strategies, knowledge of different text structures, interest, background knowledge about the topic of the reading, and cultural differences. Providing explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and text structures, building background knowledge, and helping ELLs connect with their prior knowledge all can help with comprehension. ELLs often understand more of what they read in English than they are able to convey. Thus, providing them with alternative ways to demonstrate their understanding can help. Consider using diagrams (e.g., labeling the parts of a plant) or matching activities rather than essay exams. Also encourage students to respond in a combination of English and other languages, enabling them to draw from their full linguistic repertoire.

**Q** **Dave Windahl**  
Should ELLs be taught to read and write first in their home language before being instructed in English literacy skills?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**  
When it is feasible to do so, yes, absolutely. The research evidence is clear that learning to read and write in one's home language first leads to greater outcomes in English (see Goldenberg, 2008), as well as having the important added benefit of supporting bilingualism and biliteracy. Also, research now suggests that it isn't necessary to wait until ELLs are literate in their home language before introducing English literacy. Kathy Escamilla and colleagues are conducting some very interesting research on a program called "Literacy Squared." They teach emerging bilingual students who to read and write in Spanish as well as in English.

**Q** **Lynn**  
Are there recommended progress monitoring tools for elementary reading?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**  
Do you mean in English? I am always hesitant to recommend one approach over another because there is no perfect tool out there. It's important to keep in mind that there is no single best test or assessment strategy. Different assessments tap into different skills and knowledge. Assessments should be used only for the purpose for which it was designed. So it important to use multiple assessments to obtain a more comprehensive picture of students' literacy skills. In other words, scores on the DIBELS offer a useful starting point, but students with the same scores can have different instructional needs. Also, something important to point out is that classroom progress monitoring data sets can be very useful for understanding what students in a class are learning well and where they might need more or different instruction (in other words, they provide useful information about a teacher's practice). For more information on screening and progress monitoring measures, see the National Center on Response to Intervention's [Screening Tools Chart](#). Note whether an assessment tool has been used with diverse populations.



**marg**

What techniques can be used to help ELL learners who are also learning disabled and ADHD?



**Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

A seamless, supportive education for ELLs with LD includes many essential components. When ELLs are identified as having LD, their need for instruction in English language development does not end. In other words, ELLs with LD need the services entitled to students with disabilities as well as the services designed to support ELLs. They benefit from: (a) culturally and linguistically responsive teachers, (b) culturally and linguistically responsive and relevant instruction, (c) a supportive learning environment, (d) assistance with English language acquisition (such as oral language, vocabulary, and academic language development), (e) support in the general education classroom to help them access the general education curriculum (including Sheltered English techniques, accommodations, modifications, and adaptations and reading comprehension strategy instruction), and (f) intensive research-based interventions designed to help them improve their academic and possibly their behavioral skills in targeted areas.



**James Uhry**

Are there differences between students who learn English at the same time as their native language and those who did not begin learning English until they reached school?



**Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

Sequential bilinguals acquire first one language in the home and then another language after they start school or even later. On the other hand, simultaneous bilinguals acquire two or more languages at about the same time, from birth or early childhood. Experts differ on when the cut off is for acquisition of the second language to begin and still be considered ?simultaneous.? The majority of ELLs in the United States are actually simultaneous bilinguals rather than sequential bilinguals. Immigrant students are more likely to be sequential bilinguals, whereas second and third generation ELLs are more likely to be simultaneous bilinguals. It seems to be common to think of simultaneous bilingual students as two monolinguals in one and to compare them with monolingual English speakers and monolingual speakers of another language when assessing their language proficiency. Doing so does not adequately account for the process of acquiring two languages at once and sets up a deficit perspective. Often they are described as ?limited in both languages? or as ?not having a strong first language.? Yet this depiction fails to take into account their full linguistic repertoire. Consider this example: a five-year-old simultaneous bilingual student is administered a Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in English and scores at a lower level than a typical monolingual English speaking five-year-old. That same five-year-old then takes a Spanish version of the test and scores at a lower level than a fluent Spanish speaking five-year-old. He?s lower than average in Spanish as well as English?so ?limited-limited.? But what if we were to add the total number of words that five-year-old knows in English and Spanish? The combination could very well be greater than the total number of words known by fluent English or Spanish speakers. From this perspective, the five-year-old is not limited at all. In fact, he has a head start towards becoming fully bilingual if we nurture his acquisition of both languages. We need a new way to

**A** think about the process of simultaneous bilingual language acquisition (Escamilla, 2000).

**Q** **Karen Socker**

Is it beneficial to utilize computer technology to assist ESOL students or is human interaction considered the best and only way?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

I would say that in general it is very important for ELLs to have frequent opportunities to interact with peers--to use language and, if I had to make a choice, I would opt for peer collaboration or explicit instruction by a teacher over computer programs. But, that said, I do think that computer programs can be helpful and can provide useful instruction.

**Q** **Bev Smyth**

What are some of the characteristics of language acquisition that can mirror a learning disability?

**A** **Janette Klingner, Ph.D.**

It is important to know possible characteristics associated with LD and how these might be manifested in students acquiring English as a second or additional language. There are multiple possible reasons for students to display each of these behaviors. Thus, when teachers notice any of their ELLs exhibiting one of the behaviors, their first thought should be to wonder if the underlying reason for the behavior might be second language acquisition. See the table "[Some Similarities Between LD and Language Acquisition](#)" for more information.

### Related Resources from RTINetwork.org:

- VIDEO: [Janette Klingner: Response to Intervention With English Language Learners](#)
- VIDEO: [Janette Klingner: Realizing the Potential of RTI: Considerations When Implementing RTI with English Language Learners](#)
- VIDEO: [Janette Klingner: Realizing the Potential of RTI: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in English Language Learners](#)
- [Response to Intervention in Reading for English Language Learners](#) by Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D., and Alba Ortiz, Ph.D.
- [Response to Intervention: Implications for Spanish-Speaking English Language Learners](#) by Elsa Cardenas Hagan, Ed.D.

### Additional Resources:

- [Center on Instruction](#)
- [Color?n colorado](#)

- Goldenberg, C. (2008). [Teaching English language learners](#). American Educator.
- Haager, D., Klingner, J. K., & Aceves, T. (2010). *How to teach English language learners: Effective strategies from outstanding educators*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- [The International Reading Association](#)
- Klingner, J. K., Hoover, J., & Baca, L. (2008). *Why do English Language Learners struggle with reading? Distinguishing language acquisition from learning disabilities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Haager, D., Klingner, J. K., & Vaughn, S. (Eds.) (2007). *Evidence-based practices for response to intervention*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- [National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems](#)
- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)
- [National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition](#)