Challenges when Implementing RTI with English Language Learners

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Why RTI?

National Research Council’s Report on Disproportionate Representation

IDEA 2004

LD Summit

President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education
Response to Intervention: A Three-tiered Model

Targeted assistance, as part of general education support system

More intensive, individualized support

Research-based instruction in general education classroom
Challenges When Using RTI in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools

• Most teachers lack the training, expertise, and experience to teach reading and other subjects to culturally and linguistically diverse students.

• Most “evidence-based” practices have not been sufficiently validated for diverse populations.

• Recommendations for assessing and teaching English language learners do not adequately account for what we know about learning to read in one’s first and in a second language.

• Time, resources...
Challenge 1: According to progress-monitoring data, more than half of English language learners are not reaching benchmarks.
Recommendations:

• When many students are not progressing, **change instruction:**
  – 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?

• This will require:
  – **observing in classrooms** and supporting instruction
  – *developing and capitalizing on local expertise.*
Progress Monitoring

- Use *multiple* assessment methods to provide a comprehensive view of learning.
  - No single best test or assessment strategy.
  - Different assessments tap into different skills and knowledge.

- RTI assessment strategies should reflect the multi-dimensional nature of language and literacy.

- Use progress monitoring to ensure that instruction is adjusted to meet the needs of individual students and classrooms of learners—use it to find what works!
Challenge 2: School personnel are unclear how the RTI process is similar to and different from the Pre-Referral Process used in previous years.
Recommendations

• Shift from figuring out what is wrong with a student to **looking more broadly at the instructional context** and at how to provide support for all students.

• Focus first on improving core instruction, with differentiation.
  – Use progress monitoring data to look at classroom datasets.

• Make sure someone on the team has expertise in how to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities.
Challenge 3: School personnel are confused about Tier 2 interventions and wonder whether EL services "count" as a secondary intervention.
Recommendations

• English as a second language (ESL) and sheltered content should be part of Tier 1 and the core curriculum for all English language learners.

• The “20%” of students receiving Tier 2 interventions should NOT be mostly just the English language learners in a diverse school—if most English language learners are not progressing, the instruction is not sufficient.
Challenge 4: School personnel are confused by what it means for practices to be “evidence-based” (or “research-based”) for ELLs.
What Do We Mean by “Evidence-based”?

- The RTI model is based on the principle that instructional practices or interventions at each level should be based on scientific research evidence about “what works.”
- However, it is essential to find out what works with whom, by whom, for what purposes, and in what contexts—
With Whom?

- When deciding if a practice is appropriate for implementation as part of an RTI model, it should have been validated with students like those with whom it will be applied.

- The National Reading Panel report “did not address issues relevant to second language learning” (2000, p. 3).
With Whom?

• Research reports should include information about:
  – language proficiency
  – ethnicity
  – life and educational experiences (e.g., socio-economic, previous schooling)

• Data should be disaggregated to show how interventions might differentially affect students from diverse backgrounds.
With Whom?

- English language learners are often omitted from participant samples because of their limited English proficiency.
- Yet language dominance and proficiency are important research variables and can affect treatment outcomes.
- Leaving students out of studies limits the external validity and applicability of such studies, especially for those who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students.
By Whom?

Who is implementing the instructional practice?
- Researcher?
- Experienced teacher?
- Specialist?
- Paraprofessional?
By Whom?

• Does the teacher...
  – have the attributes of culturally responsive teachers?
  • build positive, supportive relationships with students?
  • have high expectations and provide the support for students to meet expectations?
  • help students make connections?
  • work well with students’ families and the community?
  • help most culturally diverse students succeed to high levels?
  – collaborate well with other professionals?
For What Purposes?

- What is the goal of instruction?
  - Some widely touted instructional approaches help improve word identification skills, but not necessarily reading comprehension.
  - According to the Reading First Impact Study: "Reading First did not have statistically significant impacts on student reading comprehension test scores in grades 1-3."
Variations in program implementation and effectiveness across schools and classrooms are common (see the First Grade Studies for a classic example, Bond & Dykstra, 1967).

– When students struggle, is it the program, the teachers’ implementation, or the school context?
– What is it about the system that facilitates or impedes learning?
– Schools are dependent on larger societal influences that should not be ignored.
In What Contexts?

- It is essential to observe in classrooms.
  - Is the instruction appropriate for students’ language and learning needs?
  - What is the relationship between a teacher and students?
  - How does the teacher promote interest and motivation?

- We draw different conclusions when several students are struggling rather than just a few ...
• Experimental research studies tell us what works best with the majority of students in a research sample, not all students.

• Qualitative research helps us understand why a practice works or not, and factors that can affect implementation.

• Observation studies in the classrooms of effective teachers tell us a lot about the attributes of effective teachers and the characteristics of effective instruction.
Opportunity to Learn?

Instruction in an RTI Model By Teachers who Lack Preparation in Teaching English Language Learners and Use Generic “Evidence-based” Practices

• All examples are from real classrooms with English language learners, most at beginning levels of English proficiency.

• The first two examples are of Tier 1 instruction.
Students are seated in a circle on the alphabet rug. Teacher asks them to stand up, and says, “Let’s do the alphabet rap song.” Teacher begins to rap and makes motions with her hands to symbolize sound-letter correspondence. Sings A-Alley, B-Bubba, C-Catina, D-Deedee… Students are trying to mimic the teacher, however, they are falling behind. [Students are not understanding this--the teacher is going too fast.] Teacher says, “Let’s try it one more time.” More and more students are falling behind to the point where the majority are just looking around and bumping into each other. They look like bumper cars. These students cannot keep up with the song and hand motions. Teacher, “S is for Sammy Snake (making a slithering motion)... V is for Vinny Vampire (motioning with her hands to her mouth that she had vampire fangs)….W is Willie Weasel….” (Orosco, 2007)
The whole Class is sitting in a circle, with the teacher seated at the head. Teacher says, “Yesterday, how many of you knew your sight words? One student speaks out, “One?” Another, “Three?” Teacher replies, “You are right. Three students were able to tell me their sight words. We need to practice these words; we are really behind. Every one of you should know these sight words by now. You need to practice these at home. Don’t you practice these at home?” Teacher says this with frustration in her face and voice. Teacher states, “Only those 3 students will be able to pull from the treasure chest.” … Teacher begins sight words practice and holds up index cards with - Big, My, See, Like, I, At, This, And, Up, Have, Too. Students repeat sight words as Teacher holds up index cards. This is a repetitive process. She then holds up the word “Big” without saying anything. One student says the word “Big.” She holds up a another. “See.” The same student says the word again. She holds up the word “see” again and tells the student who knew the previous answer not to say anything. Pause. Another says “see.” She continues to go through this process with all the words, and says, “Okay guys, you need to practice these at home, you are not paying attention, you should have known these words by now.” (Orosco, 2007)
T., “Let’s work on our sight words.” She writes sight words on her dry erase board: *have, many, some*. T. reads the words and has students repeat them. Some students read the words without much difficulty; others do not say anything. T., “Okay, now can you guys use these words in a sentence? Who would like to try?” No takers. T., “Someone?” T. looks at a student across from her and says, “Pick a word and try.” The student is hesitant. T., “How about if I help you? Can you say this, *I have some snow*. Repeatata (Spanglish).” The student seems to get the gist, “I hab… so…mo… s…no.” T., “Good. How about someone else? How about the word *many*?” Students hesitate. T., “Okay. Here is an example. I *have many friends*. Can you say this?” Student, “I…hab…ma…ni friend…z.” T., “Good. Next word. *Some*.” T. looks at another student and makes up a sentence, “*I have some toys*.” S. repeats… The teacher takes them back to class.
• The teacher has a master’s degree in special education and has been teaching for about 20 years. She noted, “I teach LD by the book.”

• 4 second-grade culturally and linguistically diverse students, all determined to have learning disabilities.
Teacher: “Boys and girls, we need to read our story, ‘Polar Bears’. We need to listen to see what color they are, where they live or what they eat.” Teacher directs students to look at the title page, asks what they think the book is about. No response. Teacher asks, “Are polar bears nice?” No response. Teacher begins to read: “Polar Bears live in the Arctic at the North Pole. The polar bear is a marine mammal… Polar bears are carnivores…” [OC: I wonder how many students know what a marine mammal is, or a carnivore.] … As she is reading students are beginning to check out; one student is playing with the drawstring in his hooded sweater. Another two are whispering to each other. The teacher continues: “The white fur is important camouflage for the bears as they hunt their prey on the ice…”
[OC: What is camouflage? This story uses tough words for ESL students at this level. I wonder if the teacher knows whether these kids really understand this.] Teacher: “Okay let’s talk about the story now. So what do they smell?” No reply. Teacher, “Anyone?” One student, “People.” Teacher, “Good.” [This was not in the story.] Teacher, “Do polar bears live here in Colorado?” Students, “Yes.” Teacher, “Good. They could if they lived at the zoo.” [Colorado was not in the story.] … Only one student is responding, with one word answers. [OC: I wonder if this book is too difficult for them. However, it would work for these kids if the language was modeled and sheltered for them…] (Orosco, 2007)
Challenge 5: Many school personnel are not unsure how to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities.
Examples

• The staffing specialist asked the teacher her opinion, "I see he's ESOL Level 4. Do you think that has a bearing on this?" The teacher responded, "No, he speaks English well." Although Rex had been tested in both English and Spanish, only English scores were shared and included in the psychologist’s written report, and no further mention was made of the possible influence of language on Rex’s IQ score of 74.
James was at ESOL Level 1.

Teacher: “My real concern is that when I give a direction (in English) he gives me a blank look, like he doesn’t understand. He’s lost.” She also noted that he had difficulty paying attention.

Assistant principal: “A lot of children in ESOL have these difficulties.”

Teacher: “But I think it’s more than that. It’s more a matter of higher level thinking.”

This was accepted by the team and they proceeded to refer the student for an evaluation. They did not discuss his native language skills, and whether he exhibited these same problems in Haitian Creole.
It’s important to...

Understand the second language acquisition process

- Oral language
- Written language
- Literacy (and what can be confusing)

Know possible characteristics associated with LD

Look at the quality of instruction and students’ opportunities to learn
Sequential Bilinguals and Simultaneous Bilinguals

ELLs with LD exhibit difficulties in their first language as well as in English.

- When students are sequential bilinguals, it is not hard to determine whether difficulties are evident in both languages.
- When students are simultaneous bilinguals, it is much more challenging to determine if difficulties are the result of language acquisition or LD.
- We need a new way to think about the process of simultaneous language acquisition (Escamilla).
# (Some) Similarities b/w LD and Language Acquisition

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviors Associated w/ LD</th>
<th>Behaviors when Acquiring an L2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with phonological awareness</td>
<td>Difficulty distinguishing b/w sounds not in L1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence</td>
<td>Confusion w/ sound-symbol correspondence when different than in L1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in L1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words</td>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings not understood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty retelling a story in sequence</td>
<td>May understand more than can convey in L2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confused by figurative language</td>
<td>Confused by figurative language, anaphora, words with multiple meanings</td>
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<td>Slow to process challenging language</td>
<td>Slow to process challenging language</td>
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<td>Difficulty following directions</td>
<td>Difficulty following directions</td>
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<tr>
<td>May have poor auditory memory</td>
<td>May have poor auditory memory</td>
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<tr>
<td>May seem easily frustrated</td>
<td>May seem easily frustrated</td>
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Challenge 6: School personnel are unclear about differences between learning to read in English as one’s first language and learning to read in English as a second or additional language.
There are important differences between learning to read in one’s L1 and L2 (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Learning trajectories for emerging simultaneous bilinguals are not well understood.

Benchmarks and expected rates of progress may not be the same (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007).

Some recommendations (e.g., the IES guide) put too much emphasis on phonological awareness and letter naming at the expense of other skills, such as oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension.
In conclusion...

- RTI must be a comprehensive, school-wide approach, requiring:
  - coordinating curriculum and assessment considerations,
  - addressing teachers’ professional development needs,
  - attending to school climate issues,
  - and enhancing leaders’ capacities to orchestrate and respond to multiple (often contradictory) reforms (Adelman & Taylor).

- Sustained implementation of RTI will require strong leadership, collaboration among special educators, general educators, and families, and a well-established infrastructure (Burdette, 2007).