

How to Identify and Support English Language Learners At-Risk For Reading Difficulties: An Overview of the Response to Intervention Program Model

Shiva Khalaf, M.A.¹, Kristi L. Santi, Ph.D.² & Jacqueline Hawkins, Ed.D.³

Abstract

Children whose primary language is other than English often experience more challenges in developing reading skills in the early elementary grades. With the growing population of English language learners (ELLs), there is an increasing need for effective approaches that identify ELLs at risk of developing reading difficulties. The early and accurate identification of these children is crucial to ensuring their later academic success. Response to Intervention (RtI) is a way in which schools can identify children who need special support in the acquisition of major skills such as reading and writing, and provide early intervention for them. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of RtI program model that can be transferred into early elementary classroom practice. This paper (a) provides a description of key features of an RtI model; (b) identifies the significance of employing RtI for ELLs; and (c) presents essential reading skills for early elementary grades.

Keywords: English language learners, response to intervention, reading difficulties, fluency interventions, phonological awareness interventions

The current article is organized into three main parts. In Part 1, we will present an overview of Response to Intervention (RtI). We will present the most common approaches to RtI, the significance of assessment in RtI, and the three tiers of instruction in RtI. In Part 2, we will account for the importance and challenges of employing RtI models for English Language learners. Finally, in Part 3, we will provide a description of essential reading skills followed by examples of reading interventions that can be employed as part of classroom and supplemental instruction.

1. An Overview of Response to Intervention

Prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), practitioners mainly used IQ-achievement tests to identify students with learning disabilities. Using IQ-achievement tests was widely criticized due to its lack of theoretical basis, leading states and districts to define IQ-achievement differently (Willson, 1987; Reschly & Hosp, 2004). Namely, this approach failed to distinguish among students of various ability levels, students with learning disabilities, and those whose problems were due to other factors such as their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Fletcher et al., 2002). Thus, an alternative approach, known as "Response to Intervention" (RtI), which identifies children who need additional support, was proposed. This approach is a systematic process of maximizing learning opportunities for struggling students, whom are lagging behind in any content area, and emphasizing the significance of early and effective intervention for all students before making a referral to Special Education (Kemp & Eaton, 2008).

¹ Graduate Research Assistant, College of Education, University of Houston, Houston, TX.

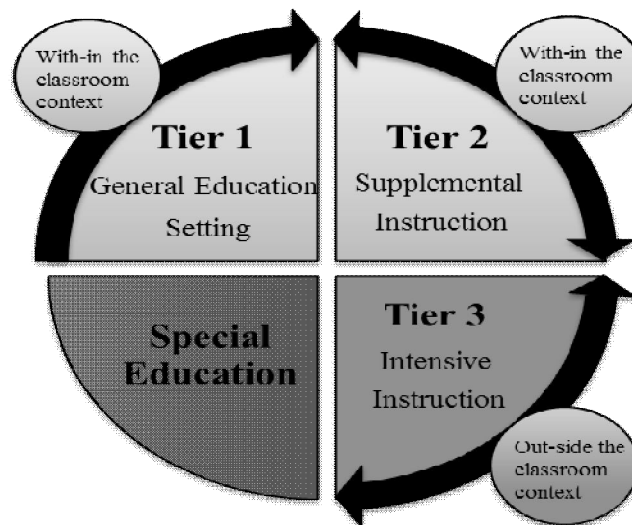
² Associate Professor of Special Education, College of Education, University of Houston, Houston, TX.

³ Associate Professor of Special Education, College of Education, University of Houston, Houston, TX.

Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, and Young (2003) identified two distinct approaches of RtI, depending on the degree of individualization and standardization. According to these researchers, on the one hand, the problem-solving approach is more consistent with the No Child Left Behind legislation and is favored by practitioners. The problem-solving approach aims at developing an individualized intervention for each child's unique need (Turse & Albrecht, 2015). On the other hand, the standard-protocol approach is more in line with the IDEA and is favored by researchers. The standard-protocol approach is made up of a multi-tiered cyclical procedure, and uses evidence based standardized interventions for either an individual child or a group of children. That is, through a screening process, individual students who are lagging behind and are not able to meet grade level expectations are identified as eligible to receive treatment- extra instruction within the classroom context (Tier 2). For those students who respond positively the treatment is discontinued; whereas, those who remain indifferent, receive additional treatment in Tier 3. Students in Tier 3 will receive intensive instruction outside the classroom setting in addition to the instruction they receive within the general education classroom for a fixed period of time. If these students demonstrate adequate progress, they are returned to the general education classroom. However, if they show insufficient progress at Tier 3, with further inspection they will be referred to special education programs for individuals with learning disabilities.

Figure 1. The multi-tiered cyclical procedure disabilities.

Figure 1 demonstrates the multi-tiered cyclical procedure for the different stages of the early identification of students with learning needs.



1.1 The Relationship between RtI and Assessments

Assessments provide information about the students that are lagging behind therefore; they are regarded as the underlying component of any intervention plan. With the information that assessments provide, teachers are able to design instruction that is based on the individual student's needs. In other words, effective assessments are used in RtI plans to identify at-risk students or those who are experiencing difficulties (screening); to monitor students' progress during the year (progress monitoring); to inform instructional planning (diagnosis); and to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions (evaluation) (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). For the purpose of this paper, screening and progress monitoring assessments are considered in more depth.

1.1.1 Screening Assessments

Screening refers to the information that is collected on a student's overall ability before instruction. Once an initial baseline for all students has been established, students who are achieving at, above, or below grade level expectations will be identified. Typically, students that score below the 40th percentile may require additional instructional treatment (Wixson & Valencia, 2011).

Screening tools that may be used in the elementary grade-levels may include the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Emergent Literacy Skills (DIBELS; Good & Kaminski, 2002), Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI; TEA, UTHSC, & UH, 2010), Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 2012), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver,

1997), Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening (PALS; Invernizzi, Sullivan, Meier, Swank, 2004), and AIMSweb (Pearson, 2012).

1.1.2 Progress Monitoring Assessments

Progress monitoring assessment is a process of monitoring and gathering information on the progress of students through curriculum based assessments (Wixson & Valencia, 2011). This process consists of formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments are often informal measures used on a regular daily basis. These measures may include teacher observation, teacher-made assessments, work samples, and etc. Summative assessments, however, are more formal and are given at regular predetermined intervals during the year to determine whether a student is making adequate progress. These measures are indicators of the effectiveness of instruction and should therefore be matched to the intervention a student is receiving (Wixson & Valencia, 2011).

Progress monitoring measurements that determine students' growth in early elementary grades may include the DIBELS, TPRI, AIMSweb, and Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR; Renaissance Learning, 2010).

1.2 The Difference between the Three Tiers of Instruction in RtI

The three different tiers in an RtI plan can be classified into six categories grounded on the following questions: what is being instructed, who is the receiver of instruction, who is the instructor, when and how long will the instruction be, where will the instruction take place, and how often will progress monitoring take place.

1.2.1 What is being instructed?

In Tier 1, a high-quality core instructional program, which meets the needs of 80% - 90% of students, is provided and students' progress is further monitored. In Tier 2, in addition to the core instructional program, 5-15% of students who were not meeting the Tier 1 benchmark are provided with supplemental instruction. These students can receive an intervention based on the standard-protocol or problem-solving approach. As alluded previously, in the standard-protocol approach, supplemental instruction is provided to students in the area of skill deficiency, whereas in the problem-solving approach, supplemental instruction is based on the student's specific skill deficits. In Tier 3, in addition to the core instruction, 1-5% of students who are still struggling in Tier 2 will receive more intensive instruction.

1.2.2 Who is the Receiver of Instruction?

In Tier 1, instruction is intended for all students- struggling and advanced. In Tier 2, instruction is intended for small groups (3-5 students) that were not meeting grade-level expectations. In the standard-protocol approach, students that have similar needs are placed in a group and presented with research-validated intervention which addresses multiple skillsets. However, in the problem-solving approach intervention is based on the unique needs of the students. In Tier 3 instruction is intended for small groups (1-2 students) or individual students.

1.2.3 Who is the Instructor?

In Tier 1 and 2, the primary classroom teacher provides instruction. In Tier 3 a specialist that is familiar with the student's skill deficiencies provides the instruction.

1.2.4 When and How Long Will Instruction Be?

Core instruction in Tier 1 is based on the 90-minute classroom literacy block. In Tier 2, in addition to the instructional opportunities that students receive during the 90-minute classroom instruction, additional treatment is also provided. That is to say, struggling students receive small group (3-5 students) supplemental instruction for 20-30 minutes, 3-5 days per cycle. After 9-12 weeks of instruction, students' progress will be further monitored. In Tier 3, in addition to Tier 1, students will receive highly intensive supplemental instruction in very small or individual settings for 30-60 minutes, 4-5 days per cycle. Within 3-6 months, students' progress will be further monitored.

1.2.5 Where Will Instruction Take Place?

In Tier 1 and 2, instruction is offered in the general education classroom. In Tier 3, instruction is generally provided in an alternative location.

1.2.6 How Often Will Progress Monitoring Take Place?

In Tier 1, universal screening and progress monitoring takes place four times a year, during fall, winter, spring, and pre-summer. In Tier 2, based on the treatment, and the student’s rate of progress, intervention can take 9-12 weeks. Thus, monitoring in Tier 2 varies, but takes place no less than once every 2 weeks. In Tier 3, based on the rate of the student’s progress intervention can take 3 to 6 months. Therefore, progress monitoring takes place no less than once a week. Table 1 provides a summary of the tiered interventions and how they differ.

1.3 Procedures for RtI

Wixson and Valencia (2011) have provided a step-by-step RtI reading implementation plan for early elementary grade teachers. The following step-wise procedure can be used for English only students (non-ELLs) and also English language learners (ELLs).

Step 1: The general education teacher administers a screening measure to all students 4 times a year beginning in the fall. Screenings are conducted for the purposes of initially identifying at risk-students.

Step 2: Based on results from the initial screening assessments in the fall, if a student is initially below the 40th percentile, then she/he is identified as at-risk and continues to be progress monitored by the general education teacher 3-5 times a week during 9-12 weeks to confirm or disprove the initial risk status.

	What	Who (Student)	Who (Teacher)	When (Duration)	Where	How Often
Tier 1	The core instructional program which meets the needs of 80% - 90% of students is provided.	Instruction is intended for all of the students.	Instruction is provided by the classroom teacher, or the ESL teacher.	Instruction takes the 90-minute classroom literacy block.	Instruction is delivered in the general education classroom.	Monitoring takes place four times a year (e.g., fall, winter, spring, and pre-summer).
Tier 2	5 - 15% of students are provided with a standard-protocol or problem-solving supplemental instruction.	Instruction is intended for small groups (3-5 students)	Instruction is provided by the general education teacher.	In addition to the core instructional opportunities, students receive supplemental interventions for 20-30 minutes, 3-5 days per cycle for 9-12 weeks.	Instruction is offered in the classroom context.	Monitoring varies, but it takes place no less than once every two weeks.
Tier 3	1 - 5% of students will receive more intensive instruction.	Instruction is intended for individual students or small groups (1-2 students)	Instruction is provided by the reading specialist.	In addition to the classroom instruction, students receive intensive instruction for 30-60 minutes, 4-5 days per cycle for 3-6 months.	Instruction is provided in a location outside of the classroom context.	Monitoring varies, but it takes place no less than once a week.

Table 1: An Overview of the Tiered Interventions and How They Differ

Step 3: In the problem-solving approach, once the teacher identifies the students who are not responding to the general education classroom interventions, she/he will refer the struggling students to the RtI Problem-Solving Team (PST). In this stage teachers are required to provide information about the at-risk students' classroom performance. However, in the standard-protocol approach, the school or grade level teams recommend a research-validated intervention.

Step 4: In the problem-solving approach, if the PST meeting determines that the student has failed to respond to the general education instructions (Tier 1), then he/she is referred for Tier 2 supplemental instruction. In this case the struggling students receive intervention based on their unique need individually or in small group (3-5 students) for 20-30 minutes. Whereas, in the standard-protocol approach, if the students are referred to Tier 2 intervention, they will receive supplemental instruction in groups of 5-6 that may address multiple skill sets.

Step 5: Within 9-12 weeks of instruction, either the PST (in the case of problem-solving approach) or the school or grade level teams (in the case of standard-protocol approach) assess students' progress in Tier 2 to determine whether their achievement is improving or not. At this point, students would be advised to remain in Tier 2, move back to Tier 1, or move to Tier 3.

Step 6: If the student demonstrates insufficient progress in Tier 2, he/she will be moved to Tier 3, where a specialist will provide intensive interventions.

Step 7: Within three to six months, the PST or the school or grade level teams consistently evaluates the progress of students in Tier 3 to determine whether the student can be sent to the general education setting, remain in Tier 3 or be referred for Special Education.

2. RtI Models for English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELLs) are students whose primary language is other than English, and whose English skills are so limited that they have difficulty learning in a general education setting in which instruction is provided in English (Ortiz & Kushner, 1997). According to the US Department of Education (2015), the percentage of ELLs in public schools in the United States has increased between 2002-2013 (8.7% and 9.2%, respectively), indicating a higher demand for guidelines on how to best address ELLs academic needs.

Given the importance of reading skills, it is critical to determine the effect of the RtI approach in identifying at-risk ELLs by focusing on early literacy interventions. Although, there is a significant amount of research on early reading skills, and how they are highly related to later reading ability (Catts, Nielsen, Bridges, Liu, & Bontempo 2015; Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1994; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006), most of this research has focused largely on non-ELLs, and less is known about ELLs. Thus, there is an increasing concern about the correct identification of culturally and linguistically diverse at-risk ELLs.

The ability to accurately identify at-risk ELLs is considered to be a major challenge. This problem is partly due to (a) lack of appropriate assessment tools for distinguishing between ELL's difficulty to acquire a second language or a language-based learning disability; and (b) lack of professional personnel who are aware of the unique needs of ELLs (Zehler, Fleishman, Hopstock, Pendzick & Stephenson, 2003). For these reasons, many ELLs are inappropriately over identified as having learning disabilities and placed in special education programs. Abedi (2009) highlighted the disproportionate rate of ELLs that were represented in the learning disability category. Of the total number of ELLs in his study 68.1% were identified as having learning disabilities, whereas only 22.5% ELLs were not categorized as having disabilities, which indicates that ELLs will more likely be misclassified as having a learning disability.

Although, interventions are a central part of RtI plans, there is a constant demand to verify what works best, for whom it works, and the context in which it works (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Unfortunately, when investigating the effects of interventions, many RtI research studies either do not include ELLs because of their limited language proficiency, or they do not disaggregate ELLs and use the same interventions that are used for non-ELLs (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007). In the latter case, it is most often the case that ELLs will not be able to perform similarly to the non-ELLs and would therefore be misclassified as having a learning disability.

Furthermore, in order to make RtI more effective for ELLs, the teaching personnel need to be aware of the recent evidence-based instructional approaches that are designed specifically for ELLs.

They also need to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention by performing formative and summative assessments of ELL's progress (Xu & Drame, 2008). Unfortunately, however, many teachers participate in very few to no hours of professional development related to ELL instruction, others are unable or unwilling to adapt a recommended intervention due to the lack of training and/or resources (Conway, Christensen, Russell, & Brown, 2000). Thus, preparing teaching personnel that are not only familiar with current evidence-based ELL instructional strategies, but are able to incorporate pedagogical strategies for teaching ELLs, becomes crucial in ensuring the success of an effective RtI plan.

3. Examples of Reading-Based Interventions

3.1 Essential Reading Skills

Reading and early literacy interventions are considered to be a central concept in RtI plans. Various intervention studies show that ELLs benefit from instructional materials that emphasize essential concepts such as phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, and fluency (Denton, Anthony, Parker, & Hasbrouck, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2006). Therefore, in the following sections, we have provided examples of fluency and phonological awareness based interventions for early elementary ELL's in Tiers 1-2 and Tier 3. However, this is not to say that these activities cannot be used with non-ELLs.

3.1.1 Fluency

Fluency, a critical component of skilled reading, is defined as the ability to read text aloud rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and accurately (National Reading Panel; NRP, 2000). It is a common held belief that fluency develops from reading practice, thus, various fluency-related activities can be used as effective interventions for the development of reading fluency of both non-ELLs and ELLs (Hapstak, & Tracey, 2007; Keehn, 2003; Kuhn and Stahl, 2003). Fluency-based interventions allow students to practice their intonation, prosody, and their reading rate (Hapstak, & Tracey, 2007). What follows are examples of fluency based activities that can be used in Tiers 1-2 and Tier 3.

3.1.1.1 Tiers 1-2 Fluency Interventions

In order to develop students' fluency, as part of the whole group intervention, the classroom teacher can incorporate different activities such as, Repeated Reading and Partner Reading. However, the reading specialist can also employ these activities in Tiers 3 using different strategies. Depending on the tier, the time and duration of these activities may vary.

According to the NRP (2000), classroom practices that encourage Repeated Reading activities lead to meaningful improvements in reading for both advanced readers and those who are experiencing reading difficulties. In Repeated Reading activities the classroom teacher can provide short reading passages (about 50 and 300 words) that (a) contain words generally recognizable to student's individual reading level; and (b) culturally and linguistically diverse students are familiar with (Young, Bowers, & MacKinnon, 1996). In Repeated Reading activities, students orally read the selected passage 3-5 times until a predetermined reading rate is attained (e.g., 85 words per minute).

Partner Reading activities enable classroom teachers to use Repeated Reading with all students simultaneously without any management difficulties (Koskinen and Blum, 1986). This strategy allows students to read a certain passage a number of times to become more fluent. In pairs, the students are required to take turns reading a short passage to each other. Each student reads the text three times and then provides feedback about their own experience and also their partner's reading fluency. A typical Partner Repeated Reading activity takes about 10 to 15 minutes. Furthermore, teachers can either pair students that have the same reading ability; pair more fluent readers with less fluent readers; pair ELLs with other ELLs; and also pair ELLs with non-ELLs.

3.1.1.2 Tier 3 Fluency Intervention

In addition to the whole class fluency activities, students identified at-risk, need supplemental instruction. The tasks and activities that the reading specialist may use as part of the intervention plan may include, Repeated Reading, Repeated Reading with Comprehension Strategy, and Stop/Go.

Therrien (2004) claims that Repeated Reading with Comprehension is designed to improve students reading fluency and comprehension. Therrien, found that this strategy can be used as an intervention to increase learning disabled and non-disabled students overall fluency and comprehension ability on a particular passage.

In this activity the student will read aloud a passage for one minute while the reading specialist marks his/her errors. After the one-minute time limit, the specialist will provide feedback on the student's reading rate, number of errors, and quality of reading expression. The student will then be asked to reread the passage for three more times, one minute each, with a different objective each time. For example, she/he would be asked to reread the passage and say what the passage was mostly about, to talk about the most important things she learned from the passage, and to predict what the rest of the passage would be about. Finally, the student would be asked to read the passage with the reading specialist at a steady pace a final time. The reading specialist should record the students reading rate (number of words read in one minute) each time and monitor the student's progress. This activity takes 10-15 minutes to complete.

3.1.2 Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness, defined as the ability to identify and manipulate linguistic sounds apart from their meanings, is a fundamental skill in learning to read (NRP, 2000). Various studies investigating phonological awareness in two languages show that phonological awareness skills in the first and second language correlate with each other, transfer cross-linguistically, and predict word-reading development in both languages (Geva & Wang, 2001; Riccio et al., 2001). Given this evidence, phonological awareness interventions are believed to highly benefit ELLs. In their study, Healy, Vanderwood, and Edelston (2005), found that of the lowest performing ELLs, 80% responded positively to phonological awareness interventions, and the remaining 20% we referred to Tier 3 intensive intervention.

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that includes various met linguistic skills. For example, phoneme awareness allows students to understand the alphabetic principle, the sound-symbol correspondence rules, and even recognize words that are only partially regular (NRP, 2000). Therefore, an awareness of phonemes is crucial to understanding the logic of the alphabetic principle. Therefore, in order to stimulate student's phonological awareness, the following interventions can be used in Tiers 1-2 and Tier 3.

3.1.2.1 Tiers 1-2 Phoneme Awareness Interventions

In regular class curriculum teachers can incorporate phonological awareness activities, which teach rhyme, syllable, and phoneme awareness. These activities can be done with the whole class or in groups of 5-6.

3.1.2.1.1 Phonemic Awareness Activities Which Teach Rhyme

According to Griffith and Olson (1992), the easiest phonemic awareness tasks are those that require students to rhyme words or to recognize rhymes. Rhyme activities, can be as simple as asking rhyme-recognition questions (e.g., does *log* rhyme with *dog*?), rhyme-completion questions (e.g., Jack and Jill went up the _____?), and naming similar rhyming words questions (e.g., what other words rhyme with hat?).

3.1.2.1.2 Phonemic Awareness Activities Which Teach Syllable Awareness

Syllable awareness tasks can be divided into segmentation and deletion tasks. The general education teacher can use segmentation activities to teach children to identify and count the number of syllables in words and pronounce each syllable separately (e.g., *garden* has 2 syllables: *gar* and *den*). In deletion activities the teacher can use compound words and ask the children to identify new words by deleting one of the parts of the compound word (e.g., if you delete *basket* from *basketball* you will have *ball*).

3.1.2.1.3 Phonemic Awareness Activities Which Teach Phoneme Awareness

This activity consists of five sub-activities. In the *initial sound recognition* activity, Students are required to select a picture starting with a specific sound or to pronounce the starting sound of a word. In the *phoneme segmentation* activity students are presented with flashcards of words and are asked to pronounce all the sounds in the words. For the *phoneme deletion* activity, the students need to identify the sound that was deleted in a word. (e.g., fish: ish, the /f/

sound was left out). In the *phoneme substitution* activity, the students make new words by putting different sounds at the beginning of words. And in the *phoneme blending* activity the children identify pictures or body parts when they are pronounced one phoneme at a time (e.g., /h/, /a/, /n/, /d/). All these activities can be carried out as part of the whole class activity or in groups of 5-6 (for more information please refer to Florida Department of Education, 1999).

3.1.2.2 Tier 3 Phoneme Awareness Interventions

In addition to the aforementioned phoneme awareness activities, students (both ELLs and non-ELLs) that are identified at-risk will need supplemental instruction in Tier 3. The tasks and activities that the reading specialist may use as part of the intervention plan may include phoneme segmentation, and letter sound correspondence.

3.1.2.2.1 Phonemic Segmentation

The basic objective of the phoneme segmenting intervention is to increase students' mastery of phonemes. Specialized segmentation activities, which help improve students reading development is based on previous evidence based research findings (NRP, 2000). In these tasks, the reading specialist models how to say the individual sounds of two different words, and asks the student to do the same (e.g., *hat* is made of the sounds /h/, /a/, and /t/).

3.1.2.2.2 Letter Sound Correspondence

In this activity children identify the sounds associated with individual letters and letter combinations (Rosenberg, 2006). The objective of this task is to increase the rate of letter sounds identification for students in Tier 3. This activity can be done in small groups or individually. In this task the student is presented with a set of five flash cards with different letters, three of which she/he has already mastered. The reading specialist models the sounds of each card before asking the student to identify the letters. The child goes through the five cards repeatedly until she/he consistently responds correctly.

4. Conclusion

The early and accurate identification of ELLs at risk of developing reading difficulties is crucial to ensuring their later academic success. As alluded previously, the most challenging aspect of identifying ELLs who exhibit academic difficulties, is identifying whether the problem is due to language proficiency or a learning disability. The article discusses the problem-solving and standard-protocol approaches to identifying at risk children and provides sample activities that can be employed in RTI program models.

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