Effective Reading Intervention Practices for English Language Learners
**SUMMARY**

In the U.S. today, we are faced with an increasingly diverse student population. ELLs make up a growing majority of these students. A disproportionate number of these students struggle to learn to read and qualify for special education. Best practices for ELLs are sought. Teachers who incorporate culturally responsive teaching with an emphasis on explicit instruction typically see major improvements in reading performance. When this type of reading instruction is provided, it should focus on the elements of effective reading instruction known to have strong evidence of success. These elements include (a) screening for reading problems and monitoring progress (strong); (b) providing intensive small-group reading interventions (strong); (c) providing extensive and varied vocabulary instruction (strong); and (d) scheduling regular peer-assisted learning opportunities (strong). Other recommendations to improve reading performance for ELLs include an emphasis on comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading, with rich discussion and collaboration evident. Vocabulary instruction, provided in an explicit fashion and often with the use of technology, can prove helpful for this population. Content-rich reading that challenges ELLs to do more is also advocated, again with explicitly taught strategies on how to best handle this type of text. Among the most promising interventions reviewed by Cheung and Slavin (2012) in their synthesis of research for Spanish-dominant ELLs, a common theme emerged—interventions that included extensive use of cooperative learning were found to impact reading acquisition in a positive manner. This finding was noted by Cheung and Slavin (2005) in a previous review of effective reading programs for ELLs. Finally, reading interventions must include an emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension to make a difference in reading performance.
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe how educators can best meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) who require strategic or intensive intervention in English-based reading. An overview of ELLs is provided along with a discussion of culturally responsive instruction and explicit instruction. Further, use of culturally responsive, explicit instruction within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework is highlighted along with the elements of effective reading interventions for this population. How best to teach ELLs to read (native language first, then in English; the two in combination; or English only) is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we focus on best practices in strategic and intensive reading interventions for these students.

WHO ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

The term English language learner (ELL) is defined as “an active learner of the English language who may benefit from various types of language support programs. This term is used mainly in the U.S. to describe K–12 students” (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2008, p. 2). The number of ELLs who enter school speaking a primary language other than English is increasing. In fact, this number is accelerating at a much more rapid pace than the overall preK-grade 12 student population (Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students, 2011). Educators are increasingly “challenged to help these children reach the level of proficiency required for learning sophisticated academic content through English” (Dixon et al., 2012, p. 6).

Of all ELLs, Hispanics are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011): they total about 16.5% of our population, about 50 million people (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Roughly 25% of the public elementary school population and about 21% of the high school population is Hispanic (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Rotherham (2011) notes that the Census Bureau estimates that the percentage of Hispanics will be 30 or more by 2050. Further, some states, such as Texas (Smith, 2012) and California (Kane, 2010), at this time have a majority of Hispanic students in their state’s public schools.

Research shows that Hispanic students from Spanish-speaking homes disproportionately live in poverty, drop out of school, and perform more poorly on measures of reading comprehension (see Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010 and 2011, for details). For example, roughly 76% and 73% of fourth- and eighth-grade Hispanic public school students, respectively, qualify for free or reduced price school lunch. The figures for White public school students show that 29% and 24% in fourth and eighth grade, respectively, qualify (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Hispanic students were less likely to graduate from high school than Whites in all but two states (Maine and Hawaii) in the 2010–2011 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Consider the following from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2012):
Nationally, millions of students in grades 7-12 are at risk of dropping out of high school because of low literacy skills, poor attendance, and class failure. Unfortunately, many of these students come from groups that are underserved and underrepresented: students of color, high-mobility students (including foster, migrant, and homeless students), English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students. (p. 1)

Hispanic students are considered to be underachievers, not achieving up to their potential. For example, there appears to be a 25-point discrepancy between Whites and Hispanics in fourth-grade reading achievement scores, with Whites scoring significantly higher; the gap at eighth grade is 24, again favoring Whites (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), fourth graders who scored below the 25th percentile include 33% Whites, 35% Hispanics, 74% qualified for free or reduced price lunch, and 24% ELL; conversely, above the 75th percentile, 71% were White, 11% were Hispanic, 23% were qualified for free or reduced price lunch, and 2% were ELL. Similar findings were noted at the eighth grade. A recent analysis of vocabulary performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012) revealed that 24% of ELLs scored below the 25th percentile at fourth grade, with only 2% scoring above the 75th percentile.

Vocabulary instruction is touted as one of the most important elements of teaching all students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds who experience slow vocabulary development (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Blachowicz, Fisher, & Watts-Taffe, 2005; Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007).

Finally, in many states and districts, ELLs disproportionately qualify for special education (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Klingner & Artiles, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). When examining national means, there is little overrepresentation; yet there is a great deal of variation across and within states and districts. Artiles et al. emphasized that it is important to look at subpopulations of ELLs. They did not find overrepresentation among younger students across several school districts in southern California, but they did find disproportionality among older students (from fifth grade through high school). They also found that ELLs in English immersion classrooms were more likely to receive special education than their peers in modified English immersion or bilingual programs. In an examination of special education placement rates in Arizona since the passage of an English-only bill, Sullivan found that ELLs were increasingly likely to be identified as having LD or intellectual disabilities and less likely to be served in the least restrictive educational environment relative to their White peers. Multiple issues surround the labeling of ELLs for special education services, including the appropriateness of the diagnosis given identification, assessment, language, and instructional factors (Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008). These factors and the issues they raise are beyond the scope of this paper.

The underachievement of ELLs is due in part to inappropriate, ineffective instruction that is developed and/or implemented without keeping in mind the specific language and learning needs of these students. Clearly, solid instructional
programs designed to help all students who struggle in reading are needed. In particular, effective reading instruction targeted to meet the needs of struggling ELLs is warranted given that these students drop out of school at higher rates than their peers and score significantly lower on standardized reading assessments.

**WHAT IS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION?**

“I want the same thing for everyone else’s children as I want for mine” (Delpit, 2006, p. 28). Most educators would probably agree with this statement. However, many of these educators are ill prepared to deal with the unique needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds and ELLs. According to Gay (2010), “You can’t teach what and who you don’t know” (p. 1). Gay advocates that teachers must be aware of student backgrounds in order to enhance student learning experiences. She uses the term *culturally responsive teaching* to describe best practices—teachers create a classroom culture that facilitates and supports the achievement of all students, including those from diverse backgrounds. This type of pedagogy uses knowledge of culture, past experiences, and frames of reference to make learning more relevant and effective; it validates and affirms students, is comprehensive and multidimensional, is empowering and transformative, and is emancipatory (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive teachers have high expectations for their students, value diverse perspectives, and build close relationships with their students, students’ families, and the communities in which they teach. They are experts at making sure new learning is relevant and meaningful for students and connects with their prior knowledge. (For more information on culturally responsive teaching, see Bakken & Smith, 2011; Barnes, 2006; Brown, 2007; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Cheesman & DePry, 2010; Delpit, 1988; Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2002a/2002b; Gonzalez, Pagan, Wendell, & Love, 2011; Huerta, 2011; Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2006; Montgomery, 2001; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012; Terry & Irving, 2010; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2007; White, Zion, Kozleski, & Fulton, 2005.) Many of the research studies that support culturally responsive teaching have been qualitative studies conducted by observing in effective teachers’ classrooms (see Huerta, 2011, for examples with ELLs, and Ladson-Billings, 1994, for examples with African American students), and in effective schools. For two studies on successful schools for ELLs, see Lockwood & Secada, 1999, and Lucas, Henz, & Donato, 1990.

**Best Practices in Culturally Diverse Classrooms**

Best practices for culturally diverse classrooms include the following:

(a) differentiated intensive instruction on the most critical skills to teach (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008);

(b) modeling and dialogue, such as in literature circles (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012; Vialpando, Yedlin, Linse, Harrington, & Cannon, 2005);

(c) technology-based learning in a universal design format (Bakken & Smith, 2011; Curry, 2003) as well as visual supports such as videos to engage learning (Gonzalez et al., 2011);
(d) reflective thinking, making connections, and writing activities and projects (Kea et al., 2006; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; Montgomery, 2001; Richards et al., 2007; Vialpando et al., 2005);

(e) instructional formats that include ample academic responding opportunities, brisk pacing, positive reinforcement, and corrective feedback (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008);

(f) peer-mediated learning, cooperative learning, and pair-shares (Au, 2009/2010; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Vialpando et al., 2005);

(g) progress monitoring on a frequent basis (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008) and cloze procedure assessments (Vialpando et al., 2005);

(h) high expectations and affirmation of students as capable learners (Brown, 2007; Callins, 2006; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Cheesman & DePry, 2010; Pitts, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2007);

(i) focus on teach, model, practice, and apply (explicit instruction) along with think-alouds and carefully constructed scaffolding, feedback, and repetition (Brown, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2011; Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008; Montgomery, 2001);

(j) focus on what students can do versus a deficit model (Terry & Irving, 2010);

(k) collaboration with families (Harry, 2008), capitalizing on funds of knowledge within families and the community (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992);

(l) rich, culturally diverse literature and materials (Barnes, 2006; Gay, 2002a, 2002b, 2010; Richards et al., 2007); and

(m) graphic organizers (Vialpando et al., 2005). Although not all of these practices have been researched with ELLs, many have been.

WHAT IS LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION?

Teachers who work with ELLs should be responsive to their students’ linguistic needs as well as their cultural needs. They should understand and be knowledgeable about: (a) the second-language acquisition process, (b) how learning to read in a second or additional language is similar to and different from learning to read in a first language, (c) how to make sure instruction is comprehensible for their ELLs, (d) how to differentiate instruction to meet diverse students’ needs, and (e) how to use assessment procedures that are sensitive to cultural differences and provide an accurate portrayal of students’ strengths as well as their learning needs.

Although teachers may not need to develop all of the competencies required to be an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, as described by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, 2008), the TESOL Teacher Education Standards can provide a framework for thinking about the different dimensions of expertise that are important and what it means to be culturally and linguistically responsive. TESOL describes five essential domains of expertise: (a) language and knowledge of the second-language acquisition process; (b) culture and an understanding of how culture affects learning; (c) instruction and how to plan
for ESL and content learning; (d) assessment and knowledge of issues concerning assessment in a second or additional language, language proficiency assessments, and classroom-based assessments; and, last but not least, (e) professionalism and the importance of understanding the history of ESL and of being an advocate for one’s students.

Typical literacy instruction does not include enough support in oral language, vocabulary, or comprehension for ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). In multiple studies, ELLs have benefited from targeted vocabulary instruction (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Goldenberg, 2008; Lesaux, Koda, Siegel, & Shanahan, 2006) and frequent opportunities to engage in academic language (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009). Effective vocabulary instruction should be intensive, systematic, explicit, and direct in nature (Green, 2004; Kurjakovic, 2008). Technology that supports the direct teaching of word meaning shows promise for increasing vocabulary (Dalton & Grisham, 2011; McCardle et al., 2005). Vocabulary instruction should also include strategies to help students learn words independently by monitoring their understanding and taking steps to figure out unknown words. One way to do this is by building on ELLs’ native language through cognates (August, Carlo, & Snow, 2005). Another way is by teaching morphological awareness (Keiffer & Lesaux, 2008). Francis et al. (2006) emphasized that ELLs must be given ample opportunities to develop more sophisticated vocabulary backgrounds and strategies to handle challenging narrative and expository text. These strategies include: (a) making predictions, (b) monitoring understanding and asking questions during reading, (c) summarizing after reading, (d) reading with fluency, (e) significant opportunities to engage in academic talk, and (f) focused independent reading opportunities. ELLs also need supports to help them understand new words and make connections with prior learning, such as realia (real objects), pictures, diagrams, and semantic webs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

Further, a focus should be placed on reading and comprehending challenging text. For example, Perez and Holmes (2010) emphasized teaching content-area strategies to ensure students’ success in content-rich classes such as science and social studies. These strategies include learning to access textbooks and other informational materials, to take notes from teacher lectures and textbooks, and to study more effectively. (See Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Latterell, & Pan, 2013 for recommendations on best practices in adolescent literacy instruction.) Motivation is a key component of consideration for these learners. Meltzer and Hamann (2004) describe the importance of making connections, collaborative learning, and in-depth discussions when accessing content-area classes and materials. Having students interact with text and with one another is a key component to success for ELLs (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004).

One way to support ELLs’ comprehension is through Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), a procedure designed to improve reading comprehension through explicitly taught before-, during-, and after-reading comprehension strategies. In CSR, ELLs benefit from rich language exposure with peers through fostered cooperation and engagement with the teacher and other students (Boardman, Klingner, Boele,
& Swanson, 2010; Klingner & Vaughn, 2000; Klingner, Vaughn, Argüelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2011).

Teachers should include a minimum of 90 minutes per week on activities in which students of varying skill levels are grouped or paired for instruction. Partner or small-group work is advocated for this population. Getting students to read short passages, to practice summarizing/developing a gist, to answer questions, and to make predictions are key aspects of peer-assisted learning opportunities and should be included for ELLs.

**WHAT IS EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION?**

Teachers have a profound impact on how much their students learn. “Although it seems simplistic and obvious, teachers of reading ‘teach’; that is, students do not become independent learners through maturation” (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009, p. 126). Students do not learn simply by the passage of time—they must receive instruction. Teaching requires carefully planned teacher and student interactions. The most effective and efficient way of shortening the learning time for all students, including ELLs, is through the direct and explicit teaching of skills. It is a key component of quality instruction for ELLs (Calderón, 2006) and for students with learning disabilities (Ritchey, 2011). Interestingly, reading interventions delivered in either English or Spanish produced significant changes in reading skills when explicit instructional principles were evident (Vaughn et al., 2006; Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, & Francis, 2005). Consider the following:

> As educators, we all have the same goal: to help our students make the maximum possible academic gains in a positive, respectful environment that promotes their success and nurtures their desire to learn. One of the greatest tools available to us in this pursuit is explicit instruction—instruction that is systematic, direct, engaging, and success oriented... explicit instruction is helpful not only when discovery is impossible, but when discovery may be inaccurate, inadequate, incomplete, or inefficient (Archer & Hughes 2011, p. vii).

In explicit instruction, teachers are fully responsible for student learning but gradually relinquish this responsibility to students as the students become successful (Marchand-Martella & Martella, 2013; Ritchey, 2011). Teachers program for student success and are intentional with their instruction rather than leaving students to discover what to do on their own. Thus, instruction “moves from teacher modeling, through guided practice using prompts and cues, to independent and fluent performance by the learner” (Rosenshine, 1986, p. 69).

Explicit instruction is “a systematic method of teaching with emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students” (Rosenshine, 1987, p. 34). Systematic instruction is a key aspect of explicit instruction. It refers to a plan or logical sequence of teaching used to decrease student confusion and errors. For example, teaching letter sounds in a specified and logical order (e.g., separating the teaching of b and d and focusing on high-utility sounds such as a and s among those taught first) is
a hallmark of effective phonics instruction. When a curricular program includes a
detailed scope and sequence showing a logical order of skills, systematic instruction
is evident. That is, prerequisite skills are taught in a step-wise fashion before more
complex skills and strategies are taught. Throughout this process, it is important to
connect new learning with old in ways that are meaningful for students. Tasks should
never feel abstract or disconnected for students. For example, when learning the
sound \( b \), students should connect the new sound with objects or names they already
know, perhaps from home or community. This approach helps students build schema
and be active participants in the learning process.

Systematic phonics instruction can help ELLs learn decoding skills (Slavin &
Cheung, 2004). Even when the focus is on decoding, students should learn the
meanings of words. They also should apply what they have learned by reading
connected text. It is important for ELLs to learn to read and understand multisyllabic
words (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011; Carlo et al., 2004; Mancilla-Martínez &
Lesaux, 2011). Calderón et al. (2011) noted that equal coverage should be provided
for decoding and comprehension skills for ELLs. Word-reading fluency and decoding
skills are known to be significant predictors of text-reading fluency, and text-reading
fluency can explain unique variance in reading comprehension. It is important to
keep in mind, however, that ELLs do not demonstrate the same relationship between
fluency and comprehension as fluent English speakers (Crosson & Lesaux, 2010). ELLs
can become fluent word callers but slow down when they focus on comprehension.

Explicit, or direct, instruction can also be referred to as “demonstration-prompt-
practice” (Stevens & Rosenshine, 1981), “antecedent prompt and test” (Martella,
Nelson, Marchand-Martella, & O’Reilly, 2012) or “I do, we do, you do” (Archer &
Hughes, 2011). In this type of instruction, students are shown how to perform a task
before being expected to do it on their own. “High-quality instruction is the single
most important factor in improving student achievement for English Learners”
(Calderón, 2006, p. 1). This high-quality instruction should be explicit in nature to
ensure the needs of ELLs are being met in the most efficient and effective manner
possible.

**HOW CAN CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY
RESPONSIVE, EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION BE INFUSED
INTO A RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK?**

When explicit culturally and linguistically responsive reading instruction is
delivered, it should be provided within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework
(see Rivera, Moughamian, Lesaux, & Francis, 2008 for specific information on RTI and
ELLs). RTI includes progressively intensive instruction with careful progress monitoring
(Davis Bianco, 2010; Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007; Turnbull, Turnbull, &
Wehmeyer, 2010). RTI was developed as an alternative to the achievement-
discrepancy formula (sometimes referred to as the “wait-to-fail” model) used to
qualify students as having a learning disability. However, RTI should be used to help
all students, not just those with learning disabilities. The National Association for
State Directors of Special Education (2006) identified eight core principles of RTI.
These include the following:
• We can effectively teach all children.
• Intervene early.
• Use a multi-tier model of service delivery.
• Use a problem-solving method to make decisions within a multi-tier model.
• Use research-based, scientifically validated interventions/instruction to the extent available.
• Monitor student progress to inform instruction.
• Use data to make decisions. (This is a central concept of RTI.)
• Use assessment for three different purposes: screening, diagnostics, and progress monitoring.

RTI rests on the assumption that if effective instruction is provided to all students and support services are provided if needed (based on assessment information), students will be less likely to need special education services. Many students, including a preponderance of ELLs, do not receive effective instruction until after they have experienced reading failure. The hope with RTI is that this initiative will “reduce the misidentification of English learners as having learning disabilities” (Echevarria & Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 1). Further, RTI provides “a way to support English language learners when they first show signs of struggling with reading” (Orosco & Klingner, 2010, p. 270).

RTI usually includes three (or four) tiers or levels of instruction (see Echevarria & Hasbrouck, 2009; Esparza Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Esparza Brown & Sanford, 2011; DePry & Cheesman, 2010; Foorman, 2007; D. Fuchs & L. Fuchs, 2005, 2006, 2009; L. Fuchs & D. Fuchs, 2006, 2007; Haager et al., 2007; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010; National Education Association, 2010; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2010; and Vaughn & Roberts, 2007 for details on RTI implementations).

**Tier 1**

Tier 1 (comprehensive core/primary level) is focused on general education and the universal core instructional program that is in place in a school. Core reading curricula, programs, and strategies should be based on scientifically-based reading research about what works with ELLs. Teachers should use instructional practices that have been validated with similar students in similar contexts. A generic “one-size-fits-all” approach to using research-based practices is insufficient and can lead to underachievement by ELLs and misunderstandings by teachers as to why their ELLs are struggling (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). In many ways, learning to read in English as one’s second or an additional language is similar to learning to reading in English as one’s first language (Gersten et al., 2007). Yet there also are important differences when learning how to read in a second or additional language, and there is essential information teachers should understand about the process of second-language acquisition and how that comes into play when teaching ELLs to read in English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009; Klingner, Soltero-Gonzalez, & Lesaux, 2010).
Research-based instruction for ELLs includes an emphasis on the five elements of effective reading instruction that benefit other students, with the added element of oral language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The focus shifts in grades 4-12, with emphasis placed on word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation (Boardman et al., 2008). Daily reading instruction for ninety minutes, delivered by the general education teacher, is recommended. Assessment is a key aspect of this tier of instruction; benchmark assessments are usually conducted in fall, winter, and spring. Universal screening using schoolwide curriculum-based measures pinpoints those students who may be at risk. Students who perform below a norm-referenced cut-off point (e.g., below the 25th percentile) and continue to show little to no progress across five to eight weeks of effective instruction with weekly progress monitoring probes are deemed in need of Tier 2 services. It is important when determining which students should receive Tier 2 interventions to make sure that Tier 1 instruction is appropriate for meeting students’ language and learning needs and that most “true peers” (i.e., other ELLs with similar backgrounds) are thriving. When most ELLs fail to show progress, the focus should be on improving core instruction.

**Tier 2**

Tier 2 (secondary intervention/secondary level) instruction focuses on small groups of students who have not responded to Tier 1 efforts that have been effective with most of their peers. Additional attention, focus, and support are placed on key aspects of the core program to ensure student success. Thus, educators often use double dosing (i.e., conducting each lesson twice) or pinpointed explicit instruction (Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Hickman-Davis, & Kouzekanani, 2003) to provide alternative instructional formats and additional opportunities for students to practice the skills they are learning in Tier 1. Again, research-based interventions are key to successful program implementation. According to Gersten et al. (2009) in a recent meta-analysis of RTI practices, intensive Tier 2 instruction has strong evidence (consistent and generalizable) for success. Effective Tier 2 instruction includes homogeneous, small-group instruction, typically with groups of 3 to 5 students. Instruction occurs for 20 to 30 minutes each day, 5 days per week, or 45 minutes each day for 3 or 4 days per week. Twice-per-month progress monitoring probes are used to assess student progress. Implementations may last 8 to 20 weeks, depending upon the instructional needs of the learners. Students continue to receive instruction in their core program during Tier 2 instruction. “The goal is that students will ‘catch up’ with their peers after secondary intervention” (Vaughn & Roberts, 2007, p. 42). Rivera et al. (2008) emphasized, “Regardless of the type of skills an intervention targets, the focus on explicit instruction and appropriately scaffolded development of reading skills is essential in supporting ELLs who are at risk for reading difficulties” (p. 20);

Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, and colleagues provided intensive, small-group interventions in either Spanish or English to first-grade ELLs considered to be at risk for reading difficulties. The language of instruction of the supplemental interventions matched the language of classroom reading instruction. The intervention programs were specifically designed for ELLs who struggled with reading (Vaughn, Cirino et
al., 2006; Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, & Francis, 2005; Vaughn, Mathes et al., 2006). Lessons included best practices in ESL instruction:

- Explicit instruction in oral language and listening comprehension
- Explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies
- A read-aloud routine with explicit vocabulary instruction and scaffolded story retelling
- Word study and phonics strategies
- Word reading and reading connected texts
- Repeated reading for speed, accuracy, fluency, and prosody
- Frequent progress monitoring

If ELLs continue to struggle at the Tier 2 level and/or are not making adequate progress that would allow them to exit the Tier 2 program, they should receive Tier 3 services. Klingner and Harry (2006) caution, however, “we must ensure that children have received culturally responsive, appropriate, quality instruction within the first and second tiers before a special education referral or placement is made” (p. 2249).

**Tier 3**

Tier 3 (intensive intervention/tertiary level) is considered to be the most sustained and intensive of all the levels and is focused on individual student need (Stecker, 2007; Vaughn & Roberts, 2007). In this level, instructional sessions are often lengthier than those provided in Tier 2. Instruction is often delivered one on one or with very small homogeneous groups of students (1 to 3). Some view this level as special education; thus, those students who do not show progress in Tier 2 are referred to and often qualify for special education services. Still other implementations provide focused instruction after Tier 2 but before special education services are provided (thus, a fourth tier of instruction becomes special education, while the third tier is intensive intervention efforts). Tier 3 instruction may include 50-minute or longer sessions delivered on a daily basis, depending upon the appropriateness of the core reading program. Some implementations remove students from the core program, choosing instead to provide an alternative core program uniquely designed to meet the students’ skill-level needs. An alternative core does not negate core reading participation; everything depends on the needs of the students. According to Kamil et al. (2008),

*Some adolescents need more support to increase literacy skills than regular classroom teachers can provide. Students who are unable to meet grade-level standards in literacy often require supplemental, intensive, and individualized reading intervention to improve their skills. Such interventions are most often provided by reading specialists or teachers who have undergone thorough training to help them understand the program or approach they will use and to deepen their understanding of adolescent struggling readers. (p. 31)*
In their review of the research literature, Kamil et al. (2008) found the effect size for the use of intensive and individualized interventions provided by trained specialists was considered strong, meaning it met the highest level of evidence as determined by the Institute of Education Sciences and What Works Clearinghouse.

Progress monitoring is conducted a minimum of twice per month to ensure adequate progress is being made. Some implementations require weekly probes to fine-tune their analysis of student skills. Note that the goal of Tier 3 programs is to accelerate students’ skill acquisition so they can progress first to the Tier 2 programs and then, ultimately, need only the core or Tier 1 program. Thus, rather than considering the three tiers as distinct and separate services for students, the tiers should be seen as a continuum of services that best meet the needs of all students, not just those in need of special education.

Conclusion

We cannot continue “business as usual” when ELLs are struggling in our classrooms. There is great promise, though, in using an RTI approach, for many reasons. First, the universal screening and progress monitoring called for in the RTI process allow for comparison of students to other similar or ‘true’ peers in their local cohort rather than to national norms. Second, an effective RTI model requires collaboration among all educators (e.g., speech and language therapists, school psychologists, counselors, English as a second language/Bilingual specialist), thereby providing increased opportunities for professional dialogue, peer coaching, and the creation of instructional models integrating the best practices of the various fields of education and related services. This collaboration is particularly critical, because the research base for all educational fields, including instruction for ELLs, is growing rapidly. Third, students who are struggling can be identified early and supported before falling too far behind to ever catch up. (Esparza Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 71)
REFERENCES


