# Designing a Response to Intervention plan for English-Language Learners Using the results of language testing

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## Abstract

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a new option for identifying students with disabilities under IDEIA 2004. While RTI plans are generally implemented before any specialized testing, there are cases where it might be helpful to implement an RTI plan after standardized testing, using the results from a formal assessment of language skills in both the native language and English. This article explores such a case and presents a table of suggested Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions, based on the results of language testing.

## Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) comprise a growing percentage of students in our nation's schools. Of the 53 million children age 5-17 in 2006, one fifth (11 million) spoke a language other than English at home and 3 million spoke English less than "very well." (Kominski, Shin, & Marotz, 2008). Historically, the issues of appropriate assessment and identification in special education for this population have presented challenges for the school psychologists, speech-language pathologists and diagnosticians who perform most of the assessments (Harry & Klinger, 2005; Hernández, 1994; Zehler, Hopstock, Fleischman, & Greniuk, 1994). These issues of appropriate identification are just as critical today as they have been in the past (Liu, Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson, & Kushner, 2008; Wagner, Francis, & Morris, 2005), as members of multidisciplinary teams attempt to find solutions to the question of ensuring students are not placed in special education because of lack of knowledge of English or lack of adequate education. Because of these exclusionary factors under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004), the determination of eligibility is especially complex with this population. In many of these cases, the multidisciplinary team decides it simply is not possible to rule out the exclusionary factors as the primary cause of the poor academic performance. In some cases, the discussion ends at that point. This is unfortunate, because a tremendous amount of information about what the student knows and does not know in both languages has been revealed in the process of conducting the assessments. All too often, the results remain in a central file in the office and the teachers are not aware of how the information contained in these reports can guide them in classroom-based interventions. The purpose of this case study is to demonstrate how post-assessment data can be used to develop a classroom-based intervention plan for an English Language Learner (ELL).

## Implications of the FEP label

School districts are under federal mandate to assist ELL students in accessing the curriculum as they acquire English by providing some support until the student achieves a level of English proficiency (Office for Civil Rights, 2000). This support may take the form of English immersion, pull-out ESL support or even a bilingual or dual language program. Regardless of the program implemented by the district, until the student receives an English proficiency rating indicating he/she no longer meets the definition of ELL, the school is responsible for providing support as the

child acquires English. This is usually operationalized by testing the student's English proficiency each year until he/she has met a specified score for Fully English Proficient (FEP). However, once the student receives the FEP designation, the school district is no longer required to provide a scaffolded English program. The student is then placed in the general classroom without additional support for English language acquisition. Some children succeed, some do not. While it is true that many children who began school without speaking English do develop English language skills commensurate with native speakers, there is considerable variability in the rate and depth of the second language acquisition (Lesaux, 2006). Thus, there are students who are exited from the scaffolded English program who have significant gaps in their knowledge of English.

This becomes an issue for special education personnel because when academic support for English language learning ceases, as is the case when students receive the FEP designation, some fail in school and are referred for special education assessment. The Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004) stipulates that a student may not be placed in any special education category if the reason for such a designation is lack of knowledge of English. In order to address this exclusionary condition of IDEIA, students who are non-native speakers of English are usually assessed in their native language along with English. What many evaluators may not realize is that it is possible for students to perform poorly in both languages if they have had insufficient support and exposure for both languages and not necessarily have a disability. Students who appear to have limited skills in both languages when compared to monolingual peers do not necessarily have an innate, neurologically-based language learning disorder (Kohnert, 2007). As Kohnert explained, a myriad of other factors, including age of second language exposure, social context and value of the first language in the mainstream society, have an impact in determining if the first language will continue to develop and the efficacy with which the second language will be acquired.

For these reasons, ELL students may be considered by the assessment team to have had an educational disadvantage, an exclusionary condition under IDEIA (IDEIA, 2004). Thus, the student may score low on assessments in both languages, but for reasons other than innate disability. This could occur when the student's educational history provides evidence that there has been inadequate opportunity to learn in the second language as well as inadequate support for the first language. Indications that there has been inadequate support for both languages could include: 1) a history of moving from a bilingual program to an English-immersion program; 2) an early exit from any English language support; and 3) evidence of lack of school attendance in any program. In cases such as these, the multi-disciplinary team may not be able to rule out educational disadvantage as the cause of the low scores. This can result in a no-win situation: no one wants to label a student as having a disability needs unless a solid determination can be made, yet the student clearly needs additional support to benefit from classroom instruction.

At this stage, there is an alternative option. The information obtained from the assessments, combined with information about the cultural and linguistic background of the student can and should be used to assist the classroom teacher understand how to help the child learn. The information can be used to design classroom-based interventions that would support student learning. Thus, although a Response to Intervention plan would already have been carried out prior to the assessment, the results of the assessments would provide additional information that would enable the teachers and specialists to develop a plan that meets the student's needs more specifically. This can be accomplished in three steps: 1) baseline data on student performance is obtained, 2) an intervention is designed and implemented, and 3) the student is reassessed on the

skill. If the student has made significant progress, the team can conclude prior poor performance was the result of educational disadvantage and continue to provide intervention as needed. If the student does not show progress despite the intensive intervention, then the team can conclude the poor performance is not due to lack of adequate education. At that time, the team has the option of considering placement in special education. The difference between the first attempt at establishing failure from RTI and the second attempt is two-fold: 1) the student will have access to a better plan, one that is based on more sophisticated understanding of the student's linguistic skills and learning strengths and weaknesses, and 2) because the plan is tailored so closely to the student's profile, the exclusionary criteria of inadequate education will have been met. This would allow the team to confidently state that a student who didn't have a language-learning disability would have shown significant progress under this plan with the reasoning that failure of the second RTI plan is indicative of a language-learning disability. In this sense, the second RTI plan would have functioned as a period of test, teach, retest, or a form of dynamic assessment. The problem with many RTI plans that are developed prior to a comprehensive assessment is that the developers do not have sufficient knowledge of the child's language-learning strengths and weaknesses to develop a plan that is precisely tailored to his/her needs. Thus, if the team is unable to rule out lack of English knowledge or educational disadvantage as a result of the psycho-educational assessment and the first RTI, then this second attempt at RTI would allow the team to address the concerns set forth by the exclusionary criteria of IDEIA.

Use of the assessment information will also allow the classroom teachers to understand more about the language knowledge of the students in their classes. In many cases, that knowledge and development of an effective plan should result in the child succeeding in the general education classroom. Most teachers will need the assistance of specialists in interpreting and synthesizing the psycho-educational assessment results with the educational and linguistic history to form educationally-relevant accommodations and modification plans. This can occur at the multidisciplinary meeting after the reporting of assessment results and discussion of eligibility under IDEIA, a discussion of the educational relevance of the results and plans for classroom modifications or accommodations could follow. Nor would the discussion have to end at that point; the specialists should be available to consult with the families and classroom teacher throughout the year. While this process should occur for all students who are referred and assessed for IDEIA eligibility, it is most crucial that it occurs for non-native speakers of English, particularly for those who have incomplete acquisition of English despite having an FEP designation. The following case exemplifies how this proposed scenario might work.

## Juan: An Example of Scores and Possible Interpretations

Consider the case of Juan, an 11-year old Hispanic male who entered Kindergarten speaking little or no English. He was placed in an English immersion program for his kindergarten and first grade, where upon, his family moved to Texas and he was placed in a bilingual program from grades 2 and 3. He had not made significant progress in reading in English at the time he was placed in the bilingual program. Additionally, by the time he was placed in a bilingual program, all of his Spanish-speaking classmates had already had two years of literacy instruction in Spanish and were much further ahead academically than Juan. Second grade was the first instruction in his native language that Juan received and was his first introduction to reading and writing in Spanish. He remained behind his classmates through third grade, when the majority of them were transitioned into an English program. Since the school only had full bilingual strands through third grade,

Juan was placed in an English classroom with pullout services for English as a Second language for fourth grade. At the end of fourth grade, Juan passed the district test for English proficiency and received the FEP designation. Because of this designation, Juan stopped receiving pullout services for English development at the end of fourth grade. Since receiving that designation, he has not received classroom accommodation or modifications for an English Language Learner. However, his reading (in English) is estimated at second grade level and he is performing poorly in most subjects. His basic math calculations are good; however he performs poorly on word problems.

Juan had been referred for evaluation for special education at mid-year from his fifth grade teacher. His teacher had implemented an intensive, classroom-based instruction (RTI) with four other students for the second quarter and reported that Juan had not made significant gains. She wanted him placed in special education for lack of progress following the RTI plan implementation. A review of Juan's records caused members on the Child Study Team (CST) to question whether Juan had a language learning disorder or whether he had simply received inadequate education because his education had begun in English, then been predominately in Spanish, before moving back to English. Following best practices and IDEIA mandates for assessing bilingual children (American Educational Research Association, 1999; IDEIA 2004), the team determined that a bilingual speech-language evaluation was necessary, as well as achievement and intelligence testing.

The achievement assessment yielded the following results: In Spanish, Juan's reading and writing skills are much more developed than in English. His word reading fluency and comprehension scores are both around fourth grade level. In English, his word reading fluency and comprehension is at early second grade level. He demonstrated significant difficulty sounding out multi-syllabic words and has very limited sight word vocabulary for non-decodable words.

Since Juan had the FEP designation, Juan's intelligence was only assessed in English. Using the student's documented level of proficiency in English as the basis for the language of assessment is consistent with the practices documented by Klinger and Harry (2006) in their study of the procedures used to inform decision-making in assessment teams. Intelligence testing in English using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children 4th Edition (WISC-IV), (Weschler, 2003) indicated a full scale IQ of 80, a Performance IQ of 100, and a Verbal IQ of 60. The psychologist did report that Juan's working memory skills were in the borderline low range. All other nonlinguistic scores fell within average ranges. The psychologist concluded that he needed additional information to determine whether the results were consistent with Juan having either significant gaps in his knowledge of English or a language-learning disability.

Juan's discourse skills were assessed in English and in Spanish by a bilingual speech-language pathologist. In English, the speech language pathologist reported that Juan demonstrated limited referencing of pronouns, excessive use of non-specific vocabulary, poor cohesion and mazing of topic. In Spanish, the speech language pathologist reported that Juan's discourse skills were within average expectations for his age and gender.

Juan was also assessed on language using a standardized instrument. The Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals 4th edition (CELF-4) (Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2003) was used to assess Juan's skills in English. The Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals 4th edition, Spanish.

***Table 1.***
Results of language assessment on the CELF-IV

| Composite scores | English scores | Spanish scores |
|---|---|---|
| | Norms on native English speakers | Norms on bilingual speakers |
| Core Language | 60 | 90 |
| Receptive Language | 70 | 95 |
| Expressive Language | 50 | 85 |
| Language Structure | 70 | 100 |
| Language Content | 50 | 90 |
| Language Memory | 60 | 80 |
| Working Memory | 60 | 70 |

A review of these scores shows consistency with the reports from the discourse analysis in that none of Juan's Spanish scores fell outside of average ranges, while the scores in English are low when compared to native speakers of English. Despite his FEP designation, this does not necessarily indicate a language disorder, but, rather indicates that he is still in the process of acquiring English. Because speech-language pathologists are aware that these norms were based on native speakers of English, some would not report the scores, but would describe what Juan could and could not do on the English version of the test. However, the speech-language pathologist made it clear that the use of the English normative data is not being used to establish eligibility for special education, but was used to show the extent of the Juan's disadvantage when placed in an English-only classroom without modifications or accommodations. The only other item of interest reported was Juan's low average skills for language memory in Spanish and very low scores for working memory in English. The speech-language pathologist indicated that the lower scores in English for the language memory could be an indication of the extra burden placed on Juan's memory when functioning in his second language. Additionally, the construct of language content relies heavily on vocabulary knowledge which was consistent with other evidence of limited vocabulary in English. Since the difficulty was only noted in Juan's second language, it doesn't provide evidence of a disorder, but rather provides further evidence that Juan continues to need scaffolding in English as his acquisition of that language is incomplete.

Based on these results, the team concluded that Juan is unlikely to have a language learning disability, but could not entirely rule it out. The team also agreed Juan is delayed in reading in both languages. There is clear evidence that Juan has incomplete acquisition of English and continues to require language scaffolding to access the content in the classroom. The team concluded that it is impossible to determine whether he has a reading disability given the variability of language exposure in his educational history: first English-only instruction, then bilingual instruction for two years, then English-only instruction. Because of the inability to rule-out a reading disability, the team recommended that another classroom-based intervention be developed and implemented for one quarter to assist Juan with reading and writing in English. Additionally, the team recommended that Juan receive scaffolded instruction in English to assist him in acquiring English skills.

***Table 2.***
Team recommendations for Tier 1 and Tier 2 intervention.

| Difficulty | Tier 1 | Tier 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Language Arts: Delayed reading limits comprehension | Bookshelf of readings at his level<br>Whole class work on comprehension strategies by classroom teacher | Reading fluency work for 30 minutes four times a week, specific strategy instruction with Title 1 teacher |
| Language Arts: Limited writing skills | Opportunity to present some reports orally and Assistance in editing written work /classroom teacher | Assistance in writing reports by Title 1 teacher |
| Social Studies/ Science: Limited research skills | Visual summary (model of volcano) | Assistance library/computer by classroom teacher |
| Math: Delayed reading skills for word problems | Reference chart indicating Word/function (e.g. "and" is "+" sign)<br>Classroom teacher | Word problems real aloud and broken down into components by Title 1 teacher |
| All content: Needs help with novel vocabulary | Content vocabulary, explicit instruction by classroom teacher | Other novel vocabulary identified by reading texts in small group instruction by Title 1 teacher and classroom teacher |
| All content: Difficulty with complex syntax | Addressed incidentally in class by classroom teacher | Text with embedded clauses and passive voice will be identified and explained classroom/Title 1 teacher |

The team agreed to reconsider Juan's placement for special education at the end of the third quarter after the plan had been in place for one quarter. Additionally, however, the classroom teacher agreed to make modifications/accommodations to scaffold Juan's acquisition of English regardless of the final decision regarding special education placement. The reason she gave was that she had not understood the limitations of the designation of FEP prior to the discussion of the test results from the speech-language pathologist. The classroom teacher indicated she had assumed that the FEP label meant Juan knew approximately as much English as a native speaker.

## Summary

The provisions in IDEIA 2004 for classroom-based interventions provide tremendous opportunity for teachers to utilize the expertise of the specialists in their building and to make the accommodations and modifications that will allow diverse learners to experience school success. Because RTI is still a relatively new framework, the operationalization of the approach isn't established yet, which gives school personnel the opportunity to be creative in the application of the concept. There is no reason why an intervention plan can only occur prior to formal assessment. This is particularly true if the formal assessment is unable to rule out one of the two exclusionary factors for special education: lack of English proficiency and lack of adequate education. In the case of Juan, it was not possible for the team to rule out either criterion as the cause of his lack of school success. However, by using the information obtained in the formal testing, the team was able to devise an RTI plan that would allow them to make a determination of a language learning

disability and reading/writing disability after implementation. Additionally, the information obtained from the formal assessment made it apparent that Juan still requires scaffolding to assist him as he acquires English, whether or not any disability exists. In this case, Juan was able to receive the support he required without forcing the team to make a premature decision about labeling him as having a disability.

Additionally, this case suggests another point. When students are assessed for special education, information acquired about their strengths and weaknesses can be useful in helping them succeed in school, even if the determination is that the student doesn't have a disability. The results of every multi-disciplinary team meeting should include specific recommendations on modifications/accommodations and interventions that can be used to facilitate student success.

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