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The Use of Response to Intervention with English Learners

Anna Burnley

Abstract

RTIs assist teachers in adjusting instruction to support ELs in acquiring English and content-area knowledge and learning behaviors. The use of RTIs with ELs can supplement support for ELs as an integrated concept of the sheltered instruction (SI) commonly provided for this student population.

Key words: *Response to Intervention, English Language Learners*

Overview of Response to Intervention, and implications for its use with English Learners

Response to Intervention (RTI) is defined as “a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs” (NCLD, n. d.). It includes “high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning” (NCLD, n. d.). Although RTIs are routinely used to identify and support students with learning disabilities, more and more often, RTIs are also being implemented for use with English Learners (ELs) who are placed in general education classrooms.

The notion of using RTIs with ELs resulted from a desire to supplement support for ELs as an integrated concept of the sheltered instruction (SI) commonly provided for this student population. Because ELs may be considered by a school district to be at-risk learners, then provision of appropriate services is required in order to promote robust and measureable educational gains. RTIs assist teachers in “documenting, analyzing, and adjusting instruction to ensure that ELLs are supported in acquiring English and content-area knowledge and learning behaviors” (Herrell and Jordan, 2016, p. 162). RTIs are useful for both teachers and ELs working with SI due to four components (Brown and Sanford), all of which require consistent documentation under ESSA (USDOE, 2017):

- RTIs use “screening and formative assessment data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes,”
- They “monitor the effectiveness of instruction,”
- They rely on “data-based decisions for instruction” and for “movement within the multi-tiered system...,” and
- They implement “multi-leveled, evidence-based instruction that is matched to students’ instructional needs...” (Brown & Sanford, 2011, p. 8).

Additionally, RTIs are helpful in “ensuring that students are provided the differentiated instruction needed to avoid placing (ELL) students into exceptional student education programs unnecessarily” (Herrell & Jordan, 2016, p. 162). In other words, the belief that a student who doesn’t speak English will benefit from ESE

instruction when the student does not have an identified disability is dispelled by the use of RTIs in combination with SI. Conversely, an EL who needs ESE services potentially can be identified earlier and with greater accuracy by utilizing RTIs, particularly with the use of ongoing documentation.

According to Herrell and Jordan (2016) RTIs for ELs include three elements:

- Accommodations, such as giving a test orally to an EL who can't yet read the test in English,
- Modifications, such as reducing the number of sentence/reading math problems given to an EL who is still learning to read in English, and
- Interventions, such as the use of SI with ELs (p. 163).

RTIs are divided into three tiers, and these are “differentiated by the ‘intensity’ of the services provided” (Florida RTI, n. d.). The culturally and linguistically appropriate use of RTIs with ELs utilizes these three tiers, and all three tiers can, and should, include any needed accommodations, modifications, and/or interventions as noted above. For an EL, New Levine and McCloskey (2013) suggest the tiers might manifest in this manner:

Tier 1: Research-based SI in the general education classroom.

Tier 2: Intensive assistance as part of the general education support system.

Tier 3: ESE services (p. 34).

For practical purposes, classroom teachers can consider utilizing the following considerations when implementing the use of RTIs for ELs New Levine & McCloskey (2013) suggest three tiers:

Tier 1: Provide SI for the EL, while simultaneously providing content instruction to all other students in the classroom.

Tier 2: If the EL does not demonstrate measureable progress through Tier 1 strategies, then provide more intensive interventions, aka, a more intensive level of Tier 1 support.

Tier 3: If the EL still does not progress after working in both Tiers 1 and 2, then provide individual instruction, potentially as ESOL pull-out services (New Levine & McCloskey, 2013, p. 14).

To implement RTIs for ELs, Herrell and Jordan (2016) suggest following this step-by-step approach

“Step 1: Identify students’ English language development levels, strengths, and learning levels through assessment,

Step 2: Use assessment results to identify areas to be addressed by differentiated instruction, along with possible approaches to use,

Step 3: Document the assessment results and RTI plan, including length of intervention, plans for updating assessment, and parent involvement,

Step 4: Observe and document student responses to interventions as well as their academic and language development progress,

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Step 5: Adjust interventions when student progress slows or when students meet Standards,

Step 6: Ask for assistance from the school student study team when student progress is slow or lacking, and

Step 7: Continue to use assessment and documentation to support the instructional approaches used” (p. 164-165).

Although not included in Herrell and Jordan’s list (2016, pp. 164-165), an additional suggestion would be to encourage classroom teachers to consult the ESOL specialist or the ESOL coordinator for their school district whenever the instructor is uncertain about which interventions to implement. Additionally, such a consultation could assist the teacher in determining whether or not the EL is making adequate yearly progress. Learning gains should include both English language gains as well as content area gains.

What might be some of the benefits associated with the use of RTIs with ELs?

In researching the pros and cons associated with the implementation of RTIs in the English Learner population, potential challenges could include the following:

- Biases, conscious or unconscious, against ELs might cause some teachers to resist the use of RTIs with this population since it could underscore their beliefs, however erroneous, that ELs should not receive “special treatment.”
- Teachers may feel overworked, and the amount of documentation required to implement an RTI strategy with an EL may appear to be daunting.
- Teachers may lack the professional development or other supports that could transition them into this system of support and documentation, leading to potential confusion about how RTIs work when implemented on behalf of ELs.
- Teachers may lack an understanding of how language proficiency levels are measured for ELs, and may underestimate the need for RTIs in this population.

One potent example of this is seen in teachers who honestly believe that an EL is fully proficient in English once the student is able to converse using social language (BICS), even when the student cannot proficiently read the classroom text or write an essay due to a lack of academic vocabulary (CALP).

As noted, the benefits include a system of documentation engineered to assist and support both the student and the teacher. Additionally, the three-tier approach should allow the classroom teacher to ask for assistance from the ESOL specialist or the ESOL coordinator when more help is needed in language acquisition by the EL. Also, the delineation of accommodations, modifications, and interventions supports the student through all three tiers, and provides the teacher with an abundance of

strategies to use in implementing said accommodations, modifications, or interventions.

Conclusions

The implementation of a system of supports and accountability, through documentation and the use of teaching strategies, is a phenomenal and truly effective augmentation to the SI that should already be in place for the EL studying in the integrated, general education classroom. Arguably, the parental involvement aspect is successful and crucial in encouraging the parents of ELs to attend school functions and to meet with the teacher when they have concerns regarding their child's learning. Additionally, the documentation should be objective, and when it is, it can then become a powerful assist in helping to determine whether or not an EL also needs ESE services. The benefits of utilizing RTIs with ELs far outweigh any perceived drawbacks, and should be considered as a necessary element, to robust, sheltered instruction lesson plans.

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