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A MATTER OF TIME: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THE RTI PROCESS

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The Response to Intervention (RTI) process is being used to assist all students, including English Language Learners (ELLs), who are experiencing academic difficulties and potentially qualifying for special education services. This article discusses suggestions for improving the RTI process by incorporating congruent time frames within the model and aligning it with timing necessary for language acquisition in ELLs. In addition, practical recommendations for expanding the expertise of current and future educators are presented to assist in providing effective services to ELLs students in the RTI process.

The number of English Language Learners (ELLs) continues to increase in the United States, with nearly 4.7 million students in U.S. public schools identified as ELLs and provided with supports specific to their needs. This number continues to grow (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012; Park, O'Toole, & Katsiaficas, 2017). According to the NCES (2012), 6.5% of students with disabilities receive both special education and ELLs supports. Given the increasing number of ELLs in public schools, matters regarding the educational evaluation and psychological testing of ELLs and their over-representation in special education continue to be concerns in our schools (Chen & Lindo, 2018; Chu & Flores, 2011). The need to consider how we work with ELLs in the Response to Intervention (RTI) process is essential. The RTI approach is based on a multi-tiered model of prevention with each tier designed to provide increasing and more intensive research-based interventions (Hallahan,

Kaufman, & Pullen, 2019). For example, a model presented by the RTI Action Network (2018) provided the timing for Tier 1 not to exceed 8 weeks. In regards to Tier 2, a longer period of time is suggested, but it should generally not exceed a grading period. Considering the additional variable that exists for ELLs, how does the factor of language proficiency align with the RTI timing?

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Language proficiency is the most visible behavior associated with culture and an often accounted-for factor in assessing ELLs (Menchaca-López & López, 2008) whose theoretical time factor could be an oversight in the RTI process. The

concept of cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP) identified by Cummins (1981) is regarded as the essential component for academic success and is often not easily visible. Cummins (1981) theorized that CALP develops in both the native and in the second language over the course of 5-7 years. It has been further indicated that depending on the initial language of instruction, it can take 4-10 years for CALP to develop (Garcia & Dray, 2007). Because language varies according to the context in which it is used, some ELLs may use English fluently in informal conversations but still experience academic difficulties in school due to the use of formal language



in the classroom (Cummins, 1981; Valdés, Poza, Brooks, 2015). Although language proficiency is assessed during the RTI and referral processes, is the timing associated with acquiring language proficiency consistently being considered? Limited literature on effective interventions and their implementation within RTI for ELLs, in addition to the timing factor, demand the attention of researchers, practitioners, and teacher educators (Hallahan, et al., 2019). Addressing the intervention shortfalls associated with implementing adequate interventions for ELLs would be helpful when referring students for the RTI process (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). The field is also in need of both a stronger focus on pre- and post-service teacher training. It is critical for current and future teachers to understand language acquisition and development; however, “most teachers lack the training, expertise and experience in teaching reading and other subjects to ELLs” (Brown &

Doolittle, 2008, p. 66). Although these issues are significant, the purpose of this manuscript is to explore possible ways to increase the efficacy of the RTI for ELLs, thus leading to improved school experiences for these students.

Addressing the RTI approach for ELLs

In addressing the academic needs of ELLs through the RTI, three main aspects demand careful consideration: (a) realigning the time frames of the RTI process; (b) addressing the interventions shortfall; and (c) increasing the pedagogical expertise of current and future teachers (see Table 1). The following sections will discuss these critical components.

Realigning the RTI time frames

In today’s schools, the need for bilingual language support and a standardized RTI model is evident (Shenoy, 2014). The time frames associated with the RTI process (RTI Network, 2018) are inconsistent with the

timing indicated in the research for acquiring CALP (Garcia & Dray, 2007). Even if multidisciplinary teams hold off on having ELLs proceed with the RTI process early on, there are indications that there is an over-representation of ELLs in upper grade levels (Chu & Flores, 2011). These factors could imply a lack of CALP being fully developed by ELLs. The question remains, with the RTI process and supposed research-based interventions, are we determining language proficiency or disability? Researchers found that ELLs are significantly overrepresented at the secondary level and their placement rates correlate with their language proficiency: Students with lower English proficiency are more likely to be placed in special education programs than students with higher English proficiency, and they are also more likely to be placed in more restrictive educational settings (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2002).

Table 1
Supporting ELLs Students in the RTI Process

Essential Elements	Recommendations
Realigning the time frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-determine the time frames to align the development of CALP with an RTI process. • Ensure alignment and clarity of policy at all school levels. • Realign and interconnect language acquisition with appropriate implementation of culturally responsive interventions within the RTI.
Addressing the interventions shortfall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate research-based interventions that are linguistically and culturally appropriate. • Ensure fidelity and effective implementation of interventions for sufficient amount of time. • Ensure proper use and evaluation of individual response to intervention and accommodations. • Consider careful documentation for accurate evaluation of outcomes. • Incorporating cognitive and oral language engagement into instruction. • Provide explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding. • Make the curriculum accessible to students through scaffolding and differentiated instruction.
Increasing the pedagogical expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide professional development opportunities on culturally responsive practices. • Teach preservice and in-service special educators evidence-based practices to meet the needs of ELLs.

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Thus, realigning RTI time frames which are more realistic for ELLs with the time required to develop language should be considered and operationalized. Re-determining the time frames to align the development of CALP with an RTI process is not only feasible, it would align more closely with conducting a non-discriminatory assessment (Hallahan, et al., 2019) by actually accounting for the timing in acquiring language proficiency. The time frame associated with language acquisition must be interconnected with appropriate implementation of culturally responsive interventions (Brown & Doolittle, 2008).

Addressing the intervention shortfalls

In general, effective instruction is the foundation for ELLs; however, it is not sufficient for promoting accelerated learning with these

students (Goldenberg, 2013). The emphasis of RTI for ELLs is to find out what students *can do* and implement instructional supports to address their specific needs (Herrell, 2016). It should be noted that early interventions and outcomes for ELLs must be thoroughly documented to ensure that interventions are linguistically and culturally appropriate, research based, effectively implemented for sufficient amount of time, and accurately evaluated. Careful documentation will also ensure that general education alternatives were exhausted before considering referral to special education (Hallahan, et al., 2019).

A concern in current RTI practice is providing adequate time for English language development in ELLs. Studies suggest that time for language learning is often truncated or omitted altogether (Gersten, & Baker, 2000). Thus, the emphasis should be placed on sufficient language development by incorporating cognitive and oral language engagement into instruction, adjusting

instruction “to the correct pitch at which English language learners will best hear the content” (Gersten, & Baker, 2000, p. 461), and providing ELLs with frequent opportunities to use oral language through conversational and academic discourse.

Because it takes several years for ELLs to develop grade-level academic English, they should not be at a disadvantage to have their academic learning delayed “until they could handle, on their own, the linguistic demands of content instruction in English” (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008, p. 366). For this reason, teachers should facilitate ELLs’ learning by making the curriculum accessible to them through scaffolding, an instructional adaptation to help the learner advance toward new skills, concepts, and levels of understanding (Gibbons, 2002). With ELLs, the scaffolding should be provided with a gradual increase of student independence instead of a gradual release of responsibility because teaching is a recursive, and

not a linear process (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2009). It might be necessary to step back and reteach a concept before moving forward to supported practice. This process leads to a differentiated instruction, an approach to teaching that takes into consideration the wide variety of student background knowledge and abilities by providing students with opportunities to move forward or receive additional opportunities for modeling and support (Echevarria et al., 2009).

Considering that the RTI process incorporates high-quality reading instruction in the general education setting, effective curricula, practices, and assessment for ELLs must be utilized (Haager, 2007). Explicit instruction correlates with increased reading gains for ELLs, and specifically the extent to which teachers adjust their use of English language during a lesson to make it understandable to ELLs (Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007). In order for ELLs to make significant reading gains, teachers need to be using effective instructional



techniques, adjusting their instruction as needed, facilitating vocabulary and comprehension development, and providing explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding (Klingner et al., 2007). However, the efficacy of RTI depends not only on effective interventions, but also on the fidelity of their implementation. Therefore, teachers must also know appropriate ways to implement instruction for meeting the needs of ELLs.

Increasing the pedagogical expertise of teachers

Teachers may not be adequately prepared to serve ELLs, especially those with special needs. Typically, special education teacher preparation programs offer only a small number of

courses related to supporting the needs of students with disabilities identified as ELL (Baecher, Farnsworth, & Ediger, 2014). Teacher education programs must “show a level of investment in meeting the needs of the ELLs population by ensuring they teach preservice and in-service special educators evidence-based practices to meet the sociocultural, academic and cognitive, and linguistic needs of this population of students” (More, Spies, Morgan, & Baker, 2016, p. 233). Educators and policy-makers must be aware of the urgency of preparing teachers to meet the needs of ELLs and, therefore, press to change “business as usual” in teacher education (Lucas, et al., 2008).

To effectively facilitate the learning for ELLs, teachers should possess three types of pedagogical expertise: (a) understanding ELLs' linguistic and academic backgrounds; (b) understanding the relationship between ELLs' linguistic abilities and the learning tasks they are expected to carry out in class; and (c) scaffolding skills so that ELLs can fully participate in those tasks (Lucas et al., 2008). Infusing these concepts into the teacher education programs through coursework on instruction of ELLs and authentic experiences during fieldwork could prove beneficial and equip future teachers with necessary knowledge and skills. Providing professional development opportunities on culturally responsive practices with ELLs for current teachers, assessment specialists, and administrators would benefit all students (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Chen & Lindo, 2018; Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). In addition, it can send the message that all educators have a role in working with ELLs students throughout the

RTI process. Teachers who are knowledgeable about ELLs can take proactive steps toward meeting their needs in the classroom. Therefore, teacher preparation and professional development pertinent to ELLs are essential in today's education.

Conclusions

There are many concerns regarding the implementation of RTI with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Because the appropriate application of RTI for ELLs is not clearly evident, finding practical ways to appropriately serve the needs of ELLs within RTI is highly important in today's schools and in teacher training programs. In this article we discussed possible ways for increasing the efficacy of the RTI for ELLs that will lead to improved school experiences for these students. Steps toward ensuring ELLs are supported in acquiring English and academic knowledge and skills through the RTI process include realigning the time

frames of the RTI process, addressing the interventions shortfall, and increasing the pedagogical expertise of all teachers working with ELLs. We encourage practitioners, teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers to focus their collaborative efforts on seeking effective ways for supporting ELLs and improving their school outcomes.

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