

# Effective Practices for English Learners



## BRIEF 1

Meeting the Needs of English Learners  
Through a Multitiered Instructional Framework



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## Meeting the Needs of English Learners Through a Multitiered Instructional Framework

*Providing effective instruction for English learners and making informed decisions regarding their language and literacy needs continue to be goals for educators across the nation. A culturally responsive response to intervention framework optimized to meet the needs of English learners advances these goals through effective allocation of resources, data-based decisions, and increasingly intensive levels of research-based instruction for students experiencing learning difficulties. In turn, documentation of response to intervention practices helps to identify students with learning disabilities. In this practice brief, three model demonstration projects (Cohort 5 of the Model Demonstration Coordination Center) describe their work implementing various response to intervention models focused on language and literacy at schools with high percentages of English learners in kindergarten through grade 3. This brief is the first in a series devoted to effective practices for English learners.*

## Meeting the Needs of Linguistically Diverse Students

As a result of demographic shifts in U.S. public schools, educators, school leaders, and parents are increasingly charged with teaching English Learners (ELs), the fastest-growing segment of the culturally and linguistically diverse student population, how to read and write in their native language and/or in English as a second language. Educators must expand their knowledge and skills to support ELs' language and literacy development and to reliably identify and effectively educate ELs who have a language or reading disability. Additionally, school leaders and educators must ensure that ELs are not disproportionately represented in remedial and special education programs.<sup>1</sup>

A promising model for identifying and meeting the instructional needs of ELs is the response to intervention (RTI) framework. RTI is widely used, particularly in the primary grades. A multitiered instructional framework, RTI is a useful administrative tool for identifying areas of instructional need, allocating available educational resources accordingly, and tracking the impact of allocated resources. In classrooms and in schools, RTI offers a systematic and efficient framework for making informed instruction-related decisions, identifying reading-related risk, and reliably identifying students who have or are at risk for reading disabilities.

Research has shown that RTI can be effective for monolingual populations. However, educators seek to better understand how RTI can be adapted to meet the unique needs of diverse student populations, including ELs, and to answer complex questions such as the following:

- What is needed at the district, school, and classroom levels to optimize a tiered instructional framework for ELs?
- What is the impact of students' language dominance and language proficiency at each stage of the RTI process?
- What instructional approaches and practices best meet the needs of ELs?

This practice brief is the first in a series that addresses these issues and assists campus leaders, educators, and policymakers with implementing a model of tiered instruction that accommodates ELs. In this brief, we describe the work of three model demonstration projects and introduce the key components of a language and literacy instructional framework to improve the achievement of ELs.

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1 Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2004

## Model Demonstration Projects

The three research projects that authored this report were funded in September 2011 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. These projects make up what is known as Cohort 5 of the Model Demonstration Coordination Center (MDCC). (See project summaries on the next page.)

Each of the research projects works with school districts that serve high populations of ELs.

Cohort 5 works to improve the outcomes of ELs in the primary grades by implementing tiered approaches that incorporate the following instructional features:

- Appropriate, research-based reading instruction and interventions for ELs
- Culturally responsive teaching strategies and principles
- Professional development and strategic coaching for teachers
- Assessment, screening, and progress monitoring of students in need of support

During the 2012–2013 school year (year 1 of the project), each of the three project teams set goals related to improving educational outcomes for ELs through an RTI framework. This work would be conducted in one-way and two-way bilingual education programs and focus on both native language and English as a second language instruction. Also in year 1, teams identified project-specific baseline practices and procedures on which to build in subsequent years. After identifying a baseline model, project and school/district staff members at each site collaboratively designed a refined framework. The refined models include new and enhanced practices driven both by theory and locally identified needs and practices.

The projects continue to work with participating schools and districts to implement an RTI framework that includes regular evaluation and revision based on feedback from local stakeholders and continue to work with MDCC to gather information about the contextual factors that influence model implementation (e.g., school and district demographics, campus culture, level of practitioner expertise).



The overall goal of MDCC, operated by SRI International and funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), is to bridge educational research and practice to improve outcomes for children and youth. Since 2005, MDCC has worked with cohorts of OSEP-funded model demonstration projects focused on promising practices, procedures, and programs in a wide range of settings and topics. A primary goal of MDCC is to gain knowledge about the design, development, and implementation of evidence-based models in real-world educational contexts. Across diverse projects and settings, MDCC seeks to identify characteristics of effective implementation and model refinement processes—those that move practices from early development to full and sustained implementation and, ultimately, to improved outcomes.

### English Learner Institute for Teaching and Excellence (Project ELITE)

*The University of Texas at Austin*

**Sites:** Three schools in a rural district near an urban area in Central Texas

**District profile:** 31.9% of students identified as limited English proficient districtwide; individual school percentages range from 50% to 57%

**Scope of work:** Project ELITE adapts, refines, and evaluates multitiered instructional frameworks and their components—progress monitoring, culturally responsive principles, reading instruction, and reading interventions—to determine whether and to what extent the frameworks (1) improve reading achievement and language development for ELs with or at risk of having a disability and (2) assist educators in determining whether ELs who experience reading difficulties have a disability.

**Website:** [www.meadowscenter.org/projects/detail/english-learner-institute-for-teaching-and-excellence-project-elite](http://www.meadowscenter.org/projects/detail/english-learner-institute-for-teaching-and-excellence-project-elite)

### Establishing Successful Tiered Responsive Education for English Language Learners' Achievement (Project ESTRE<sup>2</sup>LLA)

*The University of Texas at Austin*

**Sites:** Three K–3 schools in Texas with a large EL population

**District profile:** Two schools—one with a 78% EL enrollment and the other with a 59% EL enrollment—are in a large urban school district with an overall EL enrollment of 27%; the third school has a 58% EL enrollment and is in a rural school district with a 16% EL enrollment

**Scope of work:** Project ESTRE<sup>2</sup>LLA adapts, refines, and evaluates a multitiered instructional framework in three K–3 elementary schools with a large EL population. The model is inclusive of the sociopolitical, cultural, and linguistic factors that influence the education of ELs and uses a multitiered framework for responsive native language and English as a second language instruction. The goal is to determine to what extent the framework increases the accuracy of identification of ELs with disabilities and improves the reading achievement and language development of ELs with or at risk of having a disability.

**Website:** <http://projectestrella.wordpress.com>

### RTI Effectiveness Model for ELs (Project REME)

*The University of Colorado at Boulder*

**Sites:** Three K–3 schools in a rural Colorado district

**District profile:** 37% of students identified as limited English proficient districtwide; individual school percentages range from 40% to 86% in kindergarten through grade 3

**Scope of work:** Project REME examines the effect of a culturally responsive, multitiered RTI instructional model on the reading and language achievement of ELs. The project aims to establish and institutionalize a schoolwide RTI model that increases reading and language achievement for ELs; decreases special education referrals for ELs in kindergarten through grade 3; and establishes and optimizes collaborative interactions among grade, school, and district RTI teams. The project works collaboratively within a partnership model to transform and sustain RTI practices.

**Website:** [http://mdcc.sri.com/cohort5\\_co.html](http://mdcc.sri.com/cohort5_co.html)

## RTI in Language-Diverse Settings

The practices commonly associated with RTI—core classroom instruction, universal screening, tiered intervention instruction, and systematic progress monitoring—are well supported by scientific research.<sup>2</sup> Yet educators continue to confront issues related to RTI's fit, adaptability, and appropriateness for culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly ELs.<sup>3</sup> To address this critical gap, we must examine the core components of RTI and determine school, district, and class considerations necessary for students who learn to read in their primary language in addition to English.

Below, we outline the essential components of RTI and some broad considerations for K–3 educators beginning to implement a tiered instructional framework tailored to meet the needs of ELs. Future publications in this series will address some of these key components in greater depth.

### Core Instruction

First and foremost, all learners should receive comprehensive, research-based, quality literacy instruction, whether in students' primary language or in English. As research has shown, inadequate core instruction can be a source of academic problems, complicating accurate identification of ELs who are truly at risk for learning disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Core instruction for all learners should be explicit and systematic and include evidence-based strategies for differentiation. "Evidence based," in this respect, refers to practices shown to be valid for the particular target population—in this case, ELs.<sup>5</sup>

Effective **core instruction** for ELs includes the following:

- Differentiated, high-quality, research-based language and literacy teaching in both the primary language and English
- Culturally relevant principles applied to instruction and assessment
- Educator knowledge in distinguishing language and cultural differences from learning disabilities

Effective core instruction for ELs is guided by teachers' knowledge of native language development and the second-language acquisition process. Such instruction focuses on building skills in each of the four language domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Further, data on students' language background and level of native language and/

2 For example: Griffiths, Parson, Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Tilly, 2007; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2006; Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004

3 Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006

4 Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006

5 Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007

or second-language proficiency inform instructional planning. Instructors regularly review these data alongside data from literacy screens and assessments to ensure that instruction is appropriately differentiated for students in bilingual education and English as a second language programs.

### Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring

Universal screening measures are brief, standardized assessments of grade-level priority skills (e.g., phonological awareness, graphophonemic knowledge). These assessments identify students' reading development at a single point in time (e.g., beginning, middle, or end of year) against established benchmarks. Screening identifies students who make adequate progress and students who fall behind and could benefit from additional, targeted support. In an effective RTI model, data from valid screening assessments and language proficiency data guide instructional decisions about ELs and planning for instruction in all tiers of the model.

An effective **data-based decision-making system** for ELs includes the following:

- Appropriate screening and progress-monitoring measures
- Educator knowledge and use of students' language proficiency data
- An individualized, problem-solving approach to instruction
- A sound understanding of student and external factors that affect learning

An effective RTI model also uses valid progress-monitoring assessments to determine students' response to instruction. ELs with specific needs are regularly monitored for progress in each tier of instruction (with more frequent monitoring in Tier II and Tier III), and these data inform subsequent instructional planning. Like screening assessments, progress-monitoring assessments should be appropriate for the students' language of instruction and measure progress toward language and literacy goals.

### Tiered Instruction

Tiers II and III of an RTI framework for ELs include systematic, evidence-based interventions that address students' specific learning and language needs and use multiple data sources, including first- and second-language development and proficiency. Tiers II and III instruction should enhance, **not replace**, quality core instruction and should be differentiated to meet students' unique learning

Effective **tiered instruction** for ELs includes the following:

- Differentiated, high-quality, research-based language and literacy instruction with varying levels of intensity
- Data-informed and appropriate instructional adjustments

needs. Supplemental and intensive intervention instruction for ELs must be informed by the students' level of language proficiency and the language of core classroom instruction. In addition to basic early literacy skills, tiered interventions may include appropriate instructional strategies that target first-language and/or English as a second language development.

### Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The RTI framework we propose is grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy and practice. As an educational model, cultural responsiveness is broadly defined as a system that acknowledges and operationally addresses the mediating role of culture in the learning process, particularly in the instruction, assessment, and evaluation of students whose cultural practices differ from the mainstream culture.<sup>6</sup> Culturally responsive educational systems acknowledge and systematically validate students' languages, experiences, and perspectives and use and those sources of knowledge as "conduits for teaching more effectively."<sup>7</sup>

The foundation of culturally responsive educational systems is providing **all** students with equitable and appropriate opportunities to learn. In this respect, culturally responsive pedagogy shares common theoretical ground with RTI. Both models posit that all students must be provided adequate opportunities to learn through quality, evidence-based instruction in all tiers of the instructional framework before consideration of learning disabilities.<sup>8</sup> Specific to a culturally responsive model, however, is that evidence-based practices must be deemed valid for the population with whom they are applied (e.g., ELs).

### Response to Intervention for English Learners Practice Series

This practice brief is the first in a series devoted to effective practices for ELs. The goal of the series is to assist administrators, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in implementing or refining a campuswide model for improving the academic achievement of ELs in the primary grades. We hope to add to existing research, best-practice recommendations, and tools for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Each practice brief will tackle salient issues that emerged during the model implementation process to translate "lessons learned" into practical guidance.

Forthcoming briefs will revisit the key features of RTI and explore three integral components of an RTI framework for ELs: (1) data-based decision-making; (2) core instruction;

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6 Landson-Billings, 1995  
7 Gay, 2002, p. 106  
8 Klingner & Edwards, 2006

and (3) embedded and ongoing professional development. Each brief will draw upon information gathered during model implementation at each project site to describe how these practices can be used with ELs. We will present recommendations throughout this series for making learning opportunities adequate and appropriate, as they relate to language and culture, in each component of the RTI process. (See below for summaries of the forthcoming briefs in this series.)

By framing the series of practice briefs in this way, we hope to offer a more comprehensive RTI framework that is responsive to the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and that is informed by educators' understanding of how students' language proficiency and second-language development affect their reading achievement trajectories.

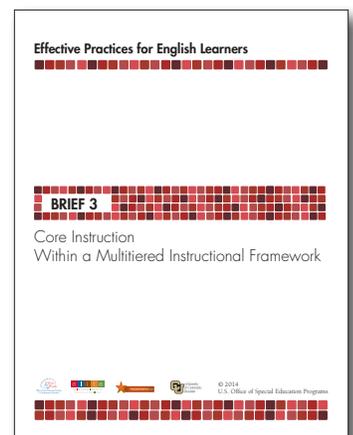
### Practice Brief 2: Assessment and Data-Based Decision-Making

The second brief in the series will provide information on using assessment data to make educational decisions about ELs within an RTI framework. We will explore the implications of language diversity when monitoring response to instruction and making decisions based on that response. We will discuss the relationship of assessment and decision-making with other features of RTI in a language-diverse school—the intersection of language proficiency, language of instruction, and language of assessment—and the impact on ELs' reading and writing outcomes. This brief also will address key questions for educators to consider and recommendations for assessment and data-based decision-making.



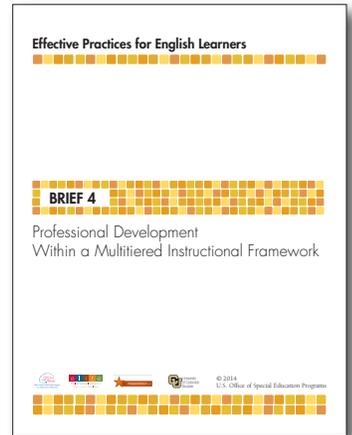
### Practice Brief 3: Core Instruction

The third brief in this series will provide information on providing quality, evidence-based classroom instruction that addresses the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. This brief will emphasize the roles of classroom teachers in core instruction within an RTI framework. The brief also will address key questions for educators to consider and recommendations related to culturally responsive, evidence-based core instructional practices.



## Practice Brief 4: Professional Development

The fourth brief in this series will present information on providing quality, evidence-based professional development that supports educators' efforts to understand and meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. We will emphasize the importance of supporting educators within an RTI framework as they learn how to make data-informed decisions about ELs and deliver appropriate, multitiered instruction to culturally and linguistically diverse students. This brief will present key questions for educators to consider and recommendations related to professional development.



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