

Interventions for English Language Learners: A Review

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Abstract. English Language Learners (ELLs) are individuals who have “sufficient difficulty reading, speaking, writing, or understanding the English language” (US Department of Education, 2014). These individuals require strategic and targeted instruction in order for them to succeed in classroom settings. This population represents a clear area of need in the American education system. ELLs are the fastest growing student population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, general education teachers consistently report feeling underprepared in their ability to accommodate the unique needs of the ELLs in their classroom (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010, 35). This review only includes high quality sources. The purpose of this literature analysis is to comprehensively evaluate the experiences of English Language Learners, in order to better ascertain the accommodations that they are receiving in the context of the American education system. Through my analysis it is evident that this population has clear needs that are not currently being met. However, if ELLs are provided with tiered interventions, they show significant improvements in their language acquisition.

I. Who are English Language Learners?

English Learners are students who have “sufficient difficulty reading, speaking, writing, or understanding the English language” (US Department of Education, 2014). Nearly five million students enrolled in American public schools are English Language Learners. This means that one in every ten students are not proficient in English (National Center of Education Statistics, 2015). This population has increased by one million over the last ten years. It is predicted that by 2025, one in four enrolled public school students will be an English Language Learner (National Education Association, 2008). This fast-growing rate illustrates the clear necessity of well-equipped instructors and evidence-based instructional methods to meet the needs of these students so that they are able to successfully meet state standards. Teachers and educational stakeholders must understand the importance of using evidence-based interventions in their instruction.

Approximately 71% of English Language Learners speak Spanish as their first language (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). While Spanish is the primary language spoken by English Language Learners, there are over 400 languages spoken by ELLs in America today (National Education Association, 2005). This demonstrates that these students come from a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds and needs, which has clear implications for effective intervention. Interventions cannot be streamlined or based in a specific language or cultural context because of the diversity of these students.

II. Academic Outcomes for English Language Learners

English Language Learners consistently score below their native English speaking peers on assessments of all academic subjects (Fry, 2007, 4). Nearly three-quarters of surveyed ELLs scored in the lowest level on the reading portion of the

National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2005. Nearly ½ of ELLs scored in the lowest level on the math portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2005. In contrast, only 11% of their peers performed at this level on the math portion and 25% performed at this level on the reading section (Fry, 2007, 8). ELLs did nearly three times worse than their peers on the reading section, illustrating a clear deficit. This deficit is further supported by clear issues with reading comprehension among English Language Learners. In 2001, for example, 81.3% of ELLs performed below the norm in reading comprehension (National Education Association, 2005). The significantly lower scores among ELLs, specifically in reading and math skills, illustrate the need for educational supports among this population.

Perhaps, more alarmingly, this achievement gap seems to widen with time, growing by nearly 30 percent (Fry, 2007, 10). This gap could be attributed to the Matthew Effect, which states that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer when it comes to literacy development. Higher levels of language exposure lead to higher levels of success using language, which then encourages students to seek out more opportunities to practice this language (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998, 137).

ELLs likely experience more frustration with their English literacy and language development, which might lead to their disengagement from their learning. Meanwhile, proficient readers are able to engage with higher-level texts, introducing them to more complex vocabulary and syntax. This increased exposure allows proficient readers to continue developing their already above-average literacy skills. Over time, the gap widens because ELLs are not given the same practice employing and succeeding in reading higher-level texts – they are still developing foundational literacy skills while their peers are growing in their own literacy development.

This explanation for the widening gap is supported by the high cognitive load required for literacy development in school-age students. School-age children learn around 3,000 new words per year, most of which are not explicitly taught (Nagy et al. 1987, 20). Studies have shown that ELLs' vocabulary growth rates may even surpass

those of native English speakers, demonstrating their high potential for success across all academic domains (Mancillla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). However, the disparity in access between ELLs and native English speakers is still in effect because of the sheer volume of words that ELLs must learn (Mancillla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). For an ELL student still grappling with the structure and syntax of a new language, being tasked with learning new words within an unfamiliar context is an overwhelming requirement for academic success.

ELLs are less likely to be referred early to special education programs, which means that they spend less time receiving the interventions that they need to be successful (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017, 11). These students are also less likely to be identified as gifted and receive services – only two percent of ELLs are enrolled in gifted programs, compared to the 7.3% average (Department of Education, 2017). These students, then, are not exposed to advanced course content and materials which stifles their potential to succeed. The National Association for Gifted Children articulated concern for this issue, identifying the detriments of keeping ELLs out of accelerated programming in schools (Langley 2016). This voiced concern reveals that often, the potential for ELLs is stifled and their needs are not accommodated as effectively as native English-speakers.

ELLs are also less likely to graduate high school and take the necessary college entrance exams than their native-speaking peers. While the national graduation rate is 82%, only 62% of ELLs graduate high school (Department of Education, 2017). In 2001, it was reported that ELLs had dropout rates that were four times higher than that of their peers (National Education Association, 2005). One in ten ELL students in upper grades were retained (National Education Association, 2005), demonstrating clear academic needs in this population and that these needs are often not met.

III. Barriers to Academic Success

A. Socioeconomic Status and Receptive Vocabulary

English Learners are also more likely to come from low-income families, with 60% of ELLs

falling below the poverty line (Grantmakers for Education, 2013). Poverty has clear implications for a child's language development. There are clear disparities in educational accessibility and exposure for children living in poverty, as studies have identified significant gaps in receptive vocabulary exposure stratified by socioeconomic status (Hart & Risley, 1995, 5). Children with higher levels of input have higher vocabularies. These higher vocabularies are essential in second language acquisition. If a student has an understanding of a word in their first language, they will have an understanding of its meaning and use. Therefore, when they learn it in English, they will only have to map the new word onto the word in their other language as opposed to learning both the word and the concept. Clearly, then, this gap in receptive vocabulary exposure has implications for an ELLs understanding of both their home language and English. A higher vocabulary in one's first language has been linked to more success in learning English (Vermeer, 2001, 218). Therefore, ELLs in low-income families are set even further behind their native English-speaking peers because they must learn a new language and, oftentimes, account for lacking input in their home language.

B. Teacher Preparation

While it is clear that English Language Learners need extensive and targeted interventions to account for the growing gaps between them and their peers, teachers consistently report feeling underprepared to do provide effective interventions (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010, 35). Although teachers consistently report feeling underprepared to instruct ELLs, most teachers have at least one English Language Learner in their classroom (Ballantye et al., 2008). Only 27% of general education teachers reported feeling well-prepared to address the unique needs of students with limited English proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Oftentimes, their feelings of unpreparedness are warranted. A review of 417 institutes of higher education found that fewer than one in six require any kind of preparation for preservice teachers about the education of ELLs (Menken & Antunez,

2001). While nearly half of teachers reported that they had ELLs in their classrooms, fewer than eight percent reported attending eight or more hours of ELL-specific professional development (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Although teachers clearly expressed concern about their ability to meet the needs of ELLs, districts were least likely to host a professional development seminar on ELLs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). This lack of necessary supports for teachers illustrates a disconnect between the needs of students and the preparation of teachers. On a survey of more than 1,200 teachers, over half said they needed more information to work effectively with ELLs, demonstrating the clear need for evidence-based professional development. While ELLs consistently have worse academic outcomes than their peers, it is clear that they are not prioritized in teacher education or professional development programs. Teachers consistently report feeling unequipped to meet the clear needs of ELLs, but this need is not being met.

C. Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teachers must also be aware of the funds of knowledge that their students bring into the classroom. They must work to deeply understand their students as humans, not just as academic beings. If a teacher does not consider the wealth of cultural backgrounds in each classroom in their instruction, it can painfully isolate all students from the classroom environment and encourage them to disengage. This can specifically affect English Learners, who already might experience social isolation due to language barriers between students. Teachers must be aware of this and work to counteract it by rooting their practices in culturally responsive teaching. If teachers make explicit effort to specifically embrace and celebrate cultural diversity in the classroom, studies have found that English Learners are further encouraged to participate in class and have better academic outcomes (Yoon, 2004, 35). Steps to encourage a more inclusive classroom environment include "showing interest in ELLs' culture, encouraging them to share their cultural experiences, including ELLs as full participants... and encouraging mainstream students to support

ELLs' learning" (Yoon, 2004, 36). Therefore, an effective teacher must consider and embrace the cultural differences between mainstream and ELL students, encouraging participation and inclusion. However, a teacher must be able to do this in a way that does not further isolate the student. If a teacher continually singles out individual students to share their cultural practices, this could result in feelings of "othering" that will make the student feel more alone. Therefore, teachers must carefully consider the method they use to support and include all students.

IV. Interventions for English Language Learners

A. The Response to Intervention Model

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model is consistently utilized in educational settings in order to meet unique student needs (Ebbels et al. 2017, 2). This intervention model is beneficial in meeting the unique needs of English Language Learners in their literacy learning. It divides types of academic intervention into three tiers by level of pervasiveness, with Tier 1 being the least pervasive and Tier 3 being the most intensive. Tier 1 interventions consist of high-quality, evidence-based teaching for all children, while Tiers 2 and 3 consist of more targeted approaches with students who are struggling (Ebbels et al. 2017, 3). Tier 1 interventions involve only the instruction that occurs in the general education classroom, including the core reading and math curricula. Because Tier 3 is largely individualized, this paper will only review outcomes of Tier 1 and 2 interventions.

As there is a clear gap between ELLs and their peers, this differentiated tier model can help provide the additional supports necessary to encourage ELL growth. RTI also is beneficial in its assessment model. The RTI model focuses largely on curriculum-based assessment and classroom observation to measure student achievement (Xu & Drame, 308, 2007). Curriculum based assessment is brief, weekly testing to measure growth and inform future instruction (McLane, 2018). This type of assessment is preferable because "students with diverse backgrounds are provided opportunities to receive appropriate intervention before

being assessed through a standardized, possibly culturally biased testing...[It] can directly impact instructional effectiveness in serving children with diverse needs" (Xu & Drame, 308, 2007).

B. Tier One Interventions

In this whole-classroom setting, a teacher with an ELL student must make adjustments to lesson plans in order to make the learning accessible to all of their students. However, a teacher must also implement effective and evidence-based instruction as the foundation for student learning. A study conducted by Baker et al. in 2006 found clear correlations between effective instruction in the classroom settings and academic success of English Language Learners. This study measured the presence of evidence-based instructional techniques (i.e. use of visuals, modeling of strategies, explicit vocabulary instruction) and their relationship to student reading comprehension scores.

The ELLs with classroom teachers who had a higher usage of these instructional techniques had higher levels of performance on reading tests than their peers with less effective teachers (Baker et al., 2006, 218). While most of the instructional practices Baker and his colleagues studied are generally characteristic of effective instruction, the presence of one – the extent at which the teacher adjusted their own English during a lesson – was especially indicative of ELL success. These teachers thoughtfully used student funds of knowledge to leverage their ability to grasp new vocabulary words. For example, they might incorporate cognates in their instruction or use student interests to frame the words they introduced in each lesson. They also might use more familiar, colloquial words (i.e. big instead of humongous) and provide scaffolds for students to access new words. This makes it clear that while ELLs are responsive to high-quality instruction, teachers must be aware of the wording that they use in order to make lessons accessible to students.

One clear area of need for English Language Learners is explicit vocabulary instruction, as some scholars believe that vocabulary acquisition is the central task of second language learning (Lewis, 1993). Explicit vocabulary instruction is the intentional introduction of new vocabulary

words, in which the teacher directly provides a definition of the new word, supported with repeated opportunities for practice, examples and visuals. A study specifically focused on the necessity of explicit vocabulary instruction found that ELLs evidenced notable increases in their lexicon when provided with explicit and repeated vocabulary instruction of many words over time (Beimiller & Boote, 2006). It is evident, then, that ELLs are highly responsive to effective classroom instruction, such as repeated exposures to new word meanings. This type of explicit vocabulary instruction is necessary for ELL success – the students with explicit instruction learned nearly double the amount of word meanings as those dependent solely on context. Similarly, the study revealed the importance of reinforcement – those with repeated instruction knew twice as many words as those who were reliant on a sole explicit explanation (Beimiller & Boote, 2006). An article in *Studies of Literature and Language* articulates this necessity, stating that if ELLs are expected to only rely on incidental language exposure, they will never demonstrate the necessary lexical growth (Bingjun, 2013, 35).

Teachers must also be highly responsive to student need. While evidence-based practices are necessary, researchers have concluded that support based in continual and frequent monitoring of students is necessary for ELLs to succeed (Haager and Windmueller, 2001). Teachers must use results from assessments, classroom observation and informal student work to ensure that they are meeting student need to the best of their ability. For example, if a student consistently struggles with a certain consonant blend in their spelling, a teacher should be able to recognize this deficit through one of the continual assessment measures (i.e. classroom observation) and work to address this need in the classroom setting. An effective teacher at the Tier 1 level continually works to understand and meet areas of student need. This has proven to be a necessary supplement to evidence-based curricular practices in order for ELL students to succeed.

Another Tier 1 Intervention that has high potential of effectiveness for ELLs is the implementation of peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS). Peer learning has proved to be an effective

means of intervention for both struggling and high-performing students. In this class-wide intervention, higher-performing readers are paired with their lower-performing peers in order to complete reading-based activities. This intervention was largely effective in mainstream classrooms, as evidenced by teacher testimonies and testing scores (D. Fuchs et al., 2001). When studied for the specific effectiveness of this intervention on English Language Learners, researchers found that it was highly useful as a Tier 1 Intervention (McMaster et al. 2008). ELLs who had the intervention outperformed the control group of ELLs on every assessed area (i.e. phonemic awareness, etc.). The intervention was effective for the ELLs and native English speakers, depicting its clear applicability for a whole-classroom intervention. Peer learning as a class-wide intervention can also foster important peer relationships and skills like collaboration, communication and inquiry skills (Boud et al. 1999, 414). The intervention, therefore, has clear social and academic benefits for all students.

Notable, also, is the power of a teacher who considers the unique needs of each student in the general education classroom. As noted in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, teachers must provide instruction that is “rooted in the cultural capital of [students]” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 151). It is necessary for teachers to consider and account for the cultural differences. Teachers must be able to both celebrate students’ unique culture while also accounting for how their cultural differences might influence their learning. Being mindful of students’ interindividual differences will empower them and avoid confusion that could have been mediated.

This celebration of differences has important implications beyond academic benefits. Some researchers believe that cultural conflict may explain some of the difficulties ELLs face in acquiring their second language (Trueba, 1988, 127). These conflicting expectations between cultures can have lasting socioemotional effects, which can manifest in behavioral issues. Trueba cited that these behavioral issues can manifest in special education placement. It is necessary that teachers, then, are aware of this turmoil and attempt to account for it in their classroom (Xu & Drame,

2007, 5). However, teachers must intentionally caution from attributing all behavior management issues to the change in cultures. This could result in a dangerous undertreatment of diagnosable issues in English Language Learners.

C. Tier Two Interventions

If students are not responsive to the targeted, culturally cognizant educational model of Tier 1, they should be referred to more explicit and intensive educational interventions. If Curriculum Based Measurements and classroom observation indicate that Tier 1 is not sufficient to support a student, they advance to Tier 2 of the RTI model. Tier 2 is characterized by “explicit skills-based instruction” (McMaster et al. 2008). It is administered to small groups of 3-6 who receive the intervention for a minimum of thirty minutes each day to “ensure that interventions are sufficiently intense” (Vaughn, 2008). Students receive the intensive Tier 2 instruction as a supplement to Tier 1 instruction to further address areas of need.

Tier 2 interventions are more intensive than Tier 1 interventions, increasing the likelihood that individual student needs are met and understood. These interventions are heavily structured and focused on equipping students with explicit skill instruction. One example of a Tier 2 Intervention is the *Early Interventions in Reading* program, which includes activities like phonological awareness tasks, alphabetic decoding practices, book readings and comprehension activities (Kamps et al. 2007, 157). This high level of structure is conducive to student growth as they are able to repeatedly rehearse skills that are foundational to literacy success.

Tier 2 interventions like this one are highly effective academic supports for all students. One study compared the effects of Tier 2 intervention on 340 students enrolled in eight schools. This study found that the students who received the small-group Tier 2 intervention were, on average, able to read 16.27 more nonsense words fluently and 7.1 more words per minute than their peers in the control group (Kamps & Greenwood, 2005, 504). This study demonstrated the clear positive implications of Tier 2 intervention on all students, including ELLs.

One study specifically compared the academic outcomes for ELLs enrolled in schools that implemented the RTI model and those that did not. The study focused heavily on the differing effects of structured Tier 2 Interventions like the *Early Interventions in Reading* program and a typical ELL intervention. The control ELL intervention used “balanced literacy instruction with a focus on word study, story reading and writing activities” and was administered to larger groups (Kamps et al. 2007, 153).

Upon comparing the two groups, the ELLs that received the Tier 2 interventions had better academic outcomes than those that did not. They had higher levels of nonsense word fluency and oral reading fluency (Kamps et al. 2007, 159). This study found that the students who were administered any of the three Tier 2 interventions outperformed ELL and native English speakers who did not receive the intervention, illustrating the clear potential for targeted Tier 2 interventions in this population. While these findings had highly relevant implications about the effectiveness of Tier 2 interventions, the researchers identified clear limitations. Most notably, “the majority of the students also received a prior direct instruction intervention. Thus, the study did not have a true control group across grade levels” (Kamps et al. 167). Although I believe these findings contribute much to the lacking literature about tiered intervention for language learners, this limitation clearly influenced the results of the study, as every child was receiving some type of intensive intervention. However, the children who did receive the Tier 2 intervention clearly outperformed those who did not, indicating the importance of Tier 2 interventions for this population.

If a student is not responsive to this small-group, intensive intervention, they progress into Tier 3 of the Response to Intervention Model. In Tier 3, students receive one-on-one intervention that is more individualized to meet unique needs. This intervention may be provided by a specialist, like an English as a Second Language instructor or literacy specialist. These students may be pulled out of the general education environment for short periods of time and receive targeted interventions. For example, a Tier 3 instructor might spend a session explicitly supporting students in learning

new vocabulary words with flashcards and repeated, individualized practice. They might provide visuals or explicitly link new words to words in the student's native language.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, English Language Learners have clear needs that are not being fully addressed in schools. These students consistently underperform their peers and have worse academic outcomes. However, most teachers cite feeling underprepared to provide adequate supports to accommodate ELLs in the classroom. This is alarming because it is predicted that by 2025, one in four students will be an ELL (National Education Association, 2008). ELL-based professional development is necessary for teachers, as this student population is rapidly growing. It is necessary that interventions for this population are studied further and taught to teachers to encourage educational equity in this regard.

The Response to Intervention model is highly effective for English Language Learners. Through structured, evidence-based interventions designed to meet student need, ELLs are able to receive the supports that they need to advance past the clear academic gap that exists between ELLs and native English speakers. Ultimately, English Language Learners are a population that has clear and unique needs that need to be addressed in educational settings. In order for English Language Learners to succeed, they must receive systemic and structured interventions to support their learning.

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