



Culturally Competent Screening and Special Education Referral: A Systematic Approach

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Many students who are English language learners (ELLs) lag behind their native English speaking peers in academic skills. Therefore, they are at greater risk for referral to special education or other services. Studies have indicated that academic, demographic, and economic variables all contribute to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). In most cases, the low achievement of ELLs is not because of indifference, low motivation, or limited intelligence, but because they are navigating a school environment with an unfamiliar curriculum, language, and culture. Many concerned teachers believe these students require intensive services only available in special education. Yet, labeling any student as having a disability is a serious matter with lifelong consequences that extend far beyond the person's academic career. Ortiz (1990) found that when prereferral teams were trained on culture and language issues, the number of referrals of culturally and linguistically diverse students to special education was substantially reduced. Before referring an ELL student to determine special education eligibility, school staff members should consider culturally competent screening procedures. This handout provides an overview of screening approaches as applied to ELL students.

UNIVERSAL SCREENING

Universal screening refers to procedures used with an entire population (school, district) to identify students who might need support beyond the standard curriculum. The identification of students as potentially at risk for academic failure should be based on data rather than opinion. One of the important elements of a screening program is to use objective academic data to compare ELL students to their cultural and linguistic peers (e.g., with students from similar cultural backgrounds who speak the same native language). Such a system minimizes culture and English proficiency as potential sources of bias in the referral process.

One useful procedure for wide-scale screening is curriculum-based measurement (CBM). These tools are well researched in terms of reliability and validity; they are efficient, idiographic, direct, and repeatable; and they can be normed on various populations within the school community to ensure appropriate comparisons. Screening results can be used to pinpoint curriculum-related skill problems, focus instruction on deficient skills, and monitor progress. Further, as an idiographic assessment, CBM employs intraindividual comparisons for planning and evaluating interventions - that is, a student's performance over time can be analyzed to determine if current instruction is on target or needs modification. Thus, CBM has multiple applications within a systematic approach to early intervention and prevention of inappropriate special education referrals. Also, evidence of the

validity of using CBMs with ELL students, while limited at this time, is emerging and indicative of the effectiveness of this approach (Deno, 2005; Wiley & Deno, 2005).

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE CLASS ROOM INSTRUCTION

At the outset of implementing a screening program, it is important to ask if teachers are using effective instruction that promotes English literacy development for ELL students. Findings of the National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006) include: (a) teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English, and (b) what we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for ELLs as well, but (c) when instructing English learners in English, teachers must modify instruction to take into account students' English language proficiency. Critical components of instruction research on effective instructional strategies for ELL students are emerging. For instance, Gersten and Baker (2000) identified five critical instructional components for ELL students. These components include:

- Vocabulary taught prior to and during each unit
- Visuals to reinforce concepts and vocabulary
- Cooperative learning and peer-tutoring strategies
- Strategic use of native language
- Matching of cognitive and language demands to student skills

Facilitating learning in a second language. A substantial body of research suggests that literacy and other skills and knowledge transfer across languages and facilitate learning in the second language (e.g., Thomas & Collier, 2002). ELLs learning to read in English, just like their English-speaking peers, need explicit teaching of the five components of literacy: phonemic awareness and phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing. Identifying effective strategies for building reading comprehension is more complex, and includes expanding vocabulary and syntax knowledge as well as increasing reading practice with independent level materials and related oral discussion. Working to improve background and content knowledge should be ongoing. As ELLs work to acquire these complex skills, such as comprehension and analysis, they may require different instructional approaches, and will probably require some instructional supports for a long period of time.

IN-DEPTH SCREENING: GATHERING INFORMATION

Once initial screening identifies an ELL student as at-risk for academic failure, a more in-depth screening is necessary. The purpose of this screening is to form an accurate picture of the student's skill levels relative to the classroom curriculum and his or her peers from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such information will be useful in developing effective interventions. If the student is eventually referred for formal assessment (such as a special education evaluation), this screening data will also help to interpret the results of those assessments. Specific data are needed in the following areas:

Language proficiency. Screening should address both native language and English language proficiency of the target student. Typically, the staff in the ELL department or a speech and language pathologist would assist in this process. There are some important questions to be answered:

- Are there signs of language disorder in the native language that may impede English language learning?
- Are the student's English skills within the expected level, given his or her years of formal schooling and literacy in native language? According to Cummins (1984), students learn basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in about 2 years upon entering a new language environment. However, learning deeper, more abstract, and complex language involved in conceptual learning (cognitive academic language, or CALP) takes much longer.
- Research suggests that ELL students require 4–7 years of formal schooling in order to acquire an average level of academic language if they have had the support of native language instruction. If they have had only English instruction, the typical ELL student will need 7–10 years to attain average achievement, if they ever do (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Family, health, and developmental history. Gathering a thorough history of family, health, and developmental background of an ELL student through a high-quality interview with the parents provides the necessary context to interpret the student's school functioning. When interviewing parents who are at an early stage of acculturation and have limited English proficiency, it is both inappropriate and insensitive to present a laundry list of direct questions embedded with American mainstream and technical terminologies. Instead, an open-ended inquiring approach is recommended. Special attention should be given to specific cultural beliefs and practices and the unique experiences that are not common in this country. Cultural liaisons (individuals from the student's culture who are proficient in English and able to bridge communication between school and family) could provide valuable guidance in framing the questions and interpreting the interview data. A trained interpreter should be used to facilitate the interview, which might explore the family structure, languages spoken at home, immigration history, the parents' concerns about the target student relative to siblings and their expectations, developmental milestones, health status and medical care, and social and adaptive skills.

Educational and instructional history. Information about a student's past educational experience is vital to understanding his or her current academic and social performance. Educators are referred to Thomas and Collier (2002) for a summary of a national study of the effects of different instructional service models on the long-term achievement of language minority students. School personnel need to consider such questions as:

- Has instruction been continuous or frequently interrupted?
- What is known about the quality of instruction?
- Has the student attended school regularly, or have there been problems with school attendance or tardiness?
- What language(s) was used during instruction?
- Did the student learn to read in the native language?
- Are school records available from other countries or other schools attended in the United States? If school documents from other countries are available, they should be translated by individuals who are knowledgeable about the educational system involved.
- Has the student's schooling been disrupted by war, family migration, or other trauma?
- Has the student received previous ELL instruction or special program support? What was the nature of the program (e.g., bilingual or dual immersion)? Is there evidence that the curriculum has been effective and accommodates the needs of diverse students?

- Has the student been exposed to positive but realistic expectations, or only minimal standards and expectations?

Once all this information is gathered, the teacher may wish to consult the building support team, especially ELL teachers, to determine if there is a gap between reasonably expected and actual performance.

Classroom observations and interviews. To gain a reasonably accurate description of a student's academic performance, the teacher and the support team may undertake a number of different activities, including classroom observations and interviews with teachers and the student. Classroom observers focus on both the student of concern and the instructional environment. With ELL students, they observe such factors as communication behaviors and social interaction. Questions to consider include:

- Does the student initiate verbal interaction with both mainstream peers and the teachers, or only with cultural and linguistic peers?
- Does the student demonstrate comprehension of instructions?
- How dependent is he or she on visual and concrete clues?
- Does he or she watch peers to figure out what to do?
- How culturally and linguistically isolated is this student in his or her classes? Does the student interact with students of other backgrounds and feel safe and accepted in the classroom?
- Does the student comprehend academic and classroom vocabulary, and is it directly taught?

Occasionally, students appear to be English proficient because they are very talkative with peers in English. Teachers assume they are also proficient with cognitive academic language, which is often just developing.

Measuring and monitoring academic skills. To what extent is the ELL student receiving instruction at his or her appropriate level? Is there a reasonable match between the student's academic and language skills and the classroom curriculum?

Curriculum-based assessment to plan instruction. Curriculum-based assessment (CBA; Gickling & Armstrong, 1978) can be generally defined as a process of ongoing assessment of a student based on the student's curriculum to determine his or her instructional needs. CBA can be used to estimate a student's instructional level in reading, writing, and mathematics. An instructional level in reading can be defined as the level at which 93–97% of the words are known. When students are taught at their instructional level, their learning is optimized. On the other hand, if the student is instructed at the frustration level (93% or fewer of the words are known), learning is hindered by frustration and inefficient/ineffective strategies. Once the instructional level is determined, teachers must consider if any adjustments are needed to help the learner bridge from what is known to what needs to be learned. How can instruction be delivered at an appropriate level and rate so as to optimize acquisition, fluency, and generalization?

Curriculum-based measurement procedures to monitor progress. Once instructional modifications are implemented, teachers must next ask if these modifications promote improved student performance over time. To answer this question, CBM procedures are recommended (Deno, 2005). These are brief measures that can be repeated over time (e.g., weekly) to obtain

graphic documentation of the student's rate of progress in the current program. If locally based CBM norms (classroom, grade, building, or district level) are available, the support team can also determine how the target student compares to similar cultural and linguistic peers at the same grade level. Analyzing the discrepancy between the target student and his or her peers, and examining the degree to which interventions are decreasing any gap, provides one data-based method for making such screening level decisions as placement in remedial instruction groups or referral for more formal assessment.

Summary: in-depth screening. At the stage of in-depth screening, the primary focus is to draw an accurate picture of the student's functioning within the context of his or her cultural and linguistic background. Armed with this information, school staff can develop appropriate universal and targeted interventions for at-risk students. Finally, if there are signs of possible disability (e.g., persistent resistance to appropriate interventions), then the student can be referred for formal assessment, possibly leading to special education services.

ELLS AND RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

IDEA 2004 promotes the use of response to intervention (RTI) approaches to identifying and supporting all students, particularly those at risk, and as a model of early intervention. RTI models include universal screening (screening of all students, referred to as Tier 1), and targeted or in-depth screening of students who appear to have more significant needs, followed by implementing appropriate instructional modifications (Tier 2), similar to the identification procedures described above. Information gained from Tiers 1 and 2 screening and intervention becomes critical to the development of more intensive interventions and/or formal assessment (Tier 3).

In the current literature regarding RTI and ELL students, it is noted that RTI seems to have promise, but to date, the empirical evidence is very limited (Vanderwood & Nam, 2007). Yet the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches of referring and assessing at-risk students is also widely accepted (e.g., the practice of referring students who are performing below same-age peers for assessments that only consider performance relative to classmates and do not address the adequacy of instruction or cultural factors).

The theoretical foundation of RTI is quite appealing and suitable for the unique and diverse challenges presented by the struggling ELL student. Collecting data systematically and frequently on the effects of interventions and the fidelity of their implementation is important for all at-risk students. With a data-based system for making decisions about students' response to interventions, support teams may be able to avoid both too early and too late referral.

Practitioners today have access to ecologically sensitive assessments and science-based intervention strategies that are useful in screening and subsequently designing and evaluating interventions for native English speakers. While many issues must be addressed and many procedures refined, similar strategies can be implemented to benefit ELL students.

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