

# MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

## BRIEF 1

# *Multitiered Instructional Systems for ELs*

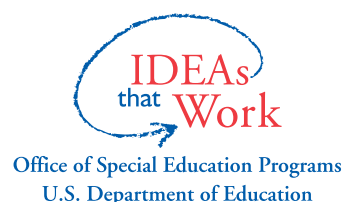


English Learner Literacy Intervention Programs and Strategies  
ENSURING SUCCESS



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## Multitiered Instructional Frameworks

When implemented effectively, multitiered instructional frameworks support educators in providing high-quality culturally and linguistically responsive instruction for English learners, including those in need of supplemental support in language and literacy. Further, when a multitiered system of supports include assessment procedures that are linguistically aligned and informed by educators' knowledge of the language-acquisition process, students with disabilities are accurately identified.

In this introductory brief, three model demonstration projects describe their work implementing multitiered instructional models for English learners with and without disabilities in grades 3 to 5 and introduce key issues to consider.

# Meeting the Learning Needs of English Learners

This guide is the first in a series of practice briefs for school leaders, educators, and other stakeholders who implement or support effective instructional practices for English learners (ELs) with and without disabilities. This introductory brief describes a multitiered instructional framework focused on the language and learning needs of ELs and highlights key questions and considerations that educators often encounter when implementing tiered instruction for bi/multilingual learners. Also in this brief, three model demonstration projects introduce their work and give an overview of the essential components of a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) for ELs with and without disabilities. Throughout the series, the briefs explore MTSS components in greater depth and describe exemplars from participating schools to demonstrate research-to-practice avenues.

## Audience for the Series

This series of practice briefs supports practitioners, educational coaches, educational leaders, and policymakers in the following:

- Design and delivery of core and supplemental instruction for ELs with and without disabilities
- Data analysis and instructional decision-making
- Setting of criteria for supplemental instruction
- Appropriate identification of ELs at risk for or with disabilities
- Design and delivery of intensive interventions

**Practitioners:** Educators, including instructional interventionists, will find this series helpful for the preparation, design, and delivery of instruction for ELs, including ELs with disabilities. In addition, this series will provide guidance on selecting measures and interpreting assessment data for educators who teach in bilingual, dual-language, or English as a second language (ESL) settings in grades 3 through 5.

**Instructional coaches and school leaders:** By applying the guiding principles outlined in the series, instructional coaches and school leaders can help classroom teachers develop the knowledge and skills to serve ELs. Site leaders can also learn about approaches for building site capacity, coordinating resources, and ensuring that their multitiered framework aligns with the goals of dual-language, bilingual, and ESL program models.

**Policymakers:** This series provides district and school administrators and policymakers with a framework for multitiered instruction that can guide decision-making for the allocation and coordination of resources needed to serve ELs effectively.

# Introduction

Classrooms across the United States are becoming more diverse. The numbers of students who are learning English as their second or third language, or who are developing biliteracy, are increasing nationwide.<sup>1</sup> When implemented well, MTSS provides educators with a framework for accurately identifying and addressing the unique language and learning needs of ELs and for providing efficient and high-quality supports when gaps in achievement are identified. Further, a **culturally and linguistically responsive** multitiered framework that addresses the specific needs of ELs ensures that groups of students are not disproportionately referred for supplemental interventions or special education services.

## Overview of Multitiered Instructional Models

The practices traditionally associated with multitiered instructional models—high-quality core instruction, universal screening for education difficulties, supplemental and intensive interventions, and systematic progress monitoring—are well-supported by research and have been integrated into educational policy.<sup>2</sup> **Response to intervention** (RTI) frameworks have been used to effectively identify and meet the instructional needs of native English-speaking students with reading difficulties.<sup>3</sup> More recently, RTI has been conceptualized as part of a **multitiered system of supports**.<sup>4</sup>

In many multitiered instructional models, Tier I refers to the core instruction that all students receive, Tier II refers to supplemental supports that some students receive, and Tier III refers to a more intensive level of instruction for students who perform significantly below level or do not make sufficient progress with Tier II supports.

Not surprisingly, when MTSS is conceptualized as a problem-solving framework for identifying students' needs and allocating resources accordingly, educators see MTSS as a promising framework for ELs. Yet, compared with monolingual student populations, less empirical evidence is available to guide educators in implementing MTSS for students who are developing biliteracy, or learning English as a second language and academic content simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> Thus, school leaders and educators must consider specific questions when making educational decisions and planning culturally and linguistically responsive MTSS. These questions include the following:

- What does MTSS look like within different instructional models for ELs (e.g., one- or two-way dual-language, early-exit bilingual, ESL)?
- What adjustments are needed in core instruction (Tier I) for ELs, with and without disabilities, when a disproportionate number of ELs do not meet grade-level expectations or are identified as needing supplemental intervention?
- Which assessments are appropriate for ELs and consistent with the language(s) of instruction?
- What types of supplemental culturally responsive interventions do ELs with and without disabilities need?

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1 National Center for Education Statistics, 2017

2 Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012

3 Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003

4 Hoover et al., 2016

5 Klingner et al., 2006; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016

In this introductory brief, we begin to address these questions by introducing key considerations and tools for assessing schools' implementation of MTSS for ELs. We begin with an overview of model demonstration research and a description of each of the three model demonstration sites.

## Model Demonstration Projects

The three projects that authored this series were funded in September 2016 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (see project summaries on following page). Each research team works with school districts that serve high populations of ELs, with the overarching goal of improving language and literacy outcomes for ELs with and without disabilities in grades 3 to 5. The projects work to accomplish this goal by creating a replicable and sustainable multitiered instructional framework that is culturally and linguistically responsive to the needs of ELs.

The core components of the projects' MTSS models include the following:

- High-quality, evidence-based language and literacy instruction in all tiers
- Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices and principles, including language supports in students' first language when possible
- Linguistically aligned assessment practices and regular review of student data
- Appropriate identification of ELs with disabilities
- Professional development and strategic coaching for teachers

During the projects' initial year, research teams identified project-specific MTSS practices and procedures and collected baseline data. Educator and stakeholder input was used to inform model development and identify key areas of focus for educator support in participating schools. During the implementation phase, teams test and refine model practices in collaboration with educators; measure fidelity to the model; and provide ongoing support to leaders, specialists, and teachers in refining practice.

### Implementing MTSS for ELs: An Educator Tool

The Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners: Literacy Implementation Rubric (Project LEE et al., 2021) provides a framework for evaluating the extent to which critical components of RTI are in place, specifically as they relate to supporting the needs of ELs. The original rubric (Center on Multi-tiered System of Supports, 2021) assessed the implementation of the components at the school level to inform leadership on areas for improvement. The rubric was adapted to ensure that the unique needs of ELs are addressed in RTI implementation.

Each of the model components described in this series of briefs is addressed in the Literacy Implementation Rubric. Educators and educational leaders can reference this tool as they learn about the components.

The tool, along with accompanying worksheet and guiding questions, is available on the Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners website:

[www.mtss4els.org](http://www.mtss4els.org)

## Overview of the Three Model Demonstration Sites

### English Learner Institute for Teaching and Excellence: Project ELITE<sup>2</sup> *The University of Texas at Austin*

**Practitioners:** Three elementary schools in a school district adjacent to an urban area in Central Texas

**Project Site Overview:** The participating district serves more than 11,000 students in Central Texas. The district has experienced incredible growth in linguistic diversity—the number of ELs increased 153% between 2004 and 2014. In the 2016–2017 school year, the district had one of the highest enrollments of ELs in Central Texas. In the district, 35% of the students are identified as ELs, with representation of ELs at the three participating campuses ranging from 44% to 59%. Currently, the district serves ELs through a one-way (50/50) dual-language model in which students transition to all-English instruction with Spanish support in grade 3. The researcher-practitioner collaboration focuses on gaining knowledge about the design, development, and implementation of a multitiered instructional model that meets the learning needs of multilingual students, including those at risk for academic difficulties. Project ELITE<sup>2</sup> specifically supports educators in developing evidence-based instructional practices for ELs in the upper-elementary grades that align with both dual-language and sheltered instruction approaches.

### English Learner Literacy Intervention Programs and Strategies, Ensuring Success: Project ELLIPSES

**Sites:** Three elementary schools in a South Texas district

**Project Site Overview:** The participating district is in the Lower Rio Grande Valley along the Texas-Mexico border and serves about 50,000 students, of whom 99% are Hispanic. Approximately 33% of the students in the district are ELs. The majority of the staff members in project schools are bilingual in English and Spanish. Currently, the district serves ELs through an early-exit bilingual education model. ELs who are Spanish dominant are instructed in Spanish and English in kindergarten to grade 2 and then transition to all-English instruction with Spanish support in grade 3. Project ELLIPSES works with the district to refine the existing multitiered instructional model and improve practices for ELs with and without disabilities. District staff members are trained in using the most current evidence-based practices to serve ELs in grades 3 to 5.

### Project Lectura para Excelencia y Éxito: Project LEE

**Sites:** Three suburban elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest

**Project Site Overview:** Project LEE's collaborating district is in a metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest with a total student population of 12,678, representing 49 languages. Across the partner schools, student groups range as follows: students identified as ever-English learners<sup>6</sup>, 21% to 44% of the population; students with disabilities, 10% to 11%; Hispanic students, 36% to 48%; and economically disadvantaged students, 46% to 100%. The district has implemented MTSS in behavior since 1996 and in academics since 2001. Two of the partner schools implement a two-way dual-language model in English and Spanish, and the third school's

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6 **Ever-English learners** include all students identified as ELs, including those who are reclassified as English proficient.

program focuses on English-only instruction with ESL supports. The two-way programs begin at kindergarten with a 90/10 (90% Spanish, 10% English) model and increase the proportion of English annually, culminating with a 50/50 model in fifth grade. Project LEE works with the partner district's existing MTSS framework to enhance the cultural and linguistic alignment to better meet the needs of ELs. The focus is on using academic and language data to make instructional decisions and plan instruction and interventions through the use of the PLUSS framework.<sup>7</sup>

## MTSS for English Learners

When considering MTSS as an educational model for ELs, design and implementation must be grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy and practice.<sup>8</sup> Broadly, culturally responsive educational systems acknowledge and systematically validate students' languages, cultures, and lived experiences and use those sources of knowledge as "conduits for teaching more effectively."<sup>9</sup>

In addition, educators need support in gaining and applying knowledge of the **role of language** in all aspects of academic learning. For this reason, MTSS can be enhanced for ELs with and without disabilities by ensuring that educators have a strong understanding of students' first- and second-language development and ensuring that educators use that knowledge when planning and delivering instruction. Educators' knowledge of language acquisition also informs the process of accurately identifying students with disabilities.

Below, we outline the core components of MTSS and point to some broad considerations for educators beginning to implement a multitiered model for ELs. Subsequent briefs will examine these considerations in greater depth.

### Core Instruction for ELs

All students should receive comprehensive, evidence-based language and literacy instruction as part of the core curriculum. In cases where high numbers of ELs are identified as not meeting grade-level expectations or as needing supplemental instruction, evaluation of the core curriculum is an initial step educators need to take to ensure that all students receive adequate opportunities to learn.

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

- High-quality, differentiated language and literacy teaching that is appropriately scaffolded for students' linguistic and academic needs
- Culturally relevant principles applied to instruction and assessment
- Meaningful opportunities for students to practice in the four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
- Use of first-language supports during instruction
- Educator knowledge of native-language development and second-language acquisition

<sup>7</sup> Sanford et al., 2012

<sup>8</sup> Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995

<sup>9</sup> Gay, 2002, p. 106

Effective dual-language instruction is guided by several core principles (for in-depth guidance, see our 2015 model demonstration briefs 3 and 4: [www.mtss4els.org/resources/briefs](http://www.mtss4els.org/resources/briefs)). Dual-language programs promote the equal status of the languages of instruction, and educators tap into students' linguistic and cultural knowledge to advance learning. Instruction targets the key components of literacy—**phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, oral reading fluency, comprehension, and writing**—using a variety of instructional techniques that are appropriate for students' different language proficiency levels and stages of literacy development.<sup>10</sup>

Effective educators recognize that bilingual students draw on linguistic resources in **both** languages. These educators facilitate students' cross-linguistic transfer and develop students' metalinguistic awareness. Also, effective educators of ELs explicitly teach forms of linguistic complexity (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, language functions, conventions) and provide multiple practice opportunities for developing language skills.<sup>11</sup>

Whether students are developing biliteracy within a dual-language model, transitioning from native-language to English instruction, or receiving ESL instruction, core classroom teaching should be explicit, systematic, and differentiated for students' language and learning needs. Core instruction should be guided by teachers' knowledge of second-language acquisition, and it should integrate teaching for each language domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). In addition to reading instruction, teachers provide high-quality, structured opportunities for students to use and practice language in meaningful ways through speaking and writing.<sup>12</sup>

## Special Considerations for Students Acquiring English as a Second Language

Academic learning, particularly in the upper-elementary grades, is challenging for ELs because they are not only learning a second language but also learning new content **in** a second language.<sup>13</sup> When students are required to access new academic concepts in English, a language they are still developing, practitioners need to be knowledgeable of and skilled in a variety of effective instructional practices for ELs. These practices include the following:

- Scaffolding instruction when linguistic and cognitive demands are high
- Using **nonlinguistic** tools strategically (e.g., advance organizers, visuals) to anchor instruction and support students in making sense of content
- Adjusting instruction for different levels of language proficiency
- Teaching students how to transfer native-language skills to second-language learning<sup>14</sup>

In effective classrooms for ELs, teachers view linguistic and cultural differences as assets in the learning process, communicate high expectations, and apply instructional practices that are responsive to students' cultural and linguistic knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Effective school leaders and coaches support teachers in establishing home-school partnerships, identifying and addressing deficit perspectives of ELs, and providing instruction that is responsive to linguistic and cultural diversity.

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10 Beeman & Urow, 2013

11 Howard et al., 2018

12 Baker et al., 2014; Echevarria et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2009

13 Gersten, 1996

14 Baker et al., 2014; Gersten et al., 2007; Goldenberg, 2008; Riches & Genessee, 2006

15 Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; González et al., 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002



## Supplemental and Intensive Interventions

For ELs identified for academic supports beyond those provided in core (Tier I) instruction, educators need to consider a variety of factors when planning supplemental intervention (Tiers II and III). Because ELs are diverse—in terms of their native-language and English proficiency, previous educational experiences, and academic achievement—educators cannot adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach to intervention. In fact, interventions that have been shown to be effective for some ELs are not effective for others.<sup>16</sup>

One of the key factors educators must consider when planning supplemental support for ELs with and without disabilities is proficiency level in both the native language and English. Research emphasizes the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement, particularly in the upper-elementary grades.<sup>17</sup> When educators understand where students are in developing their first and second languages, they can target academic language and vocabulary skills in intervention plans.

Skilled practitioners use small-group supplemental instruction to provide both explicit teaching in targeted reading skills and enhanced opportunities for students to use, practice, and receive feedback on new language skills.<sup>18</sup> When interventions are delivered in a student’s second language, small-group supplemental instruction includes a focus on skills that do not transfer from the first language to the second (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, specific orthographic patterns). Practitioners also need to explicitly teach students how to use literacy skills that do transfer (i.e., reading comprehension strategies, cross-linguistic connections) from the first to the second language.

For students with significant learning problems or those who do not respond to high-quality core and supplemental Tier II instruction, an additional level of intervention is appropriate. Highly skilled specialists deliver Tier III intensive interventions, which may include special education for some districts, in smaller groups of two to three students. This level of instruction targets specific, persistent difficulties and is adjusted based on data from continuous progress monitoring. More in-depth guidance on the design and delivery of supplemental instruction for ELs is provided in **subsequent briefs** of this series.

Effective **supplemental intervention** for ELs includes the following:

- Differentiated, high-quality language and literacy instruction with varying levels of intensity
- A focus on oral and academic language development
- Educator knowledge of the second-language acquisition process and the role of language proficiency in reading achievement
- Data-informed and appropriate instructional adjustments

16 August & Shanahan, 2006; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016

17 Crosson & Lesaux, 2010; Richards-Tutor, 2016

18 Baker et al., 2012; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016

## Linguistically Aligned Assessments and Data-Informed Planning

For MTSS to be successful with ELs, a valid and comprehensive assessment system must be in place. Educators rely on accurate and appropriate **screening** and **progress-monitoring** tools to make instructional decisions and to plan instruction that best addresses the needs of ELs.

**Universal screening measures** are used to identify students who need additional support in acquiring key reading skills—phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. Within linguistically responsive multitiered systems, educators select measures in English or students' first language with established validity and reliability with ELs.<sup>19</sup> Universal screening measures are also used to establish students' current proficiency in the native language and/or English as a second language.

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

- Screening and progress-monitoring measures with established validity and reliability with ELs
- Educator knowledge and use of students' language proficiency data when interpreting student achievement data
- Regular review of student data for the purposes of planning instruction
- Collaborative evaluation of student progress and instructional planning within all tiers of instruction

Because screening measures are usually quick assessments administered at a single point in time, educators should consult additional forms of assessment data to accurately diagnose learning needs.<sup>20</sup> Given the role of language proficiency in assessment and achievement—as well as the variation in ELs' educational opportunities to develop their native and second languages—educators need to review language proficiency assessment data when interpreting the results of a screening measure.

Key to an effective multitiered system is the systematic use of **progress-monitoring measures**. These assessments are administered more frequently than screening measures and show students' progress in specific skills. Effective educators of ELs with and without disabilities use both formal and informal measures of student progress in language and literacy and use the data from these measures to inform

their instruction.<sup>21</sup> For students with persistent academic difficulties, these measures are helpful in determining whether the difficulties are due to a lack of prior learning opportunities (e.g., effective instruction), are a result of the normal second-language acquisition process, or are due to a potential learning disability.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, reviewing and analyzing the data is only half of the picture. The other half involves educators' active **use** of data for instructional planning. Because the educational needs of ELs are diverse and complex, educators should regularly collaborate about salient issues and trends in the data, problem-solve about ways to address needs shown in the data, and share expertise regarding instructional practices that positively affect student achievement. School leaders and administrators can enhance these practices by establishing time and guidance for teachers to engage in data-based decision-making.

19 del Rosario Bastera et al., 2011; Solano-Flores, 2006

20 Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012

21 Ortiz, 2007

22 Linan-Thompson & Hickman Davis, 2002

## Identification of ELs With Learning Difficulties Within MTSS

Evidence has shown that ELs are disproportionately represented in special education. In some cases, ELs are at risk for being over-identified for special education classes,<sup>23</sup> and in other cases, ELs with true learning disabilities are not identified and are overlooked in the referral process.<sup>24</sup>

By successfully enhancing each of the components of MTSS for ELs, educators can advance the school's capacity for accurate and appropriate identification of ELs with disabilities. When each tier uses instruction and assessment practices shown to be effective for ELs, students can receive support matched to their specific needs as soon as gaps in achievement are identified.

Likewise, educators need to be trained in understanding the role of students' language development (both in their first and second languages) in academic learning and in distinguishing between true learning disabilities and factors external to the student that contribute to academic difficulties.<sup>25</sup> These factors can include a lack of previous high-quality instruction, inadequate opportunities to develop native-language skills and English proficiency, or a climate of low expectations for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

School problem-solving teams are integral to the identification process, and they must include representation from a range of specializations (e.g., ESL, general education, bilingual education, special education teachers). Team members should have a strong knowledge of second-language acquisition and dual-language development so they can ensure that language and learning needs are met through individualized education programs.<sup>26</sup> Knowledge of language development's role in literacy also informs the selection of assessments and assessment procedures.

### Take Action!

Initial steps that school leaders and educators can take to optimize their multitiered instructional framework for ELs include the following:

- Evaluate the level of implementation using the **MTSS for ELs: Literacy Implementation Rubric** (access the tool at [www.mtss4els.org](http://www.mtss4els.org)).
- Use that information and student data to create a plan for improving support systems for ELs.
- Identify at least three school-level action steps that can be implemented to improve support for ELs in the coming year, with a plan for implementation, monitoring, and follow-up.

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23 Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Yates & Ortiz, 1998

24 Artiles & Ortiz, 2002

25 Artiles & Klingner, 2006; Hoover & Barletta, 2016; Klingner et al., 2006

26 Hoover & Patton, 2016

Address the following in planning meetings:

- How screening data are used to make instructional decisions for ELs and how to ensure the validity of the data
- Procedures for gathering and sharing additional data to support valid decisions for ELs
- Procedures for measuring ELs' language proficiency and making that data accessible to educators
- ELs' educational histories (e.g., enrollment in bilingual education and ESL programs, continuity of enrollment, retention or social promotion)
- Procedures for collaborative data analysis and planning meetings (e.g., time allocated for meetings, agendas, meeting procedures)
- Staff professional development needs regarding effective instructional practices for ELs (e.g., designing culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, understanding second-language and biliteracy development, analyzing data for instructional purposes)

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