

Recognizing English Language Learners with Reading Disabilities: Minimizing Bias, Accurate Identification, and Timely Intervention

by Christie Fraser, Vicki Adelson, and Esther Geva

English language learner (ELL) is a broad term used in North America to refer to students who are learning English as a second or additional language. They may be immigrants from a country where English is not the national language or born in an English-speaking country but raised in a non-English speaking home or community. In either case, they are learning English in addition to their native or home language. Because of these circumstances, they are considered ELLs. The focus of this article is on the assessment challenges regarding ELLs who, in addition to being ELLs, may also have reading disabilities.

Typically developing ELLs can acquire conversational, day-to-day language proficiency within one to two years of immersion in an English-speaking community or school (Cummins, 1984). That said, it can take them at least five to seven years to acquire grade- and age-appropriate English literacy skills necessary for learning and academic success (Cummins, 1984). At this time, it is expected that typically developing ELLs can perform more or less on par with their English-speaking peers, provided they have had consistent and sustained high-quality exposure to English and appropriate education in English (Geva & Farnia, 2012).

When thinking of reading, it is useful to think of two types of skills, those related to word-level reading and those related to text comprehension. It is also useful to know whether being proficient in English is equally important for word reading and for reading comprehension. Word-level skills are essential for reading comprehension, as are language skills (Joshi & Aaron, 2000). ELLs who begin their schooling in an English environment tend to follow a trajectory similar to English monolinguals with regard to their word-level skills. This tendency means that even though they are ELLs, they typically do as well as their monolingual peers on skills such as phonological awareness (which is the awareness of sounds in words), learning to match sounds to letters or letter clusters, the ability to read words accurately and fluently, and the ability to spell words accurately (Geva, 2006). This finding is highly relevant to the assessment and diagnosis of ELLs with reading disabilities, so it is addressed later in this article.

However, by definition, ELLs are children whose English language skills are not on par with their monolingual peers, and language skills are extremely important for reading comprehension. ELLs often lag behind their monolingual peers when it comes to breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. For example, Figure 1 displays findings of a similar trajectory but persistent lag in vocabulary development by typically developing ELLs when compared to English monolinguals in grades 1 through 6 (Farnia & Geva, 2011). Noteworthy is that even after 6 years of English schooling, the ELLs do not catch

up. Familiarity with the various ways that words are created in English is also lacking (Carlisle & Katz, 2006). These more challenging aspects include understanding how prefixes and suffixes change the meaning of a root word (for example, *forget*, *forgetful*, *unforgetful*). It also includes understanding how the words *transport* and *transportation* are related to each other in terms of their meaning (Carlisle & Katz, 2006).

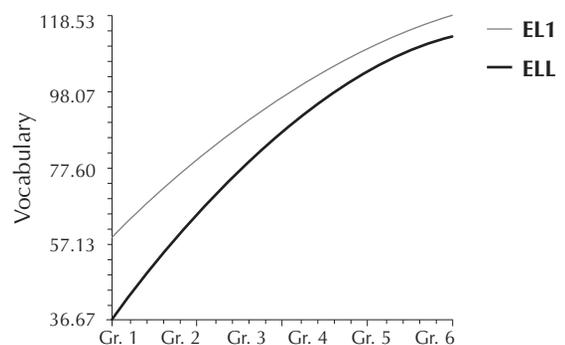


Figure 1. Graph depicting a similar trajectory but persistent lag in vocabulary development by typically developing ELLs when compared to English monolinguals (EL1). From "Cognitive Correlates of Vocabulary Growth in English Language Learners," by F. Farnia and E. Geva, 2011, *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 32, 711–738. Copyright 2011 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

ELLs also lag behind their monolingual peers in reading comprehension. While lack of cultural knowledge may explain to some extent the difficulties that ELLs may have with comprehending what they read, a major source of difficulty is the challenge to catch up on their knowledge of vocabulary (Farnia & Geva, 2011). ELLs need specific support with their knowledge of *academic* language, language that is used in school subject texts, because they are less familiar with the kind of words used in academic language than their monolingual counterparts (Jean & Geva, 2009). Explicit and multifaceted instruction of various aspects of academic language (breadth, depth, and morphological skills) can promote their language proficiency and subsequently their reading comprehension (Baker et al., 2014; Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010; Lin, Ramirez, Shade Wilson, & Geva, 2012).

As in the general population, there are some ELLs who struggle more than their ELL peers from a similar background with the development of word reading skills. Even though they receive quality instruction and exposure to reading they may find it difficult to develop accurate and fluent word-level skills because of their reading disabilities. Having difficulties with word-level skills prevents these children from comprehending what they read.

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Recognizing ELLs with Reading Difficulties

Difficulties in reading can occur because a child has dyslexia or a language impairment that affects his or her ability to read with fluency and comprehend what is read. Either way, ELLs are equally as likely as their monolingual peers to have reading difficulties, and learning disabilities are distributed evenly among all populations (Limbos & Geva, 2001). It is important to be aware of the observation that ELLs with reading disabilities do not have difficulties with their word reading skills because of their developing language status; they would have trouble with word reading in any language in which they were learning to read. They experience trouble with their reading beyond what would be considered typical of an ELL because of cognitive factors (e.g., poor phonological awareness, specific language impairment, and poor working memory) (Geva & Wiener, 2014).

Sometimes characteristics of typical developing ELLs look similar to the learning difficulties experienced by students with reading disabilities (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, & Damico, 2007). Table 1, which is adapted from Adelson, Geva, and Fraser (2014), presents a summary of indicators that distinguish typically developing ELLs from ELLs who may be experiencing specific difficulties in reading.

Accurate Identification of ELLs with Reading Disabilities

Historically, ELLs with reading disabilities have either been over-identified (Cummins, 1984) or under-identified (Limbos & Geva, 2001). It is often unclear whether their poor reading ability stems from their developing language skills or from a real problem in reading (Geva, 2000). This uncertainty, in combination with the belief that reading disabilities in ELLs cannot be properly assessed until adequate levels of L2 language

proficiency have been attained, has led to a lack of suitable models for assessment and inaccurate identification of ELLs with reading disabilities. It is true that we would not want to identify reading disabilities in ELLs when in fact they do not have any (i.e., over-identification). Equally problematic is avoiding assessment and withholding intervention when it is needed (i.e., under-identification).

Over-identification can occur because of the similarities between the behaviors and characteristics of students with reading disabilities and ELLs. Both groups may demonstrate poor listening or reading comprehension, difficulty following directions, errors in grammar and syntax, difficulty in task completion, poor self-esteem, poor oral skills, and low motivation (Flores & Chu, 2011). Over-identification can also occur when there is lack of awareness of the subtle differences between ELLs who are developing their proficiency in English and those who also have learning disabilities. Over-identification is also seen when there is bias and negative attitudes towards certain ethnic minority groups, such as the Roma or aboriginal children (Geva & Wiener, 2014).

ELLs who do actually have special education needs can also be under-identified when persistent learning difficulties are attributed to their developing English skills, lack of cultural background, or when educators and other professionals do not know how to differentiate between ELL characteristics and behaviors, and specific special education needs (Geva & Weiner, 2014). Well-intentioned educators may delay referring students for special education support because they are unsure of the cause of the student's difficulty and believe proficiency in English needs to be established before assessment for potential learning disabilities can take place (Geva, 2000).

TABLE 1. Typically Developing ELLs Versus ELLs Experiencing Specific Difficulties in Reading. Adapted from Adelson, Geva, & Fraser (2014).

Typically Developing ELLs	ELLs Who May Have Reading Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lag behind peers in certain areas related to English language learning (e.g., vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral language) but can be expected to make steady progress in each of these areas • Perform similarly to peers on cognitive processing tasks such as memory, phonemic awareness, and speed of processing that are related to word reading accuracy and fluency • Develop word-level skills (that is, word recognition, decoding unfamiliar words, and spelling) with adequate instruction and development • Gradually develop academic language (vocabulary depth and breadth), grammatical, and morphological knowledge with targeted instruction • Make steady progress in all languages spoken when academic support is provided in each • Have no history of academic difficulties in home country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have persistent problems in word reading (word recognition, decoding), reading fluency, and spelling • Exhibit persistent and pervasive difficulties despite consistent and targeted instruction • Do not make the same progress as other students with similar linguistic and educational backgrounds • May show better comprehension when listening than when reading for comprehension • Do not show increased understanding of written text as general language knowledge develops • Have difficulties in all languages spoken • Have a history of academic difficulties prior to immigration • Have more difficulties than siblings

Research has shown that ELLs can and should be assessed for difficulties as soon as the need arises; there is no need to wait until a certain level of English proficiency is achieved (Geva & Wade-Woolley, 2004). Delaying program adaptations, and, when necessary, the formal identification of students who have persistent reading difficulties, may lead to academic failure. Without explicit instruction and programming in their areas of difficulties, these students may not develop the skills they need to progress in reading, causing them to fall further behind in school subjects.

Typically Developing ELL Readers

Phonological awareness (PA) is the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound components of words (Adams, 1994). PA is a foundation skill for learning how to read; good PA skills are necessary for effective word reading. Research has shown that typically developing ELLs perform similarly to English monolinguals in PA (Lesaux & Geva, 2006); although, it is possible that they can experience some initial difficulty particularly when their native language is markedly different phonologically from English. That said, for typically developing ELLs, this difficulty is resolved with repeated exposure to English, and their PA skill in both languages will eventually be on par.

Word reading skills involve the ability to read words automatically and also having word decoding strategies that help readers “sound out” words they have not seen before. This ability is related to having PA skills and remembering what sound individual letters or letter combinations make. Children with poor PA skills also have poor word reading skills (Adams, 1994). Having good word decoding skills also means having good orthographic skills, that is, familiarity with the orthographic conventions and the ability to remember how to pronounce quickly and fluently letter combinations such as *tion* or *ful* in words (Wolf & Bowers, 1999). Typically developing ELLs make steady progress in this area and after several years of schooling in English should be able to read words in isolation with similar accuracy and speed to their monolingual peers.

Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge of the meaning of words used in oral and written language (in other words,

listening and speaking; reading and writing). Typically developing ELLs have a smaller vocabulary than English monolinguals but experience a gradual improvement as their proficiency with the English language improves. That said, they may have difficulty with academic vocabulary and may not catch up to their monolingual English counterparts despite years of schooling. This finding is illustrated in Figure 2 (adapted from Jean and Geva, 2009). This graph shows that grade 6 ELLs who have attended school in Canada from grade 1 were less familiar than their monolingual peers with academic vocabulary typically known by monolingual children in earlier grade levels. It is notable that these grade 6 children were not even familiar with academic words that monolingual children become familiar with in grades 2 or 4. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the ELLs were making steady progress in their vocabulary knowledge over time (Jean & Geva, 2009).

Reading comprehension is the complex ability to gain understanding of written text by integrating word reading, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic skills, and background knowledge. Typically developing ELLs struggle to some extent in reading comprehension because of the necessary reliance on language. They have misunderstandings with comprehension due to possible lack of prior knowledge but these misunderstandings reduce over time. They make steady progress in reading comprehension; as their oral language and especially vocabulary knowledge improves, so should their comprehension. That said, they may experience a continued lag in reading comprehension when compared to their monolingual counterparts, which is in part due to the gap in their lower vocabulary knowledge (Farnia & Geva, 2011; Farnia & Geva, 2013). Figure 3 displays findings from a study by Farnia and Geva (2013) comparing reading comprehension ability between English monolinguals and typically developing ELLs in the middle grades. At the grade 4, 5, and 6 time points, the typically developing ELLs performed significantly below their monolingual counterparts in their reading comprehension despite receiving the same instruction and support in the classroom since grade 1.

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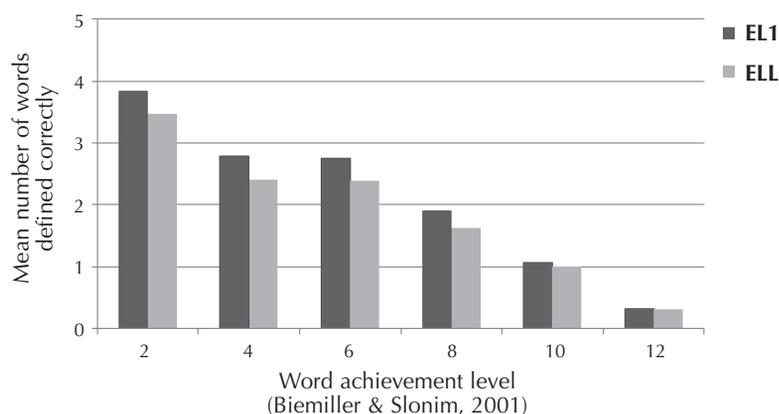


Figure 2. Graph showing differences in academic vocabulary by typically developing ELLs in grade 6 when compared to English monolinguals (EL1) in grade 6. Adapted from Jean & Geva (2009).

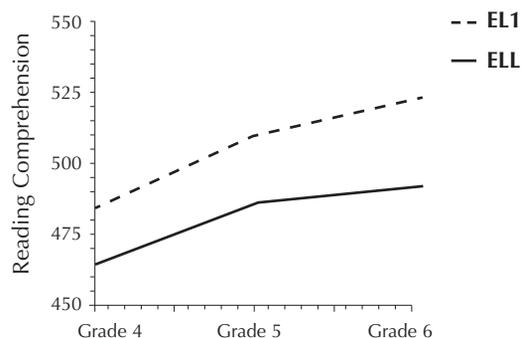


Figure 3. Graph displaying a lag in reading comprehension development between English monolinguals (EL1) and typically developing ELLs. From “Growth and predictors of change in English language learners’ reading comprehension,” by F. Farnia and E. Geva, 2013, *Journal of Research in Reading*, 36, 389–421. Copyright 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. This material is reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Areas of Weakness in ELLs with Reading Difficulties

Just like their monolingual peers, ELLs with reading disabilities may struggle in one or more areas related to reading: phonological awareness, word reading, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. These areas are discussed here and are organized under the two broader reading skills mentioned earlier: word-level reading (i.e., phonological awareness and decoding) and text comprehension (i.e., vocabulary and reading comprehension).

Word-Level Reading. ELLs who have persistent difficulties in learning how to decode and spell words (i.e., dyslexia) demonstrate an ongoing weakness in this area. They make little progress unless they receive explicit instruction in PA (Cirino et al., 2009; Lovett et al., 2008). The inability to match sounds to letters, hear rhymes, to replace one sound with another, break a word into sounds, blend sounds together, or distinguish tone (when Chinese is the home language) are examples of early indicators of a problem with PA skill. PA can be reliably tested in English with ELLs even when their English language proficiency is still developing (Geva, 2006; Geva & Farnia, 2012).

ELLs having problems with word reading difficulties are likely to have difficulties in both English and their native language. These ELLs may not make adequate progress despite targeted instruction in word reading. They have difficulty reading list words out of context with accuracy and sounding out unfamiliar words and pseudowords. They also have more difficulties with PA and rapid automatized naming than their ELL peers who do not have decoding difficulties (Geva, Yaghoub Zadeh, & Schuster, 2000). Profiles of ELLs and monolinguals who have decoding difficulties are rather similar to each other. Likewise, the profiles of ELLs and monolinguals who are typically developing are rather similar to each other.

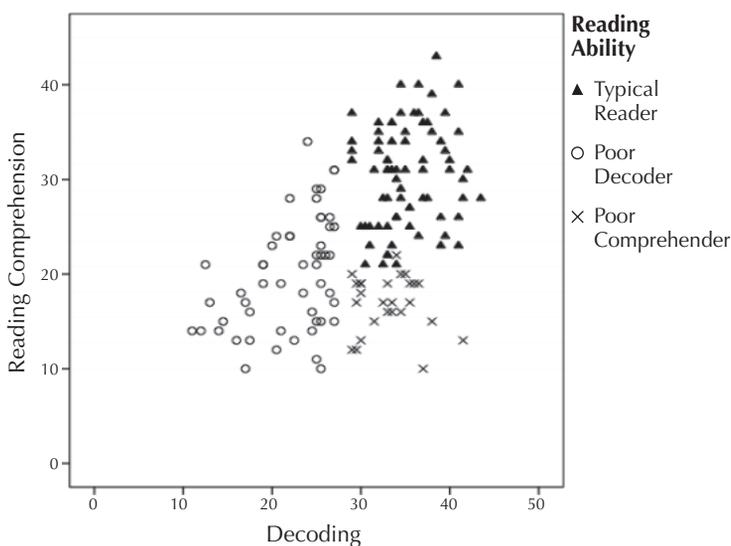


Figure 4. Graph presenting the relationship between reading comprehension and decoding ability in typically developing readers, poor decoders, and poor comprehenders in Grade 4. Participants in this study were English monolinguals (EL1) and ELLs. From Ndlovu (2010).

Difficulties in word reading (i.e., decoding) ultimately affects reading comprehension. In Figure 4 (from Kate Ndlovu’s doctoral dissertation, 2010), a scatterplot shows the relationships between decoding and reading comprehension skills in ELLs in grade 4. As you can see in the bottom left area of this scatterplot, ELLs who have poor decoding skills (each circle is a child with decoding difficulties) also have poor reading comprehension skills. On the other hand, ELLs who have average or above average decoding skills (indicated by triangles) have better reading comprehension skills.

Text Comprehension. ELLs with language problems demonstrate limited vocabulary knowledge and do not make progress over time, even in their native language. They have difficulty remembering and accessing words that have been taught, fail to make connections between known words and new words, and also have trouble making connections between words with the same root (e.g., *heal* and *health*). Vocabulary skill is a critical component of comprehension (both listening and reading), thus ELLs with difficulties in vocabulary skill also experience difficulties in reading comprehension (Farnia & Geva, 2013).

For ELLs with an oral language disability (e.g., specific language impairment), their reading comprehension skills are lower than what is expected based on word reading skills, that is, their word reading skills are superior to their reading comprehension skills (unless they are experiencing deficits at both the word and text level). Data representing individuals in this group can be seen in Figure 4 (where each child is marked with x). Some researchers refer to individuals in this group as “unexpected poor comprehenders” (Kirby, Cain, & White, 2012), while others refer to them as individuals with language impairment (Bishop & Snowling, 2004). As you can see in Figure 4, these are children who have at least average decoding skills

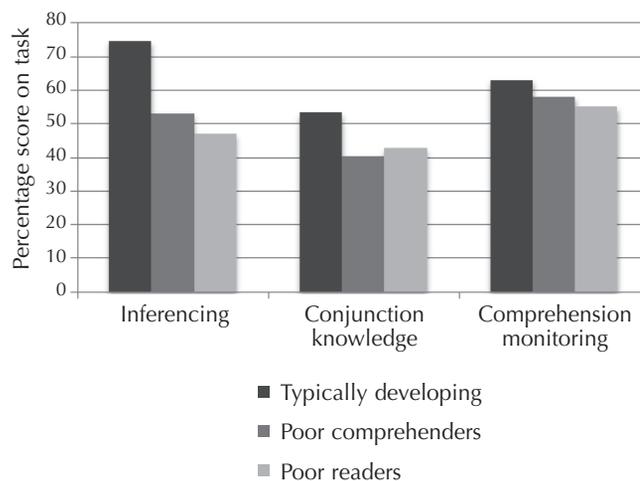


Figure 5. Graph depicting differences in inferencing, conjunction knowledge, and comprehension monitoring skill among typically developing ELL readers and ELLs with poor comprehension or poor reading skill (i.e., poor comprehension and decoding) in Grade 4. From Fraser (in preparation).

but still have poor comprehension. They fail to make regular progress and have trouble applying the comprehension skills and strategies being taught. As we illustrate in Figure 5 (from Christie Fraser's doctoral dissertation, in preparation), unlike ELLs who are typical readers, grade 4 ELL children who are "unexpected poor comprehenders" have difficulties in drawing inferences and comprehending cohesion in the texts they read (Fraser, in preparation). For example, they have trouble making meaning across ideas, clauses, and sentences in text (*inferencing*). They also have trouble using explicit (and implicit) conjunctions that signal the logical relationships across those ideas, clauses, and sentences. Further, they struggle with retelling what was read.

Supporting ELLs with Reading Disabilities

When it is first observed that an ELL student is not making the expected progress in reading when compared to other students of similar background who have received similar instruction, further assessment and intervention are required. It is not necessary to wait until a certain level of English proficiency is achieved (Geva & Farnia, 2012; Geva & Wade-Woolley, 2004). How the student responds to the intervention provided and the progress the student makes (or does not make) informs future and further intervention and support for the student. ELLs with reading disabilities need continued support to develop their English language skills, as well as focused instruction in reading skills using instructional methods that have been found to be effective for students who have reading disabilities.

Response to Intervention (RTI). The emerging assessment method for children with reading difficulties is the Response to Intervention model (RTI). RTI is a tiered approach for ongoing assessment, monitoring, and preventative intervention for students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). A summary of this model is provided in Figure 6 (from Adelson, Geva, & Fraser, 2014). Through this model, students are provided with intervention as soon as the need for support is evident, and without the need to wait for a formal assessment. The approach is based on high-quality, evidence-based assessment and instructional methods; intervention is systematic and sequential. How students respond to the intervention provided in each tier guides future decisions about the need to provide more or less support and to use different approaches and teaching methods.

Research has shown that RTI is a successful model for supporting native English-speaking children experiencing difficulties in reading (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Less is known about the extent to which RTI is successful with ELLs. That said, results from a growing body of research are promising and suggest that RTI can lead to positive outcomes with ELL children as well (Cirino et al., 2009; Gersten et al., 2007; Lovett et al., 2008). Coordinated screening and assessment strategies with targeted and evidence-based intervention can be beneficial to any child—including ELLs—struggling with reading.

Tier 1 of the intervention model is the reading instruction provided by the classroom teacher to all students and the ongoing assessment and monitoring conducted to note students who may be experiencing difficulty. Tier 2 of the model is the intervention given to a small group of students who are struggling in a particular area. It is short-term, targeted instruction.

This differentiated instruction is also provided by the classroom teacher. Tier 3 is the most specialized support of the model and is given to smaller groups of students who have not responded sufficiently to the first two tiers. This tier often involves special education support at the school level. The RTI model allows for students to be moved up and down the tiers as necessary. This movement is informed by their response to intervention within the various tiers.

Intervention. Although there is less research on interventions for ELLs with reading difficulties, findings indicate that ELLs benefit from the same types of instruction as struggling monolingual readers (Geva & Herbert, 2012; Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). Instruction for struggling ELLs should be comprehensive, systematic, explicit, and timely. It should include a combination of strategies addressing phonemic awareness; phonics (the alphabetic principle); fluency; guided oral reading; academic vocabulary and morphological knowledge; and reading comprehension strategies (Kelley et al., 2010; National Reading Panel, 2000). Like working with monolingual, struggling readers, it should target the specific areas of difficulty exhibited by the ELL.

For all ELLs, focused instruction in oral language, specifically vocabulary development, is particularly important (Farnia & Geva, 2011). Vocabulary instruction should allow for multiple exposures to new words, as well as opportunities for students to use the words orally and in reading and writing (Baker et al., 2014). It is often the case that ELLs continue to develop oral language and vocabulary skills while building core literacy skills (Kieffer, 2012; Lovett et al., 2008). Explicit vocabulary instruction can improve oral language skills, listening and reading comprehension, and writing (Baker et al., 2014; Kelley et al., 2010).

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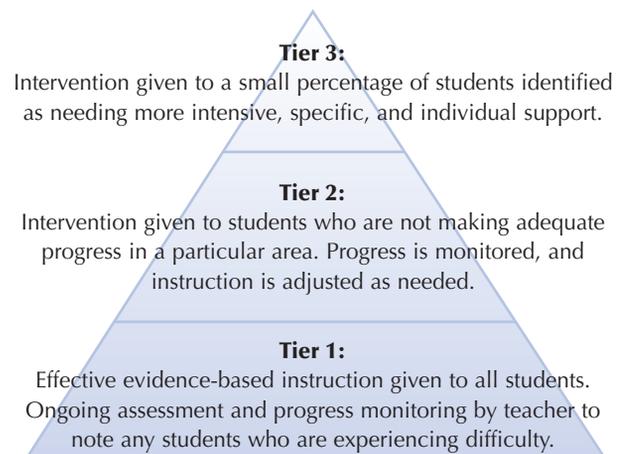


Figure 6. Type of intervention provided in each tier of the RTI model. From Adelson, Geva, & Fraser (2014).

Conclusion

Accurate identification and timely intervention of ELLs with reading disabilities is paramount for these students to receive the help they need to be academically successful (Adelson, Geva, & Fraser, 2014). The aim of this article is to help educators and parents distinguish ELLs with potential difficulties in reading from typically developing ELLs. Effective assessment and accurate identification is important for intervention to be provided in a timely fashion (see Table 2). A systematic process of assessment and identification is essential to ensure that the needs of ELLs are properly understood, and that appropriate intervention is provided as soon as it is necessary (Adelson, Geva, & Fraser, 2014).

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TABLE 2. DOs and DON'Ts in identification, assessment, and intervention for ELLs experiencing reading difficulties. Adapted from Geva and Wade-Woolley (2004).

DOs	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do gather information about each individual student's background, skills, and abilities Do evaluate known correlates of reading development Do measure students' progress to see if they are learning what is being taught Do follow a systematic process of assessment and intervention to determine and address student needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't assume that students need time to develop English proficiency before assessing their reading skills Don't assume that to read words you need to have well developed proficiency of the language Don't delay intervention once it is apparent it is needed Don't provide all ELLs with the same instruction—it should be based on their individual needs

Selected Resources

Identification, Assessment, and Instruction of English Language Learners with Learning Difficulties in the Elementary and Intermediate Grades (Adelson, Geva, & Fraser, 2014)

<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/gevalab/UserFiles/File/ELLManualFINALApril2014colour.pdf>

Assessment of Reading Difficulties in ESL/ELL Learners: Myths, Research Evidence, and Implications for Assessment (Geva & Farnia, 2012; Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network)

http://www.academia.edu/6374288/Assessment_of_Reading_Difficulties_in_ESL_ELL_Learners_Myths_Research_Evidence_and_Implications_for_Assessment

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School (2014)

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/english_learners_pg_040114.pdf

Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6 (2005)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/speced/panel/speced.pdf>

English Language Learners: School-Based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment (ESL/ELD Research Group of Ontario – ERGO, 2011)

http://media.wix.com/ugd/0319a6_d9dda27757a744558d49c413a9d7bda2.pdf

The Balanced Literacy Diet

www.oise.utoronto.ca/balancedliteracydiet/Home/index.html

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