Holyoke Public Schools Language Acquisition Toolkit 2017-18

Differentiating Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities

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Language Acquisition Toolkit

INTRODUCTION

As we work together to help our English Learners (ELs), we need to consider the reasons why an EL may not respond to a particular instructional approach. We recommend using a hypothesis-driven approach to identify the root cause for a student's learning difficulties. This means beginning by exploring the hypothesis that the causes of the student's learning difficulties are primarily external factors (rather than internal to the child).

It is our hope that this **Language Acquisition Toolkit** will be useful when strategically planning lessons and during team collaboration times for determining specific steps for helping and evaluating a struggling EL student. It should be used before, during, and after **Student Support Team** meetings when problem solving and choosing specific Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, <u>before</u> referring a student for special education evaluation to determine if the student has a learning disability.

When students are not performing at expected levels, school personnel should utilize the Language Acquisition Toolkit within the <u>Response to Instruction and Intervention process (RtI)</u>. RtI is a systematic, data-based assessment and intervention framework that seeks to prevent academic and behavioral difficulty for all students through high-quality, research-based instruction, early intervention, and frequent authentic assessment of students' progress.
   ➔ First consider the possibility that students are not receiving adequate instruction by examining their teaching practices, the school climate, and the type of programming created for students in addition to student performance data.
   ➔ Then, design and implement systemic and/or specific interventions within the general education setting to help students achieve at higher levels.

HYPOTHESIS-DRIVEN APPROACH

The foundation of this toolkit is rooted in the Hypothesis-Driven Approach which allows educators to better understand the reasons for certain behaviors, an essential part of identifying the underlying causes of a student's struggles.

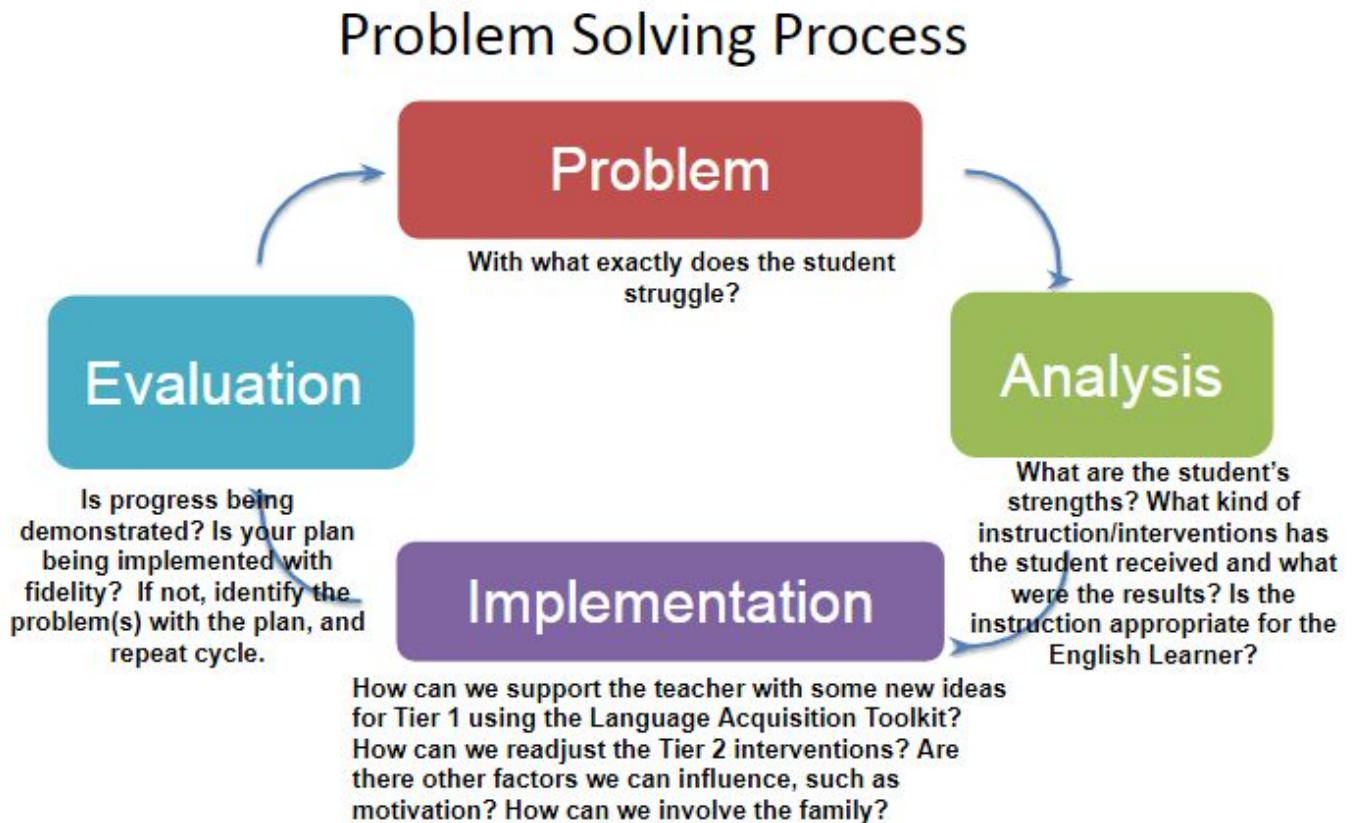Before a hypothesis is formed, educators should start by:
   ➔ Being familiar with the various **Types of ELs** (Simultaneous bilinguals, Long-term ELs, Newcomers with adequate formal schooling, and Newcomers with limited formal schooling).
   ➔ Conducting assessment with the mindset that there is nothing wrong with the individual, but rather systemic, ecological or environmental factors must be considered as the primary reasons for learning problems.

◆ This might mean that the student needs more language support, that the level of instruction is not a good match for the child, or that the environment is not conducive to learning.
◆ Before referring a student for an evaluation, consider the classroom environment, observe instruction and recommend different approaches.

While the use of a hypothesis-driven approach is not negotiable, the specific process is up to the educator. We suggest using the Problem-Solving Process (PSP) during team meetings/collaboration time, Student Support Team meetings, Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) meetings, coaching sessions, etc.

Problem Solving Process (PSP)

Problem Solving Process (PSP) allows for individuals or teams to identify a specific problem and use data to build hypotheses that address the root causes of the problem. Data is particularly important when using a hypothesis-driven approach like PSP to avoid the pitfall of reacting to a problem without first examining the root cause.

Problem Solving Process

Problem
With what exactly does the student struggle?

Analysis
What are the student's strengths? What kind of instruction/interventions has the student received and what were the results? Is the instruction appropriate for the English Learner?

Implementation
How can we support the teacher with some new ideas for Tier 1 using the Language Acquisition Toolkit? How can we readjust the Tier 2 interventions? Are there other factors we can influence, such as motivation? How can we involve the family?

Evaluation
Is progress being demonstrated? Is your plan being implemented with fidelity? If not, identify the problem(s) with the plan, and repeat cycle.

To facilitate navigating through the PSP process use this **Worksheet**.

ANALYSIS & IMPLEMENTATION

Appropriateness of Classroom Instruction

Analysis of classroom instruction is a key component of understanding the possible causes of an EL's struggles. To help aid in this process, we have included a **Teacher Self-Reflection Questions** check list. Before considering internal factors for the student's struggles, teachers should adjust their instructional practices, Tier 1 (adjustment to core instruction), to include these components (The Implementation Stage of PSP).

Use this **Teacher Self-Reflection Questions Checklist**, **PSP Worksheet**, and your **grade-level EL teacher** to help you come up with an appropriate plan to help your struggling student. This plan/intervention will lead to data collection, analysis and evaluation to address external factors that could be a hindrance to your EL student's academic success.

Teacher Self-Reflection Questions Checklist (Tier 1) - Printable Version

Reflection Questions	Response
How am I utilizing the EL teacher as a resource to strengthen my instruction for my language learner? ❏ Have I invited the EL teacher to observe my instruction and provide me with suggestions on how to better meet the needs of my ELs?	
Is my instruction **WIDA** aligned and differentiated for proficiency levels? ❏ Have I used the **Can Do Descriptors**?	
Am I lesson planning with my ELs in mind? ❏ Do my lessons include both **Content and Language Objectives**? ❏ Are both the **content** and **language objectives** evident in the **purposing** of my lessons? ❏ Do I **assess** my student's attainment of the objectives (both content **and** language)?	
Have I developed a strong, positive relationship with ELs and their families? ❏ **Home visits** ❏ One-on-one conversations	
Do I personalize instruction and connect classroom learning to the student's daily experiences? ❏ Using culturally relevant texts	

❏ Building on student interests and background knowledge	
Do I value my student's linguistic and cultural background and look for ways to show this? ❏ Giving the student opportunities to use his/her **native language in content classes** and **methods for using native language in the classroom**. ❏ Student sharing aspects of their culture and language with the class **(**i.e., identity shares, building connections to texts, providing opportunities to share culture and identity within writing). ❏ Promote transfer knowledge by helping the student make connections to their **home language** (i.e., identify **cognates,** and similar grammatical structures in all domains - listening, speaking, reading and writing). ❏ Affirm and promote the student's bilingualism and biculturalism as an asset.	
Do I give enough attention to affect, interest, and motivation? ❏ Is my student comfortable taking risks? **How do I measure this?** ❏ How am I building upon my student's **identified interests?** (i.e., student surveys, finding books on subjects that interest my student, choosing read alouds based on a relevant subject that the student has experience with or will be passionate about, initiating projects that connect to my student's community)	
Do I pay sufficient attention to the development of oral language (speaking and listening)? ❏ Daily **structured student interactions** with supports. ❏ Use of WIDA **Performance Definitions for Listening & Reading**, and **Performance Definitions for Speaking & Writing**. ❏ Use of WIDA **Speaking Rubric**	
Am I aware of aspects of reading that can be confusing for my EL? ❏ Provide multiple opportunities and methods for student to convey knowledge and understanding about a text or learning (i.e., drawing pictures, using home language). ❏ Am I aware of phonological differences between English and home language ❏ Am I aware of struggles with figurative language, multiple meaning words, idioms, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, etc.	

❏ Have I found out which sounds and letters are different in the student's first language than in English so that I can clarify misunderstanding and provide additional practice (i.e., The following English sounds are not used in Spanish - /dg/, /j/, /sh/, /th/, /z/ and vowel sounds differ)? ❏ **Resource for Middle and High School Teachers**	
Do I adjust instruction to provide my student with additional support when he/she does not seem to understand? ❏ Explicit instruction at their proficiency level ❏ More opportunities for meaningful practice ❏ Use of **SEI strategies** ❏ Differentiate instruction ❏ Continual checks for understanding and assessment ❏ Reflection on lesson effectiveness with reteach ❏ Use **Go To Strategies for scaffolding for ELs**	
Do I **preteach key vocabulary** and use multimedia, real items, appealing photos, charts, and other visuals to help make instruction comprehensible?	
When checking for comprehension, do I focus more on the content of student's responses rather than the language? ❏ Are students able to access and use the language required for understanding the content? ❏ Am I looking for academic language, and teaching and modeling text structures in my content area? ❏ Do I use WIDA **Performance Definitions for Listening & Reading**, and **Performance Definitions for Speaking & Writing**.	

IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

Assessment & Progress Data

There is no single test that educators can use to distinguish learning disabilities from language acquisition. Classroom teachers and EL specialists should gather data on EL progress and collaborate based on this data to ensure that the EL is growing at an acceptable rate in both English language acquisition and content knowledge.

The main issues to consider when assessing a struggling EL student and analyzing data are:
- Considering the importance of using multiple measures (both formal and informal),
- Understanding the different purposes of assessment, and
- Practicing interpretation of assessment information for ELs without bias.

When administering an assessment as part of a comprehension evaluation of language and content learning, a few questions can help guide the process:

- What do I want to find out?
- What can I learn from this assessment (i.e., what is its purpose)?
- What will I do with the information?
- What other explanations might there be for a student's performance?
- What do my observations of individual EL students tell me about their specific strengths and needs?

Using multiple measures to make educational decisions for ELs ensures more accurate identification of individual students' strengths and needs. There are three types of assessments: Curriculum-based assessment, Dynamic assessment, and Performance-based assessments. Consider incorporating all **three types of assessments** when evaluating your struggling student.

Consider using these suggested **Methods for Assessing Language** using Formative Assessments and Rubrics to help determine a student's progress in both content and language development.

SOURCES

➔ Click **here** for a list of sources that were used to compile this toolkit.