

APPENDIX 12: Considering the Sociocultural Context for ELs' Performance in School: Seven Integral Factors

Excerpted and adapted from *Developing a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Approach to Response to Instruction & Intervention (RtI²) for English Language Learners*. © 2013 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of the WIDA Consortium – www.wida.wisc.edu.

#1: Learning Environment Factors

- The learning environment created for ELs is the most comprehensive of the seven factors. Within the learning environment, there are aspects that are unique to educating ELs and should be discussed when seeking solutions for these students:
 - ✓ **Teachers:** Ensure that ELs spend the majority of their instructional day with teachers who are knowledgeable about the acquisition of a second or additional language.
 - ✓ **Services & Resources:** The human, material, and physical resources provided to ELs should be comparable with those provided for all students. For example, multi-level reading materials that support all the content areas help ELs gain access to the curriculum. The quality of the classroom space in which ELs are taught can also have an impact on their achievement.
 - ✓ **Service Delivery Models:** Research has found that (1) ELs benefit from receiving services that provide instruction in their home language while they are also taught academic English; (2) ELs benefit when in models that allow for the English portion of their day to be made comprehensible through sheltered instruction; and (3) ELs benefit the most academically when they are provided high-quality, sustained academic language instruction in English.
 - ✓ **Role of Home Language:** Home languages support the acquisition of English, thus the prestige and use of students' home languages within the school environment must be considered.
 - ✓ **Role of Home Culture:** School teams must assess how culturally responsive they are to the diverse students in their schools. Are students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds viewed as resources and funds of knowledge, or as deficits and hindrances to learning?
 - ✓ **Role of Instruction and Assessment:** Students should be able to practice and show what they know in multiple modalities and in all of their languages both orally and in writing. Many ELs know, understand, and can express different ideas, processes, and concepts in each of their languages depending on the contexts in which they were learned and experienced.

When interpreting student performance, it is essential that educators consider the potential limitations of standardized assessment tools that are not normed on diverse populations.

#2: Instructional Factors and Academic Achievement

- When developing instructional units of study, teachers and other personnel can collaboratively plan how they will systematically integrate academic language and literacy instruction into each of their content lessons through clearly stated language and content objectives.
- Good content assessments for ELs look primarily at what the students know and can do in the content area without interference from their English language proficiency and literacy levels. Authentic, project-based assessments are best suited to help ELs show what they have actually learned in the content areas. Before ELs reach a high level of academic language proficiency (4.8-5.2 and above on the ACCESS) traditional English academic achievement tests (e.g., multiple-choice or true/false formats) may not capture students' true content knowledge or academic achievement.

#3: Oral Language and Literacy Factors

- **Oral Language Development:** Teachers should create opportunities for students to use and practice oral academic language throughout a unit of study as this will support them when they encounter the same language in print.
 - ✓ **First Language Acquisition:** It is helpful to gain information on the experiences that ELs have had in first language development from birth until they entered school to assess whether a student's language development was progressing typically before they entered the school setting.
 - ✓ **Acquisition of a Second or Additional Language:** Developing proficiency for social purposes in a new, additional language depends on many factors including: similarity of the language to English, amount of prior exposure to English, and temperament such as shyness or an outgoing personality. These factors also may affect the development of proficiency for academic purposes, which can take an additional 5-7 years.
- **Literacy Factors**
 - ✓ **Literacy in English:** It is essential that ELs' literacy instruction in English begin always with a meaningful context connected to the curricular themes and big ideas. Then, teachers can help students connect their experiences to the topic of the reading and build the necessary schema (in the home language and English). Lessons must also develop the oral language students need in order to recognize and comprehend what they are reading.

When ELs' literacy instruction focuses primarily on developing bottom-up phonics and phonemic awareness skills outside of any meaningful contexts, these students often develop the ability to word-call and decode in English without any comprehension.
 - ✓ **Literacy for Academic and Social Purposes:** Developing students' literacy in social settings based on their experiences and interests provides an excellent bridge to developing the academic literacy they need in school.
 - ✓ **Literacy in the Home Language:** Literacy in students' home languages supports, and can even accelerate, literacy development in the new language, as many of the components of literacy have the potential to transfer across the student's other languages.

#4: Personal and Family Factors:

As with all factors, it is essential to engage professionals who know how to conduct culturally and linguistically responsive and confidential interviews in order to gather most of this information.

- **Socioeconomic Status:** ELs' economic conditions are not uniform. Some students may come from middle-class or upper-socioeconomic situations prior to coming to the U.S. Others are faced with complex issues related to poverty.
- **Family Dynamics:** Understanding how students' families are organized and function can give insight into school behavior and achievement.
- **Expectations & Aspirations:** Finding out what is expected of ELs by their families and their communities, and knowing what they expect from themselves, can be very helpful in finding ways to support the students. It's better to hear directly from families and students what their aspirations are.
- **Parental Engagement:** When schools value ELs' home languages and cultures and respect and promote diversity and multicultural principles, families will be more likely to engage and feel that they are educational partners with their children's schools.

- **Student Interests:** Exposing and introducing ELs to new hobbies in the arts, technology, and sports can become motivating and expand their interests. It is also beneficial to ask students to introduce and share their interests, customs, and other activities with the school community.
- **Experiential Background:** Incorporating ELs' backgrounds can often add richness to the curriculum. A lesson that includes a comparison among the Bills of Rights from different countries, for example, would engage not only the ELs, but would also broaden the perspectives of all students.

#5: Physical and Psychological Factors

- Both the physical and psychological well-being of ELs play a significant role in their academic achievement and overall school success. School personnel might easily overlook many of these areas if there is no formal protocol in place (at all grade levels) to assess these concerns in a proactive manner.
- **ELs may feel anxious in school for a variety of reasons**, such as peer harassment, unfamiliarity with the school or with the institution of U.S. schooling, or conditions at home. ELs may also experience stress associated with negotiating differences between their home and school culture. This acculturative stress can result in feelings of isolation, anxiety, and/or depression, and teams must consider students' stages of acculturation when assessing them for learning, social-emotional well-being, or behavior.
- **Physical factors** may include: disease or medical/health conditions (including dental, vision, and hearing); ability to access treatment for health conditions; nutrition and access to food.

#6: Previous Schooling Factors

- Many of the challenges that ELs experience in school can be explained by previous schooling experiences that have been less than optimal, interrupted, or conflicting in terms of philosophy, implementation, amount of support, etc. Gathering this information is important whether a student is coming from another country or moving to a new school within the same district.
- The lack of a cohesive instructional program can result in a form of "interrupted schooling" even when students' entire experience has been within one school system. The following are two examples of these unique experiences that are not always captured in official documents.
 - ✓ If ELs begin their school experience in English-only settings, instruction is often incomprehensible to them. Students may be present in the classroom, but if they do not understand most of what is said they miss out on learning crucial concepts, ideas, and skills.
 - ✓ When schools emphasize reading and mathematics instruction in the early grades to the exclusion of other content areas, ELs and other students may not be getting exposure to science and social studies curricula, entering intermediate and middle grades far behind.

#7: Cross-Cultural Factors

- Creating a supportive learning environment in which ELs can successfully develop their multicultural identities makes it more likely that ELs (and indeed all learners) will be successful in school. This includes classrooms where adults value diversity and use every cultural and linguistic resource as a bridge toward high academic achievement and academic language development.
- Asking team members, teachers, administrators, and all school personnel who work with ELs to examine their own cultural identities along a variety of cultural variables can be an excellent way of beginning the conversation on how to develop cultural reciprocity as practitioners and, consequently, how to deliver culturally responsive instruction, intervention, and assessment.

Sociocultural Factors Worksheet

Date _____

Student Name _____

Age ____ Grade ____

Step 1:	What do we already know?	What other data do we want/need?
1. Learning Environment		
2. Academic Achievement		
3. Oral Language & Literacy		
4. Personal & Family		
5. Physical & Psychological		
6. Previous Schooling		
7. Cross-Cultural		

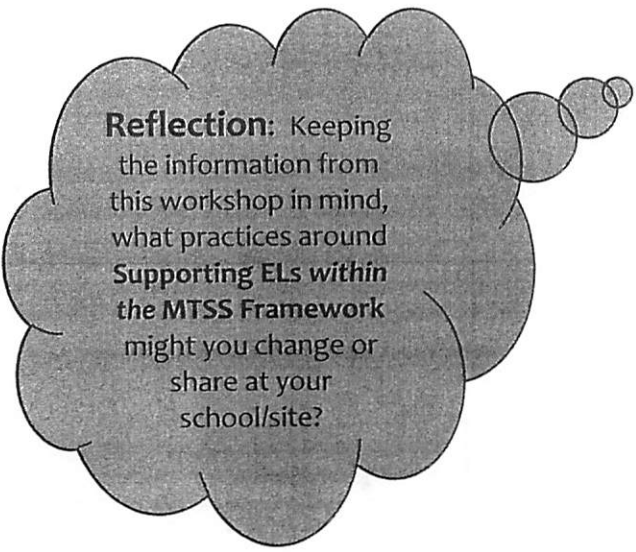
	Step 2: What do we learn from the EL Data Review sheet?	Step 3: Based on what we now know, what can we do at school and in the classroom to help this student grow in both language and content?
1. Learning Environment		
2. Academic Achievement		
3. Oral Language & Literacy		
4. Personal & Family		
5. Physical & Psychological		
6. Previous Schooling		
7. Cross-Cultural		

Step 4:	What changes were made to Tier 1 instruction and in other areas to support this student?	How did the student respond to the Tier 1 interventions and supports?
1. Learning Environment		
2. Academic Achievement		
3. Oral Language & Literacy		
4. Personal & Family		
5. Physical & Psychological		
6. Previous Schooling		
7. Cross-Cultural		

Step 5: What should the student's next placement be?

- **Placement**
(circle one): *Continue Tier 1 Instruction* *Move to Tier 2* *Move to Tier 3* *Test for Special Education* *Refer to Gifted & Talented*
- **Rationale:**

This worksheet may be kept with the student's other MTSS documentation.



Reflection: Keeping the information from this workshop in mind, what practices around **Supporting ELs within the MTSS Framework** might you change or share at your school/site?