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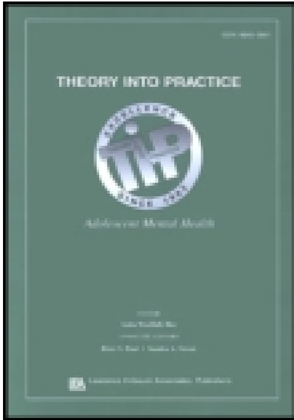

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A Sociocultural Examination of Response to Intervention With Latino English Language Learners

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Michael J. Orosco

A Sociocultural Examination of Response to Intervention With Latino English Language Learners

One of the key premises of Response to Intervention (RTI) is that it seeks to move away from focusing on a within-child deficit to an asset-based approach that promotes improving the instructional context. Although RTI holds promise, there remain many challenges that are associated with the complex interaction between the pedagogical and contextual nature that occurs with English language learners. English language learners' success within this model may be dependent on how well school personnel understand and promote these learners' sociocultural experiences with evidence-based practices. The purpose of this article is to discuss and examine the challenges that schools many encounter in developing RTI with English language learners from a sociocultural perspective.

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When Congress introduced the concept of Response to Intervention (RTI; IDEA, 2004), it built upon the hopeful tenets of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2000) that were grounded in the National Reading Panel findings (NRP, 2000). The notable goal of this panel was to find and identify scientific-based research knowledge ("what works") that would improve student reading achievement by recommending a balanced reading approach in developing reading skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension). The National Reading Panel (2000) noted that it "did not address issues relevant to second language learning" (p. 3) that were "such reported in experimental or quasi-experimental studies" (pp. 13–14). These statements were lost in legislation (e.g., NCLB, IDEA) and problematic

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because many reading initiatives (e.g., Reading First) were launched under the guise of the NRP recommendations excluding the balanced literacy approach (Office of Inspector General, 2006), inherently creating a pedagogical movement that assumed that by teaching just the reading basics functioning independently of English language learners' sociocultural experiences, that these skills would develop effective readers (Cummins, 2007).

With this said, English language learners continue to underachieve in public education, as federal legislation (e.g., NCLB, Reading First) seems to have had a minimal impact on their overall reading development. According to *The Nation's Report Card 2007 Fourth Grade*—only 14% of Black students, 17% of Hispanic (aka Latino) students, 20% of American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 45% of Asian/Pacific Islander students are reading at the proficient or advanced proficient level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Also, many of these learners continue to be overreferred and disproportionately placed into special education (e.g., Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005) as a result of cultural and linguistic differences between teacher and students (Orosco, Schonewise, de Onis, Klingner, & Hoover, 2008). Because of this, RTI seems to be a viable support option, as it can provide early intervention that not only improves academic achievement, but also reduces English language learners' misplacement into special education due to sociocultural differences.

The Sociocultural Construct

Sociocultural theory postulates that cognition is materialized through reciprocal activity between an individual and the social context that is mediated by cultural knowledge, tools, symbols, and artifacts (Vygotsky, 1978). Cultural practices intertwined with social relationships and the joint productive activities of everyday life form the basis of cognitive activity (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). As children begin to interact socially within a culture and are exposed to more knowledgeable others, the everyday experiences that they encounter begin to transform their cognitive development. This culturally constructed meaning is the primary means that children use to organize, develop, and control their mental functioning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Because of this, RTI models will need to provide the sociocultural interface that allows for contextualization (e.g., assessment, instruction, intervention) between emerging school literacy concepts and students' prior knowledge or experience from home or community (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

As English language learners participate within a school, the integration of classroom activities, tools, and artifacts plays a central role in the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Instruction and assessment must involve the weaving of new-schooled concepts with those of everyday life; instruction cannot be meaningful without incorporating the student's system of meaning and understandings (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). More specifically, this cognitive development is the process of scaffolding new information with background knowledge by more capable others provided through a medium of challenge activities that fosters learners' zones of proximal development (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). During the instructional process, the teacher proceeds through an unfolding of students' potential (i.e., zone of proximal development) by providing supports or scaffolds to emerging concepts and skills with students' cultural background knowledge and skills to achieve desired mastery (Gonzales et al., 2005). In this grain, students must be given the extended opportunities for discussion and problem solving in the context of these shared instructional activities, in which comprehension is developed (Palinscar & Brown, 1984).

Most important in the sociocultural approach, practitioners develop the educational context, which is grounded in the belief that learners be provided with high-quality instruction with the most effective practices that are not only based on, but also incorporate, these learners' cultural and linguistic heritage and experiences that facilitate learning and development (Gutiérrez,

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Morales, & Martinez, 2009). However, without this, many English language learners may experience a pedagogical system that imparts passive knowledge creation, eventually diminishing their ability to develop strong comprehension skills. RTI holds the potential to shift the educational field from focusing on the production of within-child deficits to focusing on providing the best education by developing an active knowledge system that allows for learners to apply new learned knowledge with their everyday real-life experiences.

Sociocultural Contextual Challenges

Granted that RTI holds promise, there remain many unanswered questions and concerns that are associated with the complex interaction between the pedagogical and contextual nature that occurs with English language learners. This is further exacerbated by the behavioral- and cognitive-based assumptions that learning and development occur internally with disregard for external factors, consequently pushing many intervention researchers to focus on the critical assumption that there are no sociocultural differences in learning development between English language learners and dominant English speakers (Cummins, 2007). RTI researchers like Cirino et al. (2009) have cited that there is a further need to look at sociocultural variables in future intervention studies in "determining the specific impact" (p. 748) of these variables, which "are likely to be beneficial" (p. 748) in improving English language learner reading achievement.

One of the fundamental RTI premises is that it moves away from focusing on within-child educational deficits (e.g., language acquisition vs. learning disability) to an asset-based approach, with an emphasis on examining the instructional context and other related student factors (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). In this vein, a school's core curriculum (general education classroom, Tier 1) has been cited as a critical factor in developing a high quality RTI program for English language learners (Klingner, McCray-Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007). Yet, as is evident by national reading data, the Tier 1 may be misaligned for English language learners, which, because of poor academic achievement, may result in many of these learners eventually being placed into special education because of presumed reading deficits (i.e., learning disabilities; Orosco & Klingner, in press). The following abbreviated illustration[1] provides a description of Tier 1 misalignment with Latino English language learners that failed to provide a high-interest instructional activity that connected to these students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds that would have not only promoted engagement and motivation but also ownership in literacy (Au, 2005).

The teacher, Ms. Abbott, had not yet received professional development in English language learner reading pedagogy that would have allowed her to provide explicit skills-based reading skills instruction through an interactive approach (e.g., vocabulary, oral language development), while validating students' cultural and linguistic knowledge (August & Shanahan, 2006). Further, Ms. Abbott, because of her own personal cultural and linguistic experiences, implicitly assumed that her students understood the reading passage in the same way that she understood and enjoyed it when she was a child. Ms. Abbott, her school, and her district neglected to understand that, because her students were English language learners, they would need culturally responsive Tier 1 instruction that demanded the use of culturally relevant materials.

> Ms. Abbott: "I want to share with you one of my favorite childhood stories. [The whole class is seated on the A-B-C rug in front of the class near a dry-erase board.] This was read to me by my teachers and parents; it teaches us about the environment [without explicitly or preteaching this term]." Ms. Abbott is holding up the book titled *The Lorax* (Geisel, 1971). "What do you think this book is about [with no student response]? Well, that is okay, we will learn what *The Lorax* is about together." Ms. Abbott begins reading, " 'At the far end of town where Grickle-grass grows and the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows and no birds ever sing excepting old crows . . . is the Street of the Lifted Lorax. It's not. So . . . Catch!

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> calls the Once-ler' [students are getting fidgety, not paying attention]." Ms. Abbott continues reading with no teacher–student interaction—no oral language practice: " 'He lets something fall. It's a Truffula Seed. It's the last one of all! You're in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds. And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs [continues reading the book].... Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back.' " Ms. Abbott continues, "Now it's your turn to tell me what the story is about!" Luis [a student]: "A ... A Lorax." Ms. Abbott: "Good. What was the Lorax trying to do?" As she asks this question, she begins to flip the pages. The same student: "Fly." The teacher responds, "No, I do not think so. Who was the Once-ler [pointing to the Once-ler's house]?" No students reply ... the teacher pauses ... no students reply. Ms. Abbott asks, "Has anyone read another book that is similar to this one?" No students reply. Ms. Abbott is hesitant ... gives a frustrated grin ... and, hesitant, doesn't know what to say [eventually transitions to another activity].

In the excerpt just given, Ms. Abbott assumed that her students had encountered similar cultural experiences to understand a story quite commonly read by English speaking school children. However, this story was quite abstract, different, and unusual for her learners. Unfortunately, the story did not have the intended read-aloud effect that would have engaged these learners by connecting to their background knowledge, increasing vocabulary development, and fostering oral language development that would have improved reading comprehension (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). Yet the mismatch between the vocabulary of the book and the vocabulary and students' sociocultural knowledge did not occur to Ms. Abbot because of her past personal experiences and professional development that situated her in perceiving that this instruction was appropriate.

Professional Development

Unfortunately, way too often in too many classrooms, English language learners encounter similar experiences such as the one described in the vignette. Although the majority of teacher education and professional development programs throughout the country do not focus on culturally responsive training such as bilingual development, understanding the developmental issues between first and second language interplay such as the sociopolitical process of acculturation, identity development, and communicative competence, would be beneficial in comprehending the complexity of English language learner literacy development (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010). Additionally, this professional development would need to wrap around culturally responsive instruction that provides preparation (a) in learning effective English language learner differentiated instructional approaches; (b) in understanding the bilingual language acquisition process and how it affects learning to read in two languages; and (c) in building upon English language learners' contextual experiences (Klingner, Méndez Barletta, & Hoover, 2008).

Last, because educational research can be influenced heavily by politics (e.g., Manzo & Hoff, 2007) and public education is diversely multifaceted, caution should be paid that comprehension entails more than uncovering "basic structures" (Cole, 1996). Learning is enhanced when it occurs in contexts that are meaningful and students' sociocultural experiences are centrally included in classroom curricular and activities (Au, 2005). Because of this, it becomes important to examine the ways in which sociocultural factors influence English language learner RTI model development, as this may be a key ingredient in mediating adequate and appropriate interventions in overcoming their underachievement.

Culture Onto the Classroom: A Case Study

Although there are many challenges in developing RTI with English language learners, the most critical misassumption may be that the core curriculum (aka general education, Tier 1) is aligned with English language learner needs. As

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evident by national data (e.g., NCES, 2009), the majority of English language learners continue to struggle with gaining reading proficiency at the Tier 1. With this said, the foundation of RTI may already be on shaky ground, because general education knowledge and its development seems to have been reduced in startling and powerful ways to political matter of a certain curriculum (e.g., Reading First), reading components (e.g., phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency), and instructional methods (e.g., direct instruction) (Cummins, 2007). In this cusp, it is important to caution that although these structures and methods will more than likely form the RTI framework for most American schools, it may not be the right blueprint for English language learners. In the end, the success or failure of the RTI model may be dependent on the everyday mundane instruction provided by the general education teacher.

The following description illustrates sociocultural instruction with evidence-based literacy practices (e.g., vocabulary development, writing) within an RTI model with Latino English language learners.[1] The teacher, Ms. Carlos, in contrast to Ms. Abbott, has been given English language learner professional development and training in which she has been shown how to bridge her students' sociocultural experiences with standards-based curriculum and content through explicit evidence based practices. She does this by giving students extended opportunities for oral language development, in which comprehension is collaboratively constructed and negotiated. Ms. Carlos and her students are reading and discussing a story, *The Pot That Juan Built* (Andrews-Goebel & Diaz, 2002). Ms. Carlos is using a story-talk-like participation structure with culturally relevant material that not only validates these students' sociocultural experiences but also provides the necessary social context that connects evidence-based practices with student background knowledge. This is the sociocultural internalization of instruction; this is the RTI blueprint needed for these types of learners. This is theory into practice.

Although Ms. Carlos understands that her children may struggle with this challenging text, she believes that this is the classroom instruction they must receive daily to improve their higher-level reading skills and, because of this, may be addressing the problematic fourth grade comprehension gap that many of these learners will encounter. In this example, she scaffolds the children along their zone of proximal development by providing direct and explicit instruction that connects to their sociocultural knowledge. Because her instruction is done through explanation, modeling, scaffolding, and application, her students also show engaging and motivating attitudes toward learning to read, which has been found critical in learning to read. In time, because this RTI model is socioculturally driven, the students' reading achievement scores will improve, thus eliminating the need for many of these students to receive added intervention support (Tier 2), which will allow for those with true learning needs to receive support.

> Ms. Carlos pauses for everyone to settle down on the A-B-C rug next to a dry-erase board [aka vocabulary board]. Ms. Carlos: "Today, we are going to learn about *The Pot That Juan Built* [pointing to title page with a picture of a cowboy with a pot]." She asks a question to check for student understanding:. "What do you think the book is about?" Students are hesitant, then they engagingly began to reply. "A ... man? ... Cowboy? ... Cup?" Ms. Carlos clearly states, "Close. This story is about a man and his pot. The man's name is Juan [points to the man and the pot]. Juan makes pottery. Pottery is an art." She states with an emphasis on the target word: "Does anyone know what the word *art* means?" Students are perplexed but thinking, then Lucy says, "Itz (sic) like *arte*." [Ms. Carlos first tells the students orally what it means by connecting Lucy's statement to classroom instruction.] "Yes, *art* is *arte* in Spanish. Nice job, Lucy." Ms. Carlos says, "Pottery is an art ... *arte*. When you make something like a pot, it can be called an *art* ... *arte*," as she clearly writes the target word, *art*, on the board under the word labeled **English Vocabulary Word**, *arte* under the word labeled **Spanish Vocabulary Word**. She then comments, as she writes the word *artist*, "Juan makes pottery. Pottery is an art. Juan is an artist or *artista*." Right below the word *art*, she writes

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the word *artist* in the English column and *artista* in the Spanish column. "Thank you for listening and keeping your hands to yourself. Good job!"

Ms. Carlos says, "Today, we are going preview this book and look for the pictures that describe the word *art/arte* or *artist/artista*. *Preview* means to go over the book (beginning to flip through the pages, as if to model this concept).... It means to look at the pictures and think or talk about what the book may be about, using words." Ms. Carlos, as she points to a picture of Juan holding a pot and overlooking the desert plains with adobe houses, asks, "Where do you think he lives?" Pause ... no student answers. Ms. Carlos: "Has anyone seen these types of houses [picture of adobe houses]?" Students respond, "Mexico." Ms. Carlos goes on to preview every page. The pictures [pictures of adobe houses, deserts, cactus, pottery fires, Juan] of the book are eye-catching; the students excitingly point to the pictures as if they are familiar with the setting. This book is a good example of how a teacher can apply culturally valued materials in connecting to students' social contexts.

Ms. Carlos [motioning students to the board]: "Okay, let's stop there for today and work on a writing activity using this book. Today, we are going to write about some artists that you know in your family or community." Ms. Carlos is directly and explicitly modeling by writing on the board, "I have a brother who is a chef. A chef is an artist. A chef makes delicious food. A chef experiments with food." She has some prepared pictures of chefs making food and posts them next to her phrase. Ms. Carlos explains that they need to come up with an example like hers. "Okay. I am going to hand out some writing paper and I want you to write about an artist in your family and then draw me a picture."

Ms. Carlos circulates around and provides assistance as needed. "Laura, what are you writing about?" Laura: "My mama is a *panadera* (baker). She makes bread. She ez (sic) an artist (sic)." Ms. Carlos (hearing students read their writing): "Yes, your mamma is a *pan ... adera*. She makes bread. She is an artist. Great job!" Levi writes (as he is reading), "*Mi papa ez (sic) un ... pintor*. (My dad is a painter). He ez (sic) ... n(sic) ... ar ... tizt (sic). (He is an artist.)" Elias writes, "My mama soz (sic). (My mother sews.) She iz (sic) n (sic) ... rtzt (sic). [She is an artist.]

What I have described is the teaching of Ms. Carlos, a primary-grade teacher with Latino English language learners. In this excerpt, she has used a literacy activity to not only promote student engagement, but also to build upon the skills necessary for reading comprehension by drawing from students' sociocultural knowledge. How has she done this? First, she believes that all learners can be provided with evidence-based practices such as vocabulary development that validate her learners' sociocultural experiences. Next, she applies sociocultural teaching methods that give students the opportunities to contextualize instructional reading knowledge and meanings filtered through their experiences. Finally, she provides instruction that activates students' engagement and motivation through the incorporation of their home and community based literacy practices. She and her school are on their way to developing a successful RTI model for English language learners.

Conclusion

At this juncture, it is still too difficult to determine if RTI will have a systematic effect with English language learners. Many schools are struggling to understand the concept of RTI and further to applying this with English language learner populations. Schools need a lot of direction in regard to: a) addressing teachers' professional development needs; b) coordinating curriculum, content, instruction, and assessment; and c) understanding the research to practice complexity with English language learners. In fact, researchers and practitioners, alike, may need to develop RTI models within a framework that provides a sociocultural approach that incorporates students' background knowledge with evidence based practices. RTI schools must be cognizant that they do not "put old wine in a new bottle" (Klingner & Edwards, 2006, p. 115).

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Note

1. Classroom observations were conducted by Michael J. Orosco as part of his dissertation research: Orosco, M. J. (2007). *Response to intervention with Latino English language learners*. University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO. (ProQuest-CSA, LLC 072699).

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