

# Implementing Data-Based Individualization for English Learners



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## Introduction

English learners (ELs), as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, are individuals enrolled in school between the ages of 3 and 21 whose native language is not English. In addition, their developing English proficiency often denies them access to opportunities to meet challenging academic standards, achieve in the classroom, and/or participate fully in society (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Although ELs are categorized under a single, homogeneous label, in actuality, they represent a diverse population of students with wide-ranging cultural experiences, native and second-language proficiencies, and varying degrees of subject matter knowledge (Vaughn et al., 2019).

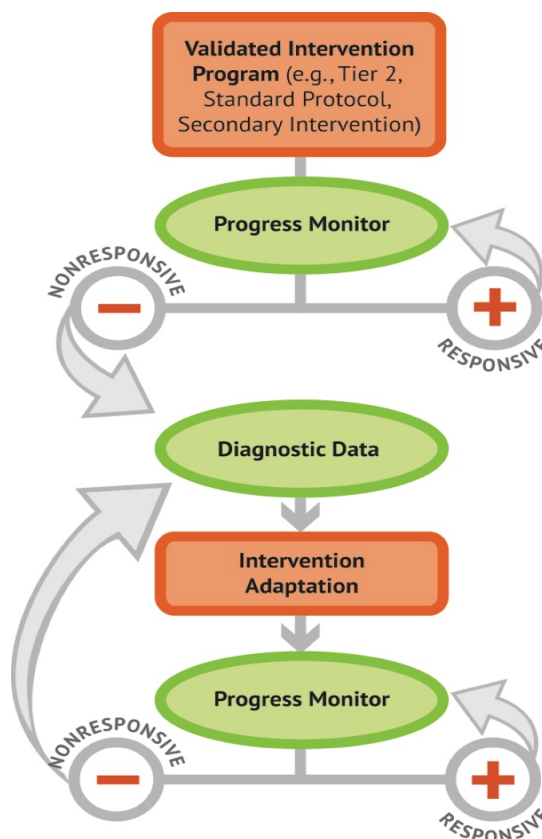
Over the years, providing research-based instruction for ELs has been a challenge for many educators due to the limited number of interventions validated for ELs. This brief will illustrate considerations for implementing data-based individualization (DBI) with ELs that accounts for their unique academic, social, behavioral, linguistic, and cultural experiences, assets, and needs.

## Data-Based Individualization for English Learners

DBI is a research-based process for individualizing and intensifying interventions through the systemic use of assessment data, validated interventions, and adaptation strategies. The graphic in Figure 1 illustrates the steps in the DBI process. DBI is grounded in experimental teaching research initially conducted by Deno and Mirkin (1977) at the University of Minnesota and expanded upon by others (Capizzi & Fuchs, 2005; Fuchs et al., 1984; Fuchs et al., 1989; Fuchs et al., 2015). Although these studies did not focus on ELs and their linguistic and cultural needs, DBI focuses on individualizing supports based on the unique characteristics and needs of the student, including language and culture.

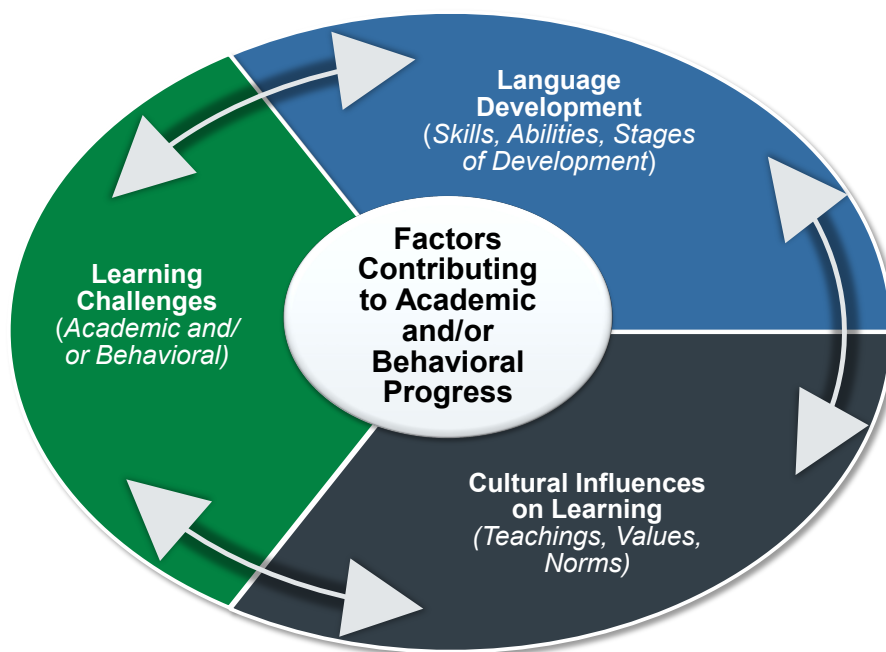
To support ELs with intensive intervention needs via the DBI process, it is important to (a) deliver instruction that represents culturally and linguistically sustaining best practices, and (b) distinguish the needs and assets of learners to improve progress (i.e., second-language acquisition, culture, learning challenges). When using the DBI process with ELs, educators should ensure that these students are appropriately supported culturally, linguistically, and academically. Figure 2 highlights three interrelated elements that are necessary for educators to consider when supporting ELs' progress. Examining these features is reliant upon an educator's:

Figure 1. Steps in the DBI Process



- knowledge of the development of second-language acquisition and its influence on learning and engagement in the classroom;
- understanding of each student's learning experiences in English and their first language;
- awareness of the student's cultural expectations and their influence on learning behaviors, language development, and language attitudes; and
- using ongoing academic and/or behavioral data with the influence of language on the development of academic and behavioral outcomes.

**Figure 2. Factors to Consider for Understanding Inadequate Progress**



The following section illustrates how educators and teams draw on this knowledge and the interrelated elements throughout the five steps of the DBI process to meet the unique needs of ELs within each of the five steps in the process: Validated intervention program, progress monitoring, diagnostic data, intervention adaptation, and progress monitoring.

## Step 1: Validated Intervention Program

The DBI process builds on a validated intervention program delivered with fidelity. For ELs, the validated program is likely to be one associated with improved outcomes in the target behavior or academic area (e.g., fractions or word reading) for native English speakers. Because the validated program may not have been adequately evaluated specifically with the target population of ELs, **it is important to consider the simultaneous integration of the intervention with appropriate language supports and culturally responsive practices.** These language supports and culturally responsive practices are likely to have a more universal benefit, meaning that they support other learners who are not ELs yet have underdeveloped academic language required for academic success.

When considering the learning needs of ELs, the validated intervention program may be selected (a) **using a validated approach for ELs when available, or (b) by selecting an approach that is validated for students with similar learning and behavior problems and then adapted to meet the learning needs of ELs.** To support educators in selecting and evaluating a validated intervention program, The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) suggests using a series of seven dimensions that make up the [Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity](#). These dimensions include strength, dosage, alignment, attention to transfer, comprehensiveness, academic or behavioral support, and individualization. Specific considerations for ELs are outlined in the [Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity with considerations for ELs](#).

While there exist a limited number of interventions validated for ELs, evidence suggests interventions that are effective for typical learners often have a universal impact on all learners, including ELs (Vaughn et al., 2017). One challenge with standard protocol Tier 2 interventions is that they often do not have adequate language support for ELs (Sanford et al., 2020). This could interfere with the rate of progress. ELs and non-ELs exhibit reading comprehension and basic mathematical skills in similar ways; however, differences in vocabulary (Kong & Swanson, 2019; Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010; Lesaux et al., 2010) and oral language (Lesaux & Harris, 2017; Orosco et al., 2011) for ELs suggest that they benefit when addressed simultaneously. This means concurrently developing academic and or behavioral skills while also supporting oral and written language across content areas (Lesaux & Harris, 2017; Sanford et al., 2020). Thus, many interventions may be effective with ELs when they include adaptations to support students' developing English proficiency (Slavin & Cheung, 2004). **When considering language and cultural adaptations, determine why you are using *this* particular support by asking yourself the following questions:**

- Is it effective in supporting *this* student with *this* intervention?
- Can the support be faded and how quickly?
- Is the support used across content areas and various instructors?

## Step 2: Progress Monitoring

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Step 2 of the DBI process is progress monitoring. During this step, ongoing progress monitoring data are collected to determine how the student is responding to the intervention. There are several valid and reliable progress monitoring tools that are effective in monitoring basic skills, such as reading accuracy, speed of reading, and math fact fluency, including some available in multiple languages. NCII's [Academic Progress Monitoring Tools Chart](#) provides a review of progress monitoring measures across grade spans and academic areas and includes information where available with data disaggregated for ELs.

Although some measures are available, there is a paucity of progress monitoring tools that monitor language and vocabulary development; thus, the progress of ELs' language development is challenging to monitor. In addition, given that language development takes time, regularly scheduled progress monitoring may not provide strong data for growth in language acquisition. When conducting progress monitoring for ELs, it is important to **consider the language of instruction**. For students who receive instruction in multiple languages, it is **recommended that progress is monitored in both languages** (Esparza Brown & Sanford, 2011; Project ELITE, Project ESTRE2 LLA, & Project REME, 2015). In addition, Esparza Brown and Sanford (2011) suggest evaluating growth related to "true peers," which they define as "students who have the same or similar levels of language proficiency, acculturation, and educational backgrounds" (p. 16).

If the student is making adequate progress in the intervention, it would be appropriate to continue to provide the validated intervention program and monitor student progress until the student reaches expectations. **If the**

data suggest that the student is not responding adequately compared with the progress of true peers, then a deeper look at the data may provide the teacher with a clearer picture of the student’s needs.

## Step 3: Diagnostic Data

Within the DBI process, the teacher or intervention team collects and reviews diagnostic data to determine potential areas of need if the student is not responding adequately to the intervention. The teacher is engaged in using the data to develop a hypothesis that will guide the intensification process. These data may include informal and formal academic, language, and behavior measures. When considering the diagnostic data for ELs within the DBI process, reflecting upon the three interrelated elements that were described in Figure 2 could provide connections between lack of progress and cultural influences on learning, learning challenges, and language development (Hoover et al., 2016). The importance of knowing about and considering these three elements when determining why a student is not responding cannot be overstated. This is further illustrated in Table 1, which shows examples of how diagnostic data related to behavior may be interpreted. The table describes similar behaviors associated with cultural influences (left column), typical learning challenges (center column), and expected behaviors associated with language development (right column). **Considering the root cause of any interfering behaviors that occur during instruction and whether they are related to language acquisition or culture could provide insight for developing a hypothesis about why the student is not progressing and help design future instruction.**

**Table 1. Diversity or Disability: Behavior Comparisons\***

Cultural Influences	Learning Challenges	Language Development
Withdrawn behavior may be due to unfamiliarity with U.S. school culture.	Withdrawn behavior is a known characteristic in some students with a learning disability.	Withdrawn behavior exists and is expected in the early stages of language acquisition (e.g., the silent period).
Cultural participation and respectful interaction styles may affect verbal interactions and the degree of expressive language.	Delays in processing to produce expressive language is sometimes a behavior associated with a learning disability.	Difficulty retrieving words from a second language to produce expressive language may be related to developing English proficiency.
Cultural values may influence error orientation (mistake making), which could be expressed as frustration.	Behaviors associated with frustration or discouragement may be present due to processing delays and the presence of a learning disability.	Learning a new language and the inability to express themselves or have their needs met can be exhausting and cause frustration.

\*Adapted from material found in Klingner and Eppollito (2013), Hoover et al. (2016), and Hoover and Patton (2017).

In each of these and similar situations, the same behavior, often suspected to be a problem behavior or challenge, may in fact be a culturally relevant behavior or an expected behavior in the process of acquiring English, rather than evidence of a learning difficulty or disability, a specific skill deficit, or a behavioral concern. As such, it is critical for educators to **consider the student’s language, cultural background, and learning challenges to ensure the design of appropriate adaptations.**

## Step 4: Intervention Adaptation

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After carefully considering the student data, the next step in the DBI process involves developing a student plan for modifying or adapting the intervention to better meet the student's individualized needs. The same seven dimensions described in the [Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity](#) that can be used to support the selection of a validated intervention program also can guide the adaptation of the intervention and help determine whether the student needs *more* or *different* language support. For example, the teacher may determine that they need to adapt the [alignment dimension](#) to ensure that the academic vocabulary used in the intervention better:

- addresses the target student's full set of academic skill levels by building on funds of knowledge;
- expands upon skills the target student has already mastered (extraneous skills for that student);
- incorporates a meaningful focus on grade-appropriate curricular content and language standards;
- reflects the student's cultural and linguistic qualities and strengths commensurate with ELs at same grade level with similar language proficiency levels;
- and provides explicit language instruction along with content development.

The teacher also may determine that they need to intensify the [dosage dimension](#) to provide additional practice opportunities with feedback for the student to practice content, develop vocabulary, and increase language proficiency through the integrated uses of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Before adapting or intensifying an intervention, **consider whether the current intervention program has been implemented with fidelity and for enough time.** Prioritize which adaptation to begin with and plan for its use. Keep in mind that it is best to keep changes small and deliberate so that the effectiveness of the changes can be monitored. Too many changes at once could cloud the ability to evaluate the adaptation's effect and the student's responsiveness to the change.

## Step 5: Progress Monitoring

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While implementing the intervention adaptations, the teacher continues to collect ongoing progress monitoring data to determine students' responsiveness. Students whose data indicate responsiveness continue with the adapted intervention. Students whose data indicate inadequate responsiveness return to Step 3; the teacher will then analyze additional data and consider further adaptations. For ELs, monitoring language acquisition instruction and progress will help to **determine whether the student is responding to adaptations related to language and culture.**

## Conclusion

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This brief is intended to provide educators with a framework for special considerations for ELs within the DBI process. As instruction is individualized for ELs, it is essential that educators adhere to the principle that language and culture remain integral to teaching and learning and, therefore, should always be part of the decision making when reviewing student data and implementing a holistic approach to intensive intervention.

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