Response to Intervention (RTI) is an approach to identifying students as learning disabled that provides an alternative to the traditional model of discrepancy between ability (i.e., IQ) and achievement (i.e., academic test scores). More important, an RTI approach helps teachers identify and intervene with students as soon as they begin to demonstrate learning difficulties, rather than waiting for them to experience sufficient failure that they become eligible for special education services.

Because the overwhelming majority of students who struggle in school and those ultimately identified as learning disabled have difficulties involving language and literacy, the International Reading Association (IRA) formed a Commission on Response to Intervention to provide guidance to language, literacy, and allied professionals as they develop and implement approaches to RTI. Notable among the activities of the commission is development of guiding principles for educators (IRA, 2010). These principles are organized according to six key topics: instruction, responsive teaching and differentiation, assessment, collaboration, systemic and comprehensive approaches, and expertise. This column explores the topic of assessment, including the role of language and literacy assessment in RTI and the assessment requirements and intent of the RTI legislation.

**The Role of Assessment in RTI**

The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States, which authorizes RTI, simply states that assessment should include “data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals” [§300.309(b) (2)]. Contrary to popular belief, the law and regulations do not mandate universal screening, nor do they specify which assessments should be used or how frequently they should be given. The intent, as we, the authors, read it, is to use assessment information as the basis for differentiating instruction so it is more responsive to students’ needs and more likely to accelerate students’ learning.

The principle on assessment in IRA’s (2010) guiding principles states, “An RTI approach demands assessment that can inform language and literacy instruction meaningfully. Assessment should reflect the multidimensional nature of language and literacy and the diversity among students being assessed.” Consistent with the principle on instruction, it makes clear that quality of assessment information in language and literacy should not be sacrificed for efficiency of an assessment procedure. It further indicates that not all available assessments are appropriate for all purposes or all students, and that care should be taken in selecting language and literacy assessments particularly for English learners and students who speak nonmainstream English dialects. Finally, the assessment principle supports the need for coherence rather than the more common collection of measures that are used inappropriately or are misaligned.

**The Purposes of Assessment**

Although the IDEA legislation does not provide much specificity about assessment, it is clear that an RTI system requires that data be gathered for multiple purposes, described here as
The different purposes for language and literacy assessment require the use of an assessment system in a well-articulated approach that involves a variety of measures and personnel. By using different measures for different purposes, it is possible to make decisions that can increase both the efficiency and the utility of assessment information. Gathering data for these different purposes, as described in the following paragraphs, meets the letter and the spirit of the law—that is, to identify students’ needs and to assess their progress and the appropriateness of the targeted instruction.

**Screening** refers to the data gathered before instruction to determine which students may require further (diagnostic) assessment and to provide schools and teachers with aggregate information about the nature of student achievement overall. The measures used for screening are often readily available (e.g., scores on beginning-of-the-year standardized tests or on the previous year’s state assessments) or quick and easy to administer to large numbers of students and are correlated with end-of-year achievement tests. These assessments can be useful for identifying students who are achieving at, above, or below the level expected for a particular age or grade. However, because the measures used for screening are fairly generic and can be mismatched to an individual student’s actual reading abilities, they rarely provide the specific information needed to determine the most appropriate intervention or instruction.

What, for example, would we know about the instructional needs of a second-grade emergent reader with an oral reading fluency score of 20 words correct per minute? We might know that the student’s score is substantially below benchmark for an average second grader, but we would not know where to target instruction. What would we have learned about her concepts of print, knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, phonemic awareness, or language abilities in English? What would happen if the targeted intervention focused on speed and accuracy of decoding rather than the more basic needs of this student?

To address these sorts of questions, a more finely grained assessment is needed—one that is not mentioned in RTI law and regulations. We are referring to diagnostic assessment.

**Diagnostics** refer to assessments that help identify a student’s specific strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of planning instruction and identifying appropriate interventions. A wide range of formal and informal assessments can be used, including running records, spelling inventories, oral language assessments, and the like. Often diagnostic assessments are individually administered, allowing the teacher or educational specialist to adjust assessment to the student’s abilities and to observe the student as he responds. For example, a teacher might provide additional scaffolding during diagnostic assessment for an English learner to determine if vocabulary or decoding is a problem. Or a teacher might select reading passages about which a student has more or less background knowledge in an effort to understand a student’s difficulty with comprehension.

Because these assessments take time to administer and interpret, many schools begin by administering screening assessments or use other screening criteria to identify candidates for further assessment. For example, some schools recommend diagnostic assessments for students who score in the lowest 35th or 40th percentile on screening measures. Others suggest that teachers use classroom work and informal classroom assessments collected over the first month of school to recommend students for follow-up diagnostic assessment.

**Formative progress monitoring** refers to data gathered during instruction to determine the appropriateness of that instruction as evidenced by student progress and to help the teacher determine how to revise it. Assessments used for this purpose are often informal measures used on an ongoing basis in daily instruction. They may include teacher-made assessments, book logs, work samples, anecdotal records, and standardized or semistructured measures of student performance such as miscue analysis and observational notes from reading or writing conferences.
Formative assessments may vary from student to student depending on the teacher’s judgment about the student’s learning at a particular point in time. They operate at the level at which a student is performing rather than at the student’s age or grade level (unless these are the same). The most useful assessments are direct measures of the desired performance rather than indirect measures that may be related to the area of concern. Measures used for formative purposes provide the information necessary to make certain that instruction is responsive to student needs.

Benchmark progress monitoring refers to data gathered at predetermined times of the year to ascertain if students are making adequate progress in overall performance in relation to age or grade expectations or benchmarks. These measures serve as indicators of the general effectiveness of instruction. If the measures used for screening can be administered three or four times in one year, then they may also be used for benchmarking progress. If not, then it is important to select a measure that is aligned with the screening assessment.

These measures are important for understanding whether student performance is advancing sufficiently to warrant continuation of or change to the current instruction. In the latter case, additional diagnostic assessments may be necessary. It should also be possible to determine if student performance has advanced to the point where more intensive instruction is no longer needed. As with screening and outcome assessments, and in contrast with diagnostic and formative assessments, these measures are typically quite broad and provide insufficient information for planning instruction.

Summative outcome assessment refers to data gathered at the end of the year to determine the effectiveness of instruction and student year-end performance in comparison to grade-level expectations. Again, if the measure used for screening can be administered three or four times a year, it could be used in the winter for benchmarking and at the end of the year to determine annual achievement. As with the measures used for screening and benchmarking, those used for summative outcome purposes are usually too general to provide sufficient information for planning instruction.

Critical Knowledge for Teachers and Specialists

Underlying the use of a variety of assessments for different purposes is the need for teacher expertise. The expertise principle in IRA’s (2010) guiding principles emphasizes that knowledgeable classroom teachers and specialists should play a central role in conducting language and literacy assessments and in using assessment results to plan instruction and monitor student performance.

Teachers need to know and understand the critical components of language and literacy relative to the developmental levels of their students so they can ensure that the essential areas are assessed and appropriate instruction is provided. Toward this end, they need to know how to do the following:

- Determine which assessments are more or less appropriate for the different purposes for gathering data in an RTI system
- Interpret assessment data collected for different purposes so they can be used appropriately to inform next steps for assessment or instruction
- Administer a range of diagnostic assessments, including their own classroom assessments and observations, to ensure that the information they have is sufficient for planning instruction
- Document students’ progress in the context of their daily instruction so they can determine if that instruction needs to be adjusted

Teachers and specialists are on the front lines of implementing approaches to RTI. Deep knowledge and skill about assessment may be the single most important factor in the success of an RTI approach in preventing students’ language and literacy problems.
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