



Driving Growth for English Learners

A data-driven approach to intervention with English learners and biliteracy students pinpoints where students struggle — and how to help them succeed.

English-language learners made up one-tenth of the fall 2016 public-school population in the United States, about 4.9 million students, according to the latest numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics. This is up from 3.8 million students in fall 2000. While Spanish was the home language for 77% of these students, as a group, ELLs speak 150 different languages in the US.

Meeting students where they are when they enter the classroom can be daunting. And time is precious in the classroom. Assessing students at the beginning of the school year to understand their baseline skills can take several weeks to accomplish. Even then, the data that teachers have carefully tabulated may be too broad to help them pinpoint exactly which areas of support to tackle first and whether it will require whole-group, small-group or individual attention.

USING DATA FOR INTERVENTION

Thankfully, education technology has advanced to the point where the process of assessment can be automated and made adaptive to reduce

the amount of time a student spends in the test. Software can immediately analyze the results and report them to educators.

It's not always straightforward, though. In the case of ELL and biliteracy students, there's more that's needed beyond a simple conversion of the words on the English version of the test to help teachers understand the foundational skills and gaps of their learners. Other factors that are not necessarily an indicator of literacy deficits can influence assessments.

"It may be that they test in the 77th percentile in Spanish and the fourth percentile in English," suggests Julie Robinson, a professional-development specialist at e-learning provider Istation. "If that's the case, then they've understood their reading skills in Spanish, but they're struggling in the English, so it's a language issue and not necessarily a literacy issue."

Or maybe students didn't understand the content itself because the text covered something they've never experienced. Attention to the culture of

the students and their frame of reference is an important aspect of any data-driven instructional and intervention model.

A SOFTWARE EVALUATION CHECKLIST

So what does a good intervention model look like? Former ELL teacher Jami Herbst, who now provides professional development to educators for Istation, advises districts and schools to consider the following as they create their intervention strategy.

- Work with assessments that are nationally normed.** As Herbst explains, "The percentile rank is really important to see where students have placed among their peers across the nation." As an example, if a student has tested at the one percentile in letter knowledge, "I definitely know I have to go over all of the letters with this student right away," she says.
- Consider a blended approach.** It may be, Herbst says, that the student is more comfortable using the computer "because there's no one there to judge them or they're too shy to answer a question," while other students might "perform better one-on-one with the teacher."
- Choose software with grade-appropriate testing and lessons.** Take, for example, a fifth-grader, Herbst begins. "You want to keep them at that fifth grade level of knowledge and skills, but you also want to be able to shelter, scaffold or support it, so that students can understand the topic. That could include the use of more visuals and more supports."
- Gauge cultural suitability.** If Spanish is the focus, make sure the assessments and lessons use stories and language that come from many areas of the world. The best programs use a "universal Spanish" that "removes the regionalism," Herbst explains.



START WITH THESE REPORTS

Istation, the program that Herbst and Robinson cover in their professional-development workshops, includes dozens of reports that teachers can pull up through an easy-to-use landing page. Here is where teachers should start.

Istation Indicators of Progress Summary

Report, which shows the number and percentage of students in the classroom at each instructional tier by traffic lights: Red (tier 3) designates those in zero to 20th percentile; yellow (tier 2) specifies those in the 21st to 40th percentile; and green (tier 1) shows those working above the 40th percentile. Outfitted with that information, Robinson says, the teacher knows where to focus on whole group instruction. This is the "big picture" or "classroom snapshot" giving us a jumping off point. Selecting the plus sign next to any student allows the teacher to focus on his or her details if they need to dig deeper.

Classroom Summary Report, a "grouping report," as Robinson says, groups students by percentile, Lexile, and/or cycles of instruction, for ease of small group creation.

Priority Report, also a grouping report, shows only those students who have demonstrated weaknesses in a given ISIP or a lack of progress in skill acquisition in the interactive instruction they're doing. It also provides links to specific lessons and resources that the teacher can use in working with that student on targeted difficulties.



Istation in Action

When Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District introduced a digital reading program, teachers pushed pause. After all, this software came with more computer assessments and they felt students were already overtested. As the trend lines showed growing proficiency among their 4,100 students, however, they reconsidered their stance.

"Teachers missed the face-to-face assessments, but there's excitement and motivation when they see growth month to month, with students going from tier 3 to tier 2 or from tier 2 to tier 1," says Serapio Trillayes, executive director for curriculum and instruction for the district.

After piloting the program in pre-K to grade 5 for two years, the district expanded to grades 6 through 8 for 2018-19. And results have been positive, Trillayes says. "Teachers are using this data to differentiate instruction, but how can you know how to differentiate instruction if you don't have data? The data is very motivating and is helping children learn to read," he adds.

Chicago Public Schools, which uses Istation Español, taught its parents how to log into the program's parent portal "to check their student's progress and find resources to help their child at home," Belmont-Cragin Elementary School principal Stacy Stewart

says. Doing so "demystified the technology, which is important because our parents want to be part of the educational process. Istation Español helps make that possible."

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It's the authentic Spanish lessons that appeal to the educators at San José Unified School District in California. "Istation Español has a richness in diversity of the Spanish language, and it focuses on phonics and phonemic awareness," says Margaret Petkiewicz, manager of the bilingual programs and EL services for the district. "The bottom line is that students have access to authentic Spanish and they're applying their foundational skills

in literature and informational reading, which is critical," she adds. "The fact that Istation has authentic Spanish and not just translation is huge for our bilingual program."

BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHERS

Once you have adopted a program, use these strategies to drive student success.

Emphasize professional development. As Robinson points out, while training may be "easy to find, teachers are overwhelmed already, and they're not going to take the time to go in and find it if they perceive it as being another difficult task." Make sure your district or school dedicates personal development hours when the instructional staff can sit and hear from experts about how to use the software you've adopted.

Prepare students for testing. Letting students know the importance of the testing and laying out your expectations ahead of time gives the resulting data more validity. Istation, for example, includes scripts that teachers can quickly read over and then repeat back in their own words.

Learn how to work with the data. That's where "the rubber hits the road for teachers," Robinson says. Identify those reports that provide the immediate

insights you need to help place students in the optimal learning scenario. She urges teachers to do progress monitoring every month to track alongside the frequency of the assessments Istation delivers.

Leverage the functions in your program to stay connected with parents. Istation lets teachers email or print lessons, materials and books generated in the software to parents. A parent portal is also part of the software and an effective way to keep everything in one hub.

GETTING TIME BACK

Robinson and her fellow teachers came to realize that they could not do their jobs as effectively without Istation. "I could get my entire class tested in 30 minutes, and that gave me so much more time in my classroom to work with students."

Istation serves as a progress-monitoring tool, so the software allowed Robinson to tweak her instruction in the classroom to better meet the needs of her students and "give them more growth and more success."

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