

Universal Screening Assessment Considerations for English Learners

As part of the Tennessee Literacy Success Act (T.C.A. § 49-1-905) LEAs and public charter schools are required to administer an approved universal reading screener in English to all students in grades K-3 during three state administration windows each school year and to report data to the Tennessee Department of Education (department).¹ In addition, universal screening is a key component of identifying students who may need further assessment or support at all grade levels and is required as part of the Tennessee Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²) framework.²

At all grade levels, universal screening is an assessment process used to analyze student performance. Universal screening should be conducted in reading, mathematics, and writing. School-based teams use universal screener data, along with other data sources, to determine how to best support student needs as a part of the RTI² framework. An additional component of this process is to conduct survey-level assessments that further examine a student's performance in specific foundational skill areas which allows teams to better tailor student support to student needs.³

Pursuant to [T.C.A. § 49-1-229](#), Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and public charter schools must have procedures for dyslexia screening within their universal reading screening processes. If a student flags for risk on the general universal reading screener, the LEA or public charter should administer additional survey-level assessments to determine if the student has skill gaps in foundational literacy skills or characteristics of dyslexia. For English learners, these drill-down assessments may also help determine if the identified risk is due to language proficiency levels or discrete foundational skills gaps. As part of this drill-down process to inform instructional decisions, LEAs and public charter schools may also consider the administration of additional assessments in the student's native language to better target discrete skills without the factor of language proficiency.

The use of RTI² is one avenue for identifying students who may have an educational disability. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that an evaluation include a variety of assessment tools and strategies and cannot rely on any single procedure as the sole criterion for determining eligibility. [See 34 C.F.R. § 300.304](#). RTI² is used as a component of the process to determine whether a child has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in basic reading skills, reading comprehension, reading fluency, mathematics calculation, mathematics problem solving, or written expression for students in grades K-12 ([Tennessee Evaluation & Eligibility Standards](#)).

Thoughtful consideration should be given to how English learners (ELs) will participate in universal screening and tiered interventions. English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers must be part of the school level RTI²

¹ [TN Universal Reading Screener Administration Guidelines for Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 3](#).

² [State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-03-03\(6\)](#)

³ [RTI² Manual](#)

team if an EL student is being discussed. The universal screener administrator should consult with an expert who is familiar with the stages of language development as data is analyzed during data-based decision making.

English Language Proficiency Assessment scores, proficiency in native language, and multiple sources of data regarding their language acquisition and progress should be discussed. School teams should compare student data with peers that have similar circumstances.

Recommendation for data-based decision making: A body of evidence that includes several data sources such as English language proficiency level, literacy background, and formal schooling information should be collected and considered when interpreting screening results for ELs.

Sources of data can include, but are not limited to:

- Language use in the home
- The student's first experience with using English
- History and access of meaningful formal instruction in listening, speaking, reading, and writing that the student has received in their native language and in English
- Data on English language development skills such as ELPA data for each domain of language (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing)

It is important for educators who are a part of the student team engaging with data-based decision making to have familiarity with or understanding of the similarities and differences in alphabetic structure, orthography, vocabulary, and syntactic structure between the native language of the student and English.

The following three scenarios are examples of effective communication among educators with different areas of expertise and demonstrate data-based, student-centered decision-making.

Scenario 1

A recently arrived Kindergarten student has been identified as an EL without English proficiency and no previous access to formal schooling. The ESL specialist has shared with the team the student has recently arrived and has no English proficiency. The student is administered the universal screener. Data from the screener indicates the student was not able to engage in tasks or understand how to answer tasks in the assessment. The student's English language proficiency (ELP) screener data indicates a beginning English proficiency level. Since the student is a beginner with no English proficiency and could not access the universal screener appropriately, the team has decided at this time that the student will not receive Tier II or Tier III RTI² services. Since the student has been identified as an EL whose performance is primarily a result of a language barrier, the student will receive ESL services. The student's language proficiency will be monitored for progress, and the student should continue to participate in regular universal screening.

Scenario 2

An EL has English language proficiency assessment data that indicates the student can access tasks when provided instructions in English. The student's English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) analysis indicates the student can follow two-step oral directions and can describe pictures, events, objects, or people using phrases or short sentences. This student is administered the universal screener. Data indicates the student could benefit from reading intervention. The student will receive ESL services and reading intervention. All relevant student data must be considered when making decisions about the continuum of services needed for a student.

Scenario 3

A potential EL is screened for ESL services. The ELPA Screener shows that this student is English proficient and does not require ESL service. Since the student is not an English learner, the student data team should use multiple sources of data to determine if the student requires additional intervention support outside of Tier I instruction.