

Preface

This is the second edition of a guidebook that we wrote six years ago; the original guide was the result of a workshop that Jack Damico and I developed in response to requests for assistance from schools. Those requests typically took a form of the question: “How can we tell if English language learners (ELLs) have special education needs?” Initially the workshop focused exclusively on the question of how to distinguish between long-term disabilities and normal second-language difficulties that ELLs were having in school. In fact, the workshop became known casually as “the LD/L2 Workshop.” Over the years, however, we came to understand that the question of L2 versus LD was extremely murky, and probably the wrong question to ask.

The foundational principle for our work is that support is more effective if it is provided seamlessly as part of a continuum that is integrated into the students’ everyday school life rather than trying to determine whether academic challenges faced by ELLs stem from a second-language development issue or a long-term disability. In our work in schools over the six years since the publication of the first edition, we have tried to move staff away from needing to know right at the beginning whether an ELL has a disability that can be categorized as a special education need. Rather, the focus is on providing support that uses the benefits of knowledge and experience from both fields: second-language acquisition first, and special education next. Ensuring a continuum of services has become of utmost importance to our framework.

In the past six years, two significant changes have affected ELLs who are facing challenges in school: (1) response to intervention (RtI) is more widely implemented, and (2) testing to check if students are meeting standards has become even more entrenched in daily school life. Each of these changes has both positive and negative consequences for ELLs. In this second edition, we integrate discussions of these two issues throughout the chapters, and provide guidance for improvement when RtI is implemented in nonsensical ways for ELLs, or when the pressure of testing leads to invalid conclusions about ELLs’ academic performance.

Based on a system of extensive information collection we offer suggested interventions for the particular difficulties that ELLs often have in school. Some of these interventions are specific to individual students while others are systemic and would improve the learning context for all ELLs. The interventions we recommend emerge from our knowledge of second-language learning as well as from special education research and practice. We also recommend forming a team consisting of teachers, administrators, and special-

ists to ensure that a broad perspective and continuum of services are provided to these students.

This guide was written with three purposes in mind. First, we wanted to help teachers identify specific challenges that students encounter in school in a way that would lead to useful support for ELLs. Second, we wanted to help educators understand those challenges through extensive information gathering. Third, we wanted to help school staff identify interventions most likely to be effective in alleviating these academic challenges. The framework that we suggest can fit well into an already existing RtI system.

We hope that the guide helps educators in deciding what type of support to provide for these students. Finding assistance that works for any student experiencing academic difficulty is not easy. When those students are ELLs, the challenge is amplified; finding assistance that works becomes much more difficult. This guide helps educators better navigate the intervention options. We offer pragmatic and effective interventions that are rooted in the theoretical tenets of second-language acquisition and acculturation. They are also firmly based on research about effective educational programs for ELLs and they result from our work in schools. The book can be used as a professional development tool for professional learning communities, problem-solving teams, and action research groups.

The approach we propose would not work without a strong collaborative model in which professionals with expertise in different areas come together to solve a problem: what to do about a student or a group of students who are having unusual academic difficulty. The approach requires that individuals from different specializations collaborate and share their expertise with one another. In doing so, they must be open to perspectives different from their own. We call these collaborative groups ECOS (Ensuring a Continuum of Services) teams. It is the ECOS team that coordinates the information gathering, the formulation of interventions, and the support of teachers.

The way that the workshop on which this guide is based was conceived reflects that collaboration directly. Jack Damico is well versed in special education, and my expertise is in ELL education. We brought our areas of expertise together and created the workshop that eventually led to this guide. Later, with the addition of Barbara Marler and Cristina Sánchez-López to the team, new perspectives were introduced. Barbara brought teaching and administrative experience, and Cristina gave us insights from a teacher's perspective. Cristina's work with Theresa Young, a speech-language pathologist from the Toronto District School Board, added yet another perspective. Without this evolving collaboration, the ideas in this book would not be as wide-ranging.

The special features in this book were designed to make it easier for schools to begin offering a continuum of services to ELLs who are having academic difficulties. One or more of the following special features appear in various chapters:

Chronicles: The chronicles are true stories told by different individuals, running the gamut from a parent to a university professor. They illustrate specific points made in the book and are accompanied by questions for discussion.

ECOS Team Activities: This feature sets up discussions, challenges, and practical activities that help ECOS teams understand and further investigate issues presented in the chapters. Many of these items are also effective as professional development activities.

Steps for ECOS Teams to Take: Chapters 2 to 4 summarize the steps that ECOS teams need to take to begin the process through which the continuum of services framework becomes part of the everyday working of a school.

These lists are cumulative in that steps are carried forward from chapter to chapter and are italicized to indicate that they have already appeared in an earlier chapter.

Checklists, Rating Scales, and Questionnaires: The guide offers many tools to assess aspects of the program or the way that support is provided to students, evaluate the current situation in a school, and develop the process for establishing a continuum of services.

Questions for Discussion: Chapters 5 to 11 include questions that are intended to prompt further discussion of the integral factors that need to be considered in designing interventions for ELLs experiencing academic difficulties. These questions get teams to think about their own specific setting and to apply the concepts to their student population.

Questions for Study Groups: This is a new feature of the second edition to elicit general discussions about issues that appear in the chapter. It is intended for teachers who participate in professional learning communities in their schools or districts.

The book also has extensive material in the appendices—open-ended worksheets, an evaluation form, and augmentative information—and a glossary, with definitions of some of the key concepts presented in the text.

We hope that the suggestions in this guide are helpful in setting up a system in schools whereby ELLs receive the support they need in a seamless way. We would be gratified if the book also inspired educators to move away from the status quo and join with colleagues to do what is most effective for ELLs who are having more than the average share of challenges in school.

—*ELSE HAMAYAN*