2014-08-04

Understanding Teachers' Interpretation of Progress Monitoring Data for English Learners Within Response to Intervention

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UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS’ INTERPRETATIONS OF PROGRESS MONITORING DATA FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS WITHIN RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

By
Ana Maria Menda

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida
August 2014
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF PROGRESS
MONITORING DATA FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS WITHIN RESPONSE TO
INTERVENTION

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Latinos hold the highest dropout rate in the United States and have been found to be disproportionately represented in the categories of learning disability (LD) and speech and language impairment (SLI) in special education. With the introduction of response to intervention (RTI), a potentially beneficial framework for English learners (EL), the role of the EL teacher takes on an additional component. ELs’ teachers must be able to filter the data collected during the progress monitoring (PM) cycle through the lens of language development in order to make adequate intervention decisions for ELs. The aim of this study was to understand the ELs teachers’ decision-making process during the cycle of PM under RTI. Nine semi-structured interviews and four observations of student study team meetings (SST) were conducted. Participants were eight English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) certified teachers working with ELs and the assistant principal of an elementary school in Miami-Dade County. Analysis of the data was made through a grounded theory approach and yielded nine conceptual categories, three themes and one thematic statement. Findings suggest that ELs teachers’ sense of agency is impacted by a rigid RTI implementation and their beliefs about language and parents. This statement is
supported by the themes: 1) RTI and PM indicators, 2) Language component and 3) Parents –agent/barrier. Recommendations based on the findings support an increase in teacher participation through collaboration in the RTI process, professional development in the area of language development and collaboration with parents.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Latino students constitute the largest minority group in the United States (U.S.) and hold the highest school dropout rates of the country, consisting of 18% versus the overall national dropout rates of 8% across other race/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Latinos are also increasingly likely to be overrepresented in certain categories of special education (Sullivan, 2011). Despite the sheer numbers of Latino English learners (ELs) in public schools in the U.S., teachers, administrators and policy makers have not reached consensus on how to appropriately address the needs of this growing heterogeneous population (Klingner & Artiles, 2006). Some of the challenge areas that have been identified include school personnel’s variable knowledge of language acquisition processes (Klingner & Artiles, 2006; Klingner & Harry, 2006; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy & Leos, 2005), as well as the limited access to adequate and valid measures to assess ELs academic progress (Leasux, 2006).

Klingner and Harry’s (2006) study of child study team meetings served to illustrate some of the lack of attention to the language development they observed: “Our primary concern in many meetings we observed was that there was a lack of consideration given to language issues. This seemed to be due to the possible misinterpretation by those involved that student’s difficulties were attributed to intrinsic deficits of some kind rather than a lack of full language proficiency” (Klingner & Harry, 2006, p. 2.265). This lack of clarity also permeates special education referrals and placements for language minority students.
For some minority groups, such as African Americans and Native Americans, disproportionality has been evidenced by their overrepresentation in high incidence categories of intellectual disabilities (ID), learning disabilities (LD) and emotional disturbance (ED) (Donovan & Cross, 2002). For ELs, however, disproportionality is evident in some geographical regions of the USA but the overall picture of disproportionality is still unclear (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar & Higareda, 2005; Pérez, Skiba & Chung, 2008; Samson & Lesaux, 2009; Sullivan, 2011; Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi & Park, 2006).

In California, a state with over 29% of its student population identified as EL, Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higareda (2005) found overrepresentation of ELs in the LD category in secondary programs, particularly in large urban districts (aggregated data of 11 schools districts, with approximately 64,000 students per district) (Artiles et al., 2005, p. 286). The authors reported that ELs with limited native and second language skills held the highest rate of identification in both elementary and secondary education in the LD and speech and language impairment (SLI) categories. English learners in immersion programs were also more likely to be represented in special education than ELs receiving different types of language supports.

In contrast, Perez, Skiba and Chung (2008) examined the relative risk ratio (RRR) for Latinos from a national database and suggested that Latinos were underrepresented in special education on a national level, with the exception of Nebraska (RRR= 2.85) (Perez et al., 2008). The authors posited that Latino under-representation in special education was due to the identification
process, unclear LD criteria, a lack of acknowledgement for natural language acquisition to occur and inappropriate use of assessment tools.

Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi and Park (2006) looked at the relationship between students’ ethnicity and their language minority status and how that relationship influenced their enrollment in special education, access to least restrictive environment and additional support services received in a southwestern district (N= 17,824) (Valenzuela et al., 2006). The authors reported that Hispanics and ELs were one third more likely to be represented in LD than white students, and reported overrepresentation in most disability categories in a district with a large population of ELs. By separating ethnicity from language minority status, Valenzuela et al (2006) were able to show a significant pattern in special education placement; Hispanic students are overrepresented in the LD category, but ELs are overrepresented in more categories: ED, ID, LD and SLI.

Contrary to Valenzuela et al. (2006), Sullivan (2011) found that districts in a Southwestern state with higher numbers of ELs had less disproportionality in the LD and SLI categories despite the fact that as a whole there was increasing overrepresentation of ELs in special education, particularly in LD and ID. However, Sullivan also reported that at a state level “ELs were increasingly overrepresented in special education and in each of the high-incidence categories of LD, SLI, and MIMR” (Sullivan, 2011, p. 324).

Samson and Lesaux (2009) investigated a large extant database (N= 2,470 language minority students, N=8,517 native English speakers) of students in grades K, 1 and 3 to examine the proportionality of representation in special
education, rates of identification and predictors contributing to EL students in special education. The authors reported that ELs are underrepresented in special education as compared to native English-speaking students up to the first grade. However, by grade three, ELs are overrepresented and identified at a higher proportion. Samson and Lesaux (2009) also reported that teacher ratings of student reading performance in kindergarten were stronger predictors of placement in special education in later grades than the child’s language minority status.

Overrepresentation of ELs in special education has the potential to be reduced if ELs’ educational needs for linguistically appropriate support services were provided through a more individualized approach. However, special education eligibility does not necessarily ensure better educational supports for ELs. Klingner, Artiles and Barletta (2006) reported that ELs who qualified for special education received fewer language supports, were instructed mostly in English and received more restrictive educational placements than their monolingual counterparts. Therefore, due to the continuous debate surrounding the over- and under-representation of ELs in categories of special education, there is a great need to examine closely the how academic decisions are made for ELs, particularly under the umbrella of Response to Intervention (RTI), an intervention framework that precedes the special education referral process.

One of the concerns has been differentiating an EL whose academic difficulties are due to their English learning trajectory, from an EL who does need additional supports due to a possible LD. Garcia and Ortiz (2004) grouped
language minority student learning profiles in three categories, type I, the natural
language development, type II, language versus disability and type III, language
learner at-risk for academic failure in order to illustrate the confusion that
permeates adequate decisions for ELs. In their description Type I are the ELs
who receive “misguided” supports by being placed in an immersion classroom,
Type II are ELs with potential difficulties (e.g. due to absences, other
environmental factors) who do not qualify for or receive additional supports but
would benefit from services to catch up to their peers; and Type III are ELs who
appear to truly have special needs yet may or may not be receiving appropriate
services. The authors suggest that staff’s inability to distinguish between these
three types of student profiles are the principal reason for the disproportionality of
language minority students in special education, “Failure to distinguish Types I
and II from Type III learning problems results in the inappropriate referral of
language minority students to special education and contributes to the
disproportionate representation of these students in special education” (Garcia et
al., 2004, p. 1). Therefore, through RTI, a framework that prescribes the use of
evidence-based curricula and assessment data collected thought the cycles of
progress monitoring (PM), such as curriculum-based measures (CBM) in addition
to the standardized assessments, teachers can make informed decisions about
what is currently working for their ELs (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter includes a review of the research literature related to understanding teachers’ interpretation of ELs’ assessment data for decision-making within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. The literature review starts with a global description of RTI and PM for ELs, continues with an overview of the more commonly used assessments within the PM cycle for ELs, including what is known about the predictive validity of these assessments. The assessment section continues with a discussion about CBMs, which is a type of assessment prominently used for PM, and what it is known about its current use with ELs. The inclusion of a section on assessments is critical since teachers working under the RTI umbrella are expected to interpret assessment results in order to make data-based decisions for their students.

In the subsequent section of chapter 2, I introduce the theoretical framework I selected to support my study: Cummins (1985) distinction between social and academic language (BICS and CALP), a distinction that permeates the discourse of EL performance in school, particularly when teachers refer to ELs’ language development by focusing on a portion of their oral language proficiency. The theoretical framework is followed by the research question.

Response to Intervention

After the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, states were able to select an early intervention framework in order to identify students at-risk for academic failure. RTI was proposed as an alternative to the IQ-discrepancy method of identifying students’ with learning
disabilities, which could translate into a faster way to respond to students’ needs than the “wait to fail” model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

RTI’s most ubiquitous components are often depicted as a pyramid consisting of differentiated tiers of support, with tier 1 as the starting point for all students, tier 2 focusing on small group instruction for students who struggled with the level of support/instruction at tier 1, and tier 3 where the most individualized support takes place. RTI can be implemented through the use of a standard protocol or a problem-solving approach, but over 96% of states in the country have adopted a problem-solving or mixed component (i.e. problem-solving and standard protocol) (Cavendish et al., 2012). Despite the differences that might exist among adopted approaches, some RTI components, at least according to RTI manuals available at states’ educational agencies, are common to all. Recommendations for the use of a universal screen at tier 1, an approach to differentiated instruction at all levels of intervention as well as the use of evidence-based research materials for instructional interventions (Cavendish et al., 2012).

Common to all tiers of the RTI framework is the cycle of PM, whereby a student’s academic growth is checked along recommended time intervals. The PM cycle includes assessing students, and collecting and analyzing data, in order to plan the next instructional steps. PM begins with the first tier of RTI, where all students are given a universal screener, and continues through each subsequent tier, with the initial screen providing an initial snapshot of students’ academic standing in comparison to the rest of the class on a standardized
measure. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) recommend the use of a “dual-discrepancy” to
determine responsiveness, where one examines “the slope of improvement and
final status” (Fuchs et al., 2007, p. 17). The authors suggest considering lack of
responsiveness if the student’s final status and slope of growth is one standard
deviation below their peers. However, local educational agencies can utilize
assessments and responsiveness protocols according to their individual needs.

Students’ progress is considered based on a method determined by the
state/school district to represent responsiveness. The typical timeline suggested
by Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) for assessing students under PM is 5-8 weeks at tier
1, biweekly at tier 2 and weekly at tier 3. They note, “[w]e recommend that
schools use universal screening in combination with at least 5 weeks of weekly
progress monitoring in response to general education to identify students who
require preventive intervention” (p. 16). However, as guidelines for assessments
and responsiveness recommendations have been suggested in the broader
literature, their implication and use must be interpreted carefully when
considering the particular needs of ELs.

For example, Klingner, Hoover and Baca (2008) recommend allowing for
referral timelines that respect the language acquisition process. In addition, Ortiz,
Robertson and Wilkson’ (2011) emphasize that student data must be collected
over time to allow for comparison with students’ own past performance and use
a, “progress-monitoring system that facilitates longitudinal examination of
students’ language and literacy development” (Ortiz, et al., 2011, p. 331).
Nonetheless, the selection of a particular way of measuring responsiveness has not yet been prescribed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007) and it is up to the school districts to decide.

Within RTI, PM has the potential to be the responsive arm that could meet the needs of ELs. Through progress monitoring, teachers can take a closer look at student’s data, such as multiple assessments points that include class work, informal observations, and plan instruction that can be tailored for adequate content and delivery to better fit the needs of the learner. This close level of monitoring and instructional delivery can help teachers understand their ELs’ progress and help them differentiate between when an EL is having academic difficulties due to their natural processes of language development, or if they are struggling due to a learning disability (LD), potentially reducing EL referral rates for special education (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010; Haager, 2007; Kamps et al., 2007). Since RTI’s cycle of progress monitoring is embedded within each tier, this practice of examining data from evidence-based curriculum and decision-making meetings are an integral part of the process.

However promising PM practices might be, educators need to clearly understand what type of data they are working with, how valid and reliable the data is, especially for their ELs (Barrera, 2006; Barrera & Liu, 2010; Macswan & Rolstad, 2006; Ortiz, Robertson, Wilkson, Liu, McGhee & Kushner, 2011). Since determining what is considered appropriately responsive for ELs within RTI is still an area of research in development (Linan-Thompson, Cirino and Vaughn, 2007), the recommendations based on the current literature are for teachers to
have a clear understanding of the stages of language learning, an understanding of disabilities, an understanding of the differences between the two, and adequate understanding of valid assessment tools (Haager, 2007; Klingner, Hoover & Baca, 2008; Linan-Thompson, Cirino & Vaughn 2007).

Progress Monitoring Assessment Data for ELs

In order to make adequate academic decisions including types of intervention and placement, teachers are recommended to consider multiple data points from multiple assessments in order to get a better picture of how a student is performing (Linan-Thompson, 2010). For ELs, an assessment in the students’ native language, in addition to an English language assessment is sometimes administered in order to provide the teacher with a data point to help make programmatic and tier movement determination/placement within RTI’s progress monitoring cycles (Finch, 2012; Klingner, Hoover & Baca, 2008; M-DCPS RTI MTSS Guide, 2012; Sanford & Brown, 2011). Nonetheless, even an assessment in the students’ native language, which can provide teachers with critical information about the students’ development otherwise not captured in English, might not always be a reliable indicator of the students’ true language skills in an academic setting.

Native language assessment. McSwan and Rolstad (2006) compared how students’ (N= 145) natural speech samples in their native language compared to their performance in two of the most commonly used native language assessments, the Language Assessment Scales – Oral (LAS-O) Español, and the Idea Proficiency test I-Oral (ITP) Spanish, to find out if these
commonly used assessments were valid representations of students' oral language performance in their native language. McSwan and Rolstad (2006) reported that “common native language tests such as LAS-O Español and the ITP Spanish do not correctly identify true native language abilities of ELLs” (p. 2322); with a discrepancy of 74 to 90% of students considered limited proficient in their native languages according to the LAS-O Español and the ITP Spanish versus 2% of students demonstrating high morphological errors in the contrasting natural language sample. Therefore, standardized native language assessments results, such as the ones provided by the LAS-O Español and ITP Spanish may be best interpreted under the context in which they were developed, meaning that teachers must understand that the language assessment is measuring academic language skills of the student which may not be a complete depiction of the students' language skills. McSwan and Rolstad suggest the need to understand the differentiation between “assessing a language” versus “assessing in a language” (p. 2324).

Cummins’ (1985) basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) framework helps to explain the possible mismatch. If these standardized language assessments are geared towards measuring academic language, and not just oral language skills/natural speech, then a great discrepancy between the students' performance may become prevalent. Since assessment results of ELs' native and English language proficiency are common recommendations in the literature for RTI decision-making (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Finch, 2012; Ortiz, Wilkinson,
Robertson-Courtney & Kushner, 2006), teachers must investigate whether results of the language assessments truly represent the linguistic capabilities of their students.

**Curriculum-based measures for ELs.** Another assessment commonly used throughout the tiers of RTI is the curriculum-based measure (CBM) (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). Curriculum based measures according to Deno (2003) are standardized procedures for testing students’ growth in the basic academic areas and are meant to be used as formative tool to moderate instruction in the classroom. Due to suggested predictive validity on state assessments for general education students, CBMs have become popular instruments of assessment (Yeo, 2010).

The oral reading fluency (ORF) probe is an example of a CBM which has been suggested to be predictive of reading comprehension (Burke, Hagan-Burke, Zou & Kwok, 2010). During an ORF, a students’ oral reading fluency is assessed in a timed prompt administered by the classroom teacher. The prompts are usually short and timed, and the teacher gets a snap shot of the students’ oral language fluency. Within an RTI framework, ORFs are commonly used as one of the assessment probes (Linan-Thompson, 2010; Ysseldyke, Burns, Scholin & Parker, 2010); however, the predictive validity of oral reading fluency probes for ELs has been not been determined (Crosson & Lessaux, 2009).

In a meta-analysis investigating the predictive validity of CBMs in state achievement tests, Yeo (2010) reported large correlations between CBMs and state achievement tests (.689) except for when ELs and students with disabilities
were present in the sample. When ELs and students with disabilities were present, the correlation coefficient was negatively related to the proportion of ELs (-.376), and students with disabilities (-.314) in the study samples (p. 419). The negative correlation, as explained by the author, could be due to the small sample sizes of students with ELs and students with disabilities in the studies.

Muyskens, Betts, Lau and Marston (2009) compared the predictive validity of CBMs and a selected state assessment for ELs in grade 5 (N=1,529) who were speakers of Spanish, Hmong and Somali. The authors reported that CBMs were predictive of end-of-the-year state assessment reading results. However, the predictive validity was a stronger indicator of later failure to meet proficiency, since 74% of the students in their sample did not reach the required reading proficiency level. Keller-Margulis, Payan and Booth (2012) investigated the predictive validity of a reading CBM (R-CBM) in Spanish and the Texas statewide achievement test in Spanish for 3rd and 4th grade students. Keller-Margulis et al. (2012) reported positive but moderate predictive validity, with a diagnostic accuracy greater than 70%, however, lower than the predictive validity of the English CBMs and state assessments.

In a similar vein, Ramirez and Shapiro (2007) investigated whether the CBM scores in Spanish of bilingual students in a transitional elementary bilingual program (grades 1-5) would correlate to the scores of the correspondent CBM in English, and also if the CBM Spanish scores in the fall could predict the scores of the CBM English in the spring. The authors used timed ORF probes in both languages to assess this relationship. Ramirez et al (2007) reported a significant
and moderately high correlation between English and Spanish oral reading fluency scores (.79, .73, & .71 in the fall, winter and spring) for all grades, except 4th. The authors also reported that Spanish oral reading fluency in the fall was highly predictive of English reading fluency in the spring, accounting for 68.6% of variance in regression model. These findings support one of Cummins’ (1984) hypotheses, the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP), which posits that a cross-language relationship can facilitate the transfer of skills from one language to the other.

Wiley and Deno (2005) investigated the predictive validity of fluency assessments for English language learners considering ORF alone or in conjunction with a Maze probe. The authors investigated whether adding an additional measure of reading comprehension and decoding such as a timed maze to an oral fluency probe would increase predictability of reading success for ELs, particularly since teachers reported to the authors that many of their ELs could recall words but did not understand what they were reading. The results did confirm the authors’ prediction that a maze probe, the second most commonly used CBM, added to an ORF would increase the variance accounted for scores of their standard assessment, but those results were only true for English-only speakers. For ELs, the maze probe did not increase correlation with reading performance on the standardized test. According to Wiley et al (2005), oral reading fluency separately from the maze was a better predictor of reading success for ELs. Therefore, depending on the assessment, or combination of
assessments being use, the outcomes need to be carefully understood as to how they relate to ELs before decision-making takes place.

Riedel (2007) investigated the DIBELS’ sub-tests predictability of reading comprehension for students in first and second grade. Although the author had a large sample of students from an urban center for his study, (N= 1,518), only 59 of the students were ELs. According to Riedel (2007), DIBELS ORF subtest was the best predictor of first-grade (80% correct classification) and second-grade (71% correct classification) reading comprehension than any other subtests, and was an especially strong predictor for the ELs included in the study. Riedel demonstrates that when comparing two groups who performed well on the ORF, significant differences existed between their vocabulary knowledge. However, the author does not mention for which students this difference was noted, missing information that could potentially explain the strong correlation between ORF scores of ELs and predictability of reading success.

Linan-Thompson’s (2010) analysis of the literature suggested that ELs students’ oral language proficiency was not a robust predictor of their performance in phonological or oral reading fluency assessments in early elementary years, and suggested increased time between assessments, or the use of alternatives assessments in addition to the universal screener to help determine appropriate next steps. Barrera and Liu (2010) also discussed some of the challenges in using CBMs for ELs. The authors explain how CBMs, or general outcome measures (GOM), should be used as formative measures to assess the delivery of instruction, not instruction itself. Barrera and Liu (2010)
questioned the use of ORFs, one of the most commonly used CBMs, in helping
differentiate if an EL has a language delay, a learning disability or just limited
English proficiency. Since ORF probes have been used to collect data and
assess student progress during the RTI process, educators might use the results
to aid in the decision making process for ELs. However, Barrera (2010) explained
the dangers of relying on these assessments for such high-stake decisions: “One
cannot know from the data whether fluency and accuracy scores result from lack
of reading experience, language, content experience, or suspected disability”
(Barrera, 2010, p.274).

Barrera (2006) presented Curriculum-Based Dynamic Assessment (CDA)
as an alternative method of assessment to CBM, since CDAs might help
educators differentiate between ELs with a disability (LD) and ELs with limited
English. Based on the work of Feurestein (1986), Barrera (2006) justified the
selection of CDAs since this assessment protocol is not stagnant, and provided
information about the learners’ potential versus their existing knowledge, “[t]his
approach examines a student’s learning ability as a function of what the student
can do as she or he is being taught, rather than on what the student does or
does not already know” (p. 147). Barrera reported that teachers were able to
differentiate the work samples of ELs with LD, ELs with limited English and
bilinguals proficient in English in 13 of the 17 measures presented. However,
when the authors analyzed each student’s work sample, the distinctions between
the different groups of students were not always clear. One difference was that
bilinguals proficient in English outperformed ELs with LD and ELs with limited
English even if their work sample showed a pattern of less notes than those of the other groups. An explanation provided was that efficiency and not volume of notes supported those learners. Barrera (2006) also reported that ELs with LD were exposed to less keywords than the other groups of students, perhaps the lack of exposure translates into the performance difference. The author posits based on the results of his study that “an important variable in differentiating students with limited English proficiency (LEP) and LD from their peers with LEP only may rest on whether these students are able to comprehend sufficient vocabulary” (Barrera, 2006, p.152). Hence, selecting an appropriate CBM is a decision that must carefully be examined.

The Florida Department of Education enlisted the BUROS center to conduct an evaluation of a commonly used CBM and a reading assessment battery developed for the state of Florida. The report from 2010, “Evaluating Reading Tests for the State of Florida: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, 6th Edition (DIBELS) and Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR)”, provided technical information regarding standardization, scoring issues, validity and reliability for both assessments. According to the report, DIBELS was positively correlated to the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment – Sunshine State Standards (FCAT-SSS) and the Stanford Achievement Test 10th edition (SAT-10) scores in Grade 3. No significant predictive bias for subgroups of students was found after DIBELS’ predictive validity and calibration and cross-validation of samples were compared to the sample of students in Florida. Similarly, Buck and Torgesen (2003) reported
significant correlation between ORF scores and reading FCAT-SSS (R = .70, p < .001), with no significant differences in ORFs’ correlation to FCAT-SSS based on subgroups of students.

While DIBELS reports did not indicate issues with validity considering ELs, a review of DIBELS psychometric properties by Goffreda and DiPerna (2010) suggests that a gap in the research with language minority students might be an issue, “[a]dditional studies are necessary to address the technical adequacy of DIBELS scores for students from specific racial and ethnic groups, as well as English language learners” (Goffreda & DiPerna, 2010, p. 480). Teachers must still use caution when interpreting the results of DIBELS with ELs, since only a few studies with small EL samples have demonstrated its predictive validity for this group of students, yet an EL’s ability to perform on an ORF might not predict their ability to perform in a reading comprehension test.

Florida assessment in reading (FAIR), the second test evaluated (BUROS, 2010) is an assessment battery comprised of multiple probes for pre-reading and reading skills. FAIR components in Kindergarten to second grade are: Broad Screen (which encompass letter naming & sounds, phonemic awareness and word reading); Broad Diagnostic Inventory (listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and spelling); and the Targeted Diagnostic Inventory (which assesses skills from print awareness in kindergarten all the way to multisyllabic word reading in second grade). And in grades three to twelve: Broad Screen (reading comprehension); Broad Diagnostic Inventory (mazes and word analysis); and Informal Diagnostic Toolkit (phonic screen inventory, ORF,
academic word inventory, lexile passages, scaffolded discussion and templates) (RTI/MTSS Guide, MDCPS, 2012).

It is important to note that all elementary students in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) are screened with the FAIR in every tier of RTI (RTI/MTSS Guide, M-DCPS, 2012). While my search did not yield any articles that addressed FAIR and ELs, FAIR’s K-2 technical manual reported issues of predictive validity for the FAIR’s Broad Screen in grade 1 for Latinos, “when examining Latino students at AP 1, a statistically significant interaction existed, suggesting that a differential prediction of risk on the SAT-10 existed for Latino and non-Latino students as a function of performance on the Broad Screen. Additionally, significant interactions existed at AP 1 between risk status and EL as well as between risk status and FRL at AP 3” (p. 32). The practice of using FAIR results within RTI for ELs then becomes problematic, considering the issues with predictive validity reported above.

BUROS (2010) also reported a significant (P= .06) interaction between risk status and Latino/non-Latino students, which questions the validity of the predictive scores of FAIR’s Broad Screen Component on the probability of reading success for students in grade 1. The report states “results raise concerns about the utility of the FAIR in Grade 1, especially for Latino students who also may be learning English” (BUROS, 2010, p.49). Therefore, considering the issues of predictive validity, particularly for CBMS, which may or may not have been assessments selected considering ELs’ needs, ELs’ teachers must be able to interpret assessment data with critical eyes.
Reading Intervention for ELs within RTI

Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater and Cirino (2006) examined the response of ELs considered at-risk to an intense reading intervention program. Students’ scores were measured before and after the intervention on subtest of the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery-Revised, as well as based on a first 5 words of an experimental reading list. An intensive reading intervention with a protocol of 50 minutes of daily intervention for a period of 7 months was given to experimental groups in classes taught in English and in Spanish. Responsiveness was measured by a score of 85 or above in the Word Attack and Passage Comprehension of the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery-Revised. The authors reported all but one student (N=31) who participated in the experimental group in Spanish did not meet the team’s responsiveness criteria by the end of grades 1 and 2. In the English experimental group, all but two students (N=22) did not meet academic criteria at the end of first grade, and all but one at the end of second grade (N=18). The success rate was attributed to the use of “explicit, extensive and intensive interventions” (Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater & Cirino, 2006, p. 397). Nonetheless, Linan-Thompson et al., (2006) cautioned that the measures used did not include a fluency/timed component that could have reduced the number of students meeting the responsiveness criteria, as a limitation to their study.

In a follow-up study, Linan-Thompson, Cirino and Vaughn (2007), examined how a timed fluency component would impact ELs responsiveness to the initial intervention. When ELs fluency scores were included, 75-80% of the
students in the intervention group did not meet the responsiveness criteria, as compared to 97% responders in the initial study. Nonetheless, however difficult it might be to determine ELs’ responsiveness to an intervention module based on a fluency measure, Linan-Thompson et al. (2007) results offer an alternative to determine responsiveness: using the discrepancy slope approach to measuring responsiveness of English language learners, as compared to a similar sample of students in the same school district, they were able to make a prediction of student's success at the following year's performance. Therefore, these findings point to how students with similar characteristics could serve as predictive comparison measure, which would help teachers make sense of ELs responsiveness to intervention within RTI.

Kamps et al. (2007) also investigated how 1st and 2nd grade ELs and native English speakers respond to a tiered intervention reading program. The authors reported that students receiving tiered intervention, in a small-group setting, with a direct instruction approach (particularly for ELs) had significant mean differences in their Nonsense Word Fluency and ORF scores of the DIBELS versus students receiving the balanced literacy approach. Therefore, while more intervention research to determine ELs' adequate responsiveness to RTI is necessary, the current available findings support an RTI tiered approach (Kamps, et al. 2007) in which explicit, systematic, direct instruction is used to support ELs’ academic growth.
Theoretical Framework

Teachers’ responsibility under RTI extends beyond delivering systematic, evidence-based direct instruction recommended. The teacher must also analyze PM data to determine academic progress and intervention steps. The difficulty, aforementioned, is that many of the assessments used to measure content knowledge, such as CBMs, also measure language skills, creating a confounding scenario that can hinder the validity and adequate interpretation of the assessment results. While teaching staff may not always possess the decision-making power in the selection of assessment instruments that will be used with their students, the responsibility of adequate interpretation of those assessments data and academic decisions are thrust upon the teachers. In addition, teachers working with ELs must filter the data through their knowledge of second language acquisition development.

One of the most basic frameworks in understanding second language acquisition was first introduced by Cummins (1979). He described a distinction between BICS and CALP to help explain why some students who sounded proficient in a language underperformed in school. Cummins (1985) describes BICS as “the manifestation of language proficiency in everyday communicative contexts” (p.137) and CALP as “the manipulation of language in decontextualized academic situations” (p.137). While several models and iterations of the framework have been proposed, the basic premise remains the same: social language will emerge faster than academic language proficiency, which can take 5-7 years (Cummins, 2000). This 4/5 -7 year time-span denotes the typical
development of students’ CALP and has also been supported by evidence-based research on student academic language development (Collier, 1987; Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000).

Nonetheless, critiques of Cummins BICS/CALP framework exist. Aukerman (2007) questioned the distinction of academic and social language, and suggested that educators should collapse the two since she feared teachers will wait for students’ academic language to develop before they offer more challenging material. Another critique comes from the underlying deficit value laden view of academic language at the expense of social language presented by Ernst-Slavit and Mason (2011). Ernst-Slavit and Mason (2011) posit that the distinction suggested by Cummins further exacerbates this hierarchical view of language, favoring CALP over BICS. Cummins (2008) responded to many of his critiques by suggesting that the difference between BICS/CALP was intentionally left vague, since there is overlap in the development of both, and adds that the BICS/CALP distinction was not put forth as a sole theory of language, but as a framework to be interpreted in the context of the classroom, and to help support the development of students who are acquiring a language yet might be deemed fluent in a language they have not mastered academically. Regardless of the hierarchical assumptions attributed to the BICS/CALP framework, data have suggested that early removal from language supports is detrimental to academic progress of ELs (Hakuta, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Unfortunately, ELs are often exited from language support programs without additional scaffolding supports early in their academic career and without
much consideration to the adequate time frames for academic language to
develop. This lack of attention to academic language needs has negative
consequences for ELs who need more, not less, language supports (Orosco &
Klingner, 2010). Thus, the understanding of a BICS/CALP distinction, and its
practical ramifications for ELs, continues to be relevant amidst the adoption of
this intervention framework.

As presented above, adapting RTI to meet the needs of ELs is not a
simple and formulaic process. Considerations have to be given to students'
language development over time (Ortiz, 2011). In addition, opportunities should
be afforded to select valid, reliable and culturally sensitive assessments
(Klingner, 2008) as well as making sure the teacher is knowledgeable and
receives proper support in understanding the interplay of variables (e.g.,
adequate assessment, sound evidence –based educational practices, language
development and second language acquisition knowledge) that can affect the
ELs academic development (Orosco & Klingner, 2008; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008).
While the task is not simple, given the recommendations suggested in the
literature, RTI could possibly become a supporting mechanism that makes a
difference in ELs’ academic success. However, for that to happen, much of the
success of RTI will depend on the ELs’ classroom teachers’ ability to adequately
assess and interpret assessment data, filter the results through the lens of a
second language acquisition process and decide on the best instructional course
of action for the student. Much of RTI’s success for ELs relies on the expertise
and skills of their classroom teachers, thus, it is critical that we understand,
particularly at the core of decision making, how ELs’ classroom teachers are interpreting PM data. Therefore, this study addresses the research question, How do elementary teachers of ELs interpret ELs’ progress monitoring data in reading for tier movement during the decision making process within RTI?
Chapter 3: Methods

I selected qualitative methods of data collection and analysis in an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the academic decisions teachers make for ELs within an RTI framework. For Strauss and Corbin (2008), a researcher selects qualitative methods in order to reach an understanding of how things are done based on the participants’ experience: “the desire to enter into the world of the participants, to see the world from their perspective and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge” (p. 16). In order to gain access to teachers’ rationale for decision-making, I used semi-structured interviews and observations for data collection and a grounded theory approach for analysis.

Through a qualitative approach I was able to tap into the “individual’s point of view” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 12), such as ELs’ teachers’ views of their student data, information that would not otherwise be evident through a report. Therefore, a qualitative methodology afforded me the opportunity to reach the “inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed though and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.12). This ability to get closer to the participants was critical considering how teachers working with ELs deal with a multitude of instructional complexities. ELs teachers have to juggle adjusting instruction to the level of schooling and language exposure of their students at arrival in their classroom, having to negotiate adequate access and training to specific EL materials and assessments, and having to negotiate access to supports in school, such as a
pull-in/push-out ESOL teacher. In addition, ELs’ teachers are also responsible for administering, scoring and interpreting assessment data and filtering the data through their knowledge of second language development in order to determine if their students are progressing. Therefore, in order to fully capture some of the underlying factors that influenced the academic decisions teachers make for ELs within RTI, I used a two-pronged qualitative approach to data collection, in which observations and interviews were employed.

Setting

My dissertation was drawn from a larger 3-year research study, “Systematic Mixed Methods Applied to Response to Intervention” (Harry & Cavendish, 2010-2013) that sought to understand the early adoption of RTI in two of the original 30 schools that were low performing and served culturally and linguistically diverse students in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS). Based on the early findings of the original study, it became clear that there were challenges accommodating ELs needs within RTI. Therefore, I decided to continue investigating this challenge by trying to understand how teachers were making decisions for ELs within RTI.

I selected Panther Elementary, which is a PK-5 school in M-DCPS with a high number of ELs that had also received 2 years of targeted support in RTI prior to the study. The additional support is described in Panther’s 2009-2010 school accountability report:

“Our school has been designated as one of the Student Teacher Support Team (ST2) Model schools, and as such, we emphasize the use of ongoing progress monitoring and focused interventions to target professional learning that meets the specific instructional needs of our
students. The model provides an effective mechanism that based on data identifies student needs and promptly delivers student interventions as well as job-embedded professional development targeting these needs” (p. 9).

The selection of an ST2 school was important since RTI served as the contextual scenario for my study. I selected a school that was one of the original 30 to receive support for early adoption of RTI.

**RTI protocol.** The protocol for RTI implementation in M-DCPS is described as a problem-solving approach. The key components are 3 tiers of intervention, with a prescription for evidence-based instruction delivered through differentiated instruction at every tier. PM and an integrated data collection/assessment system are ongoing. At Tier 1, core instruction is delivered and PM is guided by the multiple components of the FAIR and ORF (see above). At Tier 2, the intervention is delivered through a pre-packaged program (in the time of the larger study and at Panther elementary, the program selected was Voyager), in which students work in small groups according to their reading skill needs, and PM is checked through components of the FAIR and the program’s probes. Students who do not respond to Tier 2 and need additional supports are then recommended to receive more individualized instruction through Tier 3, intended to be delivered individually or through a small group of students in order for instruction to be “more explicit and intense” (RTI/MTSS Guide, MDCPS, 2012, p. 7). Table 1 depicts the student demographic of Panther elementary and the demographic of students in M-DCPS. Panther has a higher percentage of Hispanic and ELs students than the district.

Table 1
### Participant School Demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Black/Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>White/Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Other</th>
<th>ELs</th>
<th>FRDL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panther</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDCPS</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>355,268</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Participants and Recruitment

According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) purposive sampling is used when “information-rich” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 178) participants are selected based on their importance to the study. Since my aim was to understand how teachers interpret progress monitoring reading assessment data and make decisions for ELs within RTI, the participants in my research study needed to be ESOL certified teachers immersed in RTI practice working with ELs. For Bryant and Charmaz (2007), purposive sampling is achieved when “participants are selected as indicated by the initial analysis of interviews. These interviews reveal how participants themselves partition the emerging phenomena” (Bryant et al., 2007, p. 235). For the authors, purposive sampling should also be used as the sampling method after “trajectory is identified” (p. 237), and since my dissertation is a derivate of a larger RTI project, this method of sampling fit my study well.

For participant recruitment, I visited the school and left my contact information with a copy of the consent forms with the secretary at the main office. The assistant principal contacted me via phone and we scheduled a meeting. During our initial meeting, I asked permission to contact the ESOL certified teachers working with ELs for interviews, and to observe RTI data-based decision meetings for ELs in order to better understand the process in the school.
The following week, the assistant principal forwarded an email to all teachers in the school introducing the study and sharing my contact information and instructed interested teachers to get in touch directly with me. Three teachers replied to the email directly. The additional 5 teachers were recruited individually during my site visits.

According to the Florida Department of Education, to become endorsed in ESOL a teacher must complete the following coursework:

“Fifteen (15) semester hours in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) to include credit in each of the areas specified below:
(a) Methods of teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL),
(b) ESOL curriculum and materials development,
(c) Cross-cultural communication and understanding,
(d) Applied linguistics, and
(e) Testing and evaluation of ESOL (http://www.fldoe.org/edcert/rules/6A-4-0244.asp)”.

Inherent in my study question and sampling selection, was the assumption that by interviewing teachers with exposure to second language acquisition theories (via the certification process), this knowledge would surface in their practice and in the rationale for the interpretation of assessment data and decision making for ELs.

The assistant principal granted me permission to attend pre- and post-student study team (SST), which are meetings conducted by a multi-disciplinary team designed to discuss the progress and next steps for students who are struggling academically. Under RTI, SST meetings are recommended to take place as students get referred for tier 3 interventions. Permission from the district had been previously obtained since this dissertation is drawn from a larger study.
An IRB amendment was approved adding the participants. At the end of my study, I had nine interviews with eight elementary certified teachers currently working with ELs, including the designated ESOL teacher and 1 interview the school’s assistant principal (AP), who is the point person for RTI, and also ESOL certified. The grade level, ESOL level of students, type of teaching certificate, years of teaching and level of education of the 8 teachers interviewed are included in Table 2.

Table 2

Panther Teachers’ Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Grade Assigned</th>
<th>ESOL Level Range</th>
<th>Ethnic Background of Students</th>
<th>Teaching Certificate</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 - 4</td>
<td>AA Haitian Latino</td>
<td>1-6 ESOL</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 - 4</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1-6 ESOL</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>AA Haitian Latino</td>
<td>1-6 ESOL</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 - 4</td>
<td>AA Haitian Latino</td>
<td>K-6 ESOL</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3/4</td>
<td>3 - 4</td>
<td>AA Haitian Latino</td>
<td>1-6 ESOL Spanish (k-12) Reading (k-12)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 - 4</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>K-6 ESOL</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 - 4</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1-6 ESOL</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>BS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>AA Haitian Latino</td>
<td>1-6 ESOL</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures

Semi-structured interviews. I was interested in understanding how teachers interpreted assessment data within PM and made academic decisions for ELs under RTI. Therefore, I selected teachers with ESOL endorsement to interview. I hypothesized that these teachers would have had a minimal level of exposure to the topics of second language acquisition, and that I might observe that knowledge put to practice in their decision-making process.

My second assumption was that as a consequence of being a teacher in one of the first schools to adopt RTI in M-DCPS, these teachers would have had a minimum level of experience with RTI, and would therefore have developed a basic understanding of the RTI process, which could facilitate their answering of my RTI specific questions. My third assumption was that through semi-structured interviews and meeting observations I would be given a window of understanding to how the teachers were making academic decisions.

Interview questions. With the help of my committee I developed three sets of interview questions for this study. The Initial Interview Guide, with 8 items (Appendix A), was created to collect basic implementation data on the RTI process and procedures from key personnel responsible for RTI implementation at the school. This set of questions was based on the experience from the larger RTI project with the additional RTI schools. The Teacher Questionnaire, with 8 items (Appendix B) was the interview designed for the ESOL certified staff, covering basic demographic information and classroom make-up information. The Semi-structured Interview Guide, with 16 items (Appendix C), also designed
for ESOL certified teachers, and consisted of the items that addressed the core questions of my study, such as, “Describe some of the academic challenges the ELs you are working with face? What are the factors that you think contribute to those challenges?”

**Observations.** For the observation notes, the quality guidelines suggested by Brantlinger et al. (2005) are: 1) “appropriate settings and/or people are selected; 2) sufficient time is spent in the field; 3) researcher fits into the site; 4) researcher has minimal impact on setting; 5) field notes are systematically collected and; 6) sound measures are used to ensured confidentiality of participants and settings” (p. 202). I observed meetings in which ELs were being discussed in the context of RTI.

**Familiarity with context.** I visited the school 12 times between December 2013 and March 2014, in which time I interviewed teachers in grades 1, 2, 3 and 4. I was also able to meet the full administrative and student support service team, comprised of Panther’s social worker, school psychologist, speech pathologist, special education teacher, TESOL teacher and the AP’s secretary. During the observations I sat at the end of the table and used a small notebook to take notes discreetly. I also made sure that my notes were typed clearly after I exited the meetings, while the information was still fresh in my mind. I did not write down names of any of the participants in my typed notes.

**Quality indicators.** In order to ensure quality of the process, I followed the quality indicator guidelines put forth by Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach and Richardson (2005) for qualitative studies. Since my method of data
collection had two-components, interviews and observations, I followed the quality indicator protocol associated with each mode.

For the interview section, the guidelines are 1) “appropriate participants are selected; 2) interview questions are clear; 3) adequate mechanisms are used to record and transcribe interviews; 4) participants are represented sensitively and fairly in the report; and 5) sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 202). I used purposive sampling methods to ensure that the teachers I was interviewing had EL students, and were working under an RTI framework. I carefully drafted and selected interview questions that mapped onto my study with the support of my dissertation committee (see appendices A, B & C). I used a voice-recorder with permission from the teachers to ensure that I captured their responses verbatim in the answers. I sent the interviews to be transcribed and I double-checked each transcript to ensure accuracy of the work. And as I was coding the data, analyzing and writing the findings, I tried to keep the perspective of the teacher I interviewed in mind in order to portray them under the best possible light, since it was important to capture their voice. For guideline 4, I ensured that the name of teacher being interviewed was not shared during the interview or in the transcription. Additionally, teacher and school names have been changed to ensure confidentiality of staff. Interview audio files and each transcript have been uploaded to a secure, password protected drive, as have the signed consent forms signed by each participating teacher.
**Researcher perspective.** It is important to note that I had to be cognizant entering the school, that as a former bilingual public school teacher, I would be negotiating both *emic* and *etic* perspectives while on site (Fetterman, 2010). On one hand, my past experience as a bilingual elementary teacher working with ELs aligned me with the group of teachers I was interviewing and observing during the meetings, on the other, my current state as a Ph.D. candidate/student-researcher coming from the University of Miami, clearly put me in the *etic* category. I was a new face in “their” school “peering” into their school culture and practices. Therefore, I understood my need to closely monitor my “reactions” during the meetings.

**Analysis**

The semi-structured interview questions outlined and the observations constituted the core of my data collection. Nine teachers (N=9), including a key administrative staff member, were interviewed and 4 SST meetings discussing next steps for ELs within RTI were observed. Interview data were transcribed and observation notes were typed and saved on the secure drive at the University of Miami. I coded and analyzed the data based on Charmaz’s (2010) approach to grounded theory methodology. Charmaz suggests coding every unit of meaning found in the data.

**Coding.** I began the coding process by attaching a code to each unit of meaning in the data. At the initial passage, after coding 9 interviews and 4 observation notes, I ended up with 649 open codes and 54 memos. As the coding process continued, I compared new codes to pre-existing codes in the
data and then had to decide whether to elevate, collapse or merge these units of meaning. I relied on the use of memos to guide my analytical process as I looked for a good fit between codes. This iterative process, known in the literature as the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), happened organically, as I saw a need for these “instances of meaning” to be joined, separated or eliminated.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) caution researchers that this coding hierarchy can actually happen simultaneously as the initial coding process begins. As researchers continue to compare codes and ask questions of the data in the process, we begin to see connections whereby a simple code can be brought up to a broader conceptual level. This may emerge at any point during the analysis, and was true during my process for some of the prominent codes even during my first pass through the data. While I started coding at each unit of meaning, and followed a system to elevate my codes, there were instances in which I knew a code captured a strong message from the data and would be elevated to a conceptual category from the start. Even towards the end of the data analysis, the fluidity of the process of elevating or collapsing data continued.

The fluidity of this process continued until the final stages of analysis.

**Coding support.** I conducted all my analysis by hand. I wrote the initial codes at the margins of my printed transcriptions of my 150 pages of typed interviews and meeting observations. After my first pass at the data, I counted 649 initial codes and 54 memos. As my process of analysis continued, I continued to compare, collapse and elevate codes, resulting in 125 open-codes
and a couple of budding conceptual categories. Each printed interview had a page with the initial codes that had pertained to the instances of meaning in that particular data set. I had to number the codes according to the interview number in order to keep the process systematic and organized.

Once that organizational process was finished, I went back to each interview with a master list of potential conceptual categories and compared, collapsed or eliminated codes. At each pass, I checked for codes that had stayed close to meaning of the data, this was done with the help of memos I generated during the coding process. As the end of this iterative process, I had 15 conceptual categories, were collapsed to 9. Three main themes emerged as the pillars for thematic statement.

I used Harry, Sturges and Klingner’s (2005) mapping process to guide my development of my conceptual categories and thematic statement when I was past the initial coding phase. The mapping schema helped to organize the conceptual categories, and provided clarity for the final analysis of the data.

Lastly, to ensure credibility, I relied on “researcher reflexivity” through the use of memos, self-disclosure of biases and assumptions throughout the coding and analyses, as well as “peer debriefing”, with 1 member of my cohort who coded 2 interviews at a conceptual level to ensure reliability (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 201).

The result can be seen in the conceptual map in Table 3, with the thematic statement at the top supported by the 3 themes, which are supported by nine conceptual categories that emerged from the open codes.
Table 3

**Conceptual Map**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Statement</th>
<th>Teacher agency for ELs is negatively impacted by the adoption of a standardized RTI framework, and influenced by their beliefs about language and parents.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conceptual Categories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTI and PM indicators</td>
<td><strong>Narrow scope</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language component</td>
<td><strong>T2 misalignment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent – agent/barrier</td>
<td><strong>Assessment frustration</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Findings

While there is support in the literature for RTI’s potential in addressing ELs’ needs through its multiple tiers of intervention and PM (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010; Haager, 2007; Kamps et al., 2007), the effectiveness of this framework is reliant on teachers’ delivery and interpretation of the data from the PM cycle, which drives the decision making process. Therefore, in order to address my question, which is an attempt to understand teachers’ rationale behind decision-making, I present the findings that emerged from the analysis including the thematic statement and each of the three themes and the nine conceptual categories that support it.

The thematic statement, “Teacher agency for ELs is negatively impacted by the adoption of a standardized RTI framework, and influenced by their beliefs about language and parents” is supported by three themes: 1) RTI and PM indicators; 2) language component, and; 3) parent – agent/barrier. While each theme is supported by distinct conceptual categories, the concept of teacher agency weaves the themes together.

Teacher agency, the most salient concept that surfaced from the coding process, was based on teachers’ views that ELs academic successes and failures were contingent upon parents’ ability to support students at home, not necessarily based on the work students were doing in the classroom. This "distance" between success/challenge and their teachers’ work was prevalent in the data and emerged as the weaving component that undergirds my thematic statement.
One of the first questions I asked teachers during the interview was what they thought were the biggest challenges and successes for their ELs, and to what they attributed those success and challenges. At the root of my question, was my hope to uncover teachers' use of their knowledge of language development in their practice. The responses I received, however, were different. According to the majority of the participants in my interviews, students' success and challenges were linked to the perceived level of parental support, and not to the time students spent in the classroom. With one exception, teachers shared that ELs’ challenges and success were dependent on the level of support they received from their parents, which for many teachers, was dependent on the parents’ ability to speak English, level of education and socio-economic background. Nevertheless, the data revealed that the RTI process at Panther was one of the components that influenced teachers’ sense of agency.

**RTI and PM Indicators**

The first theme in my conceptual map is RTI and PM indicators. Considering that RTI serves as the background to my study, it is not surprising that many codes and conceptual categories emerged in dealing exactly with its components, implementation, including teacher frustration with the process and the assessments used for PM. Under this theme, there were three distinct categories: narrow scope, which speaks to the administrative oversight and staff confusion with the process; T2 misalignment, which talks specifically about how this one tier of RTI is represented by a sole pre-packaged program and the issues related to that standard-protocol approach, and assessment/frustration,
another component of RTI in which teachers are required to administer and interpret multiple assessment results in order to decide on the next steps for the students.

**Narrow scope.** RTI training was provided to key administrators in the district through presentations and webinars. Those key administrators were then expected to train their own staff. Therefore, the rollout and implementation of RTI at Panther elementary was dependent on key administrators’ ability to pass down the information they received in their own training and keep the process flowing. While this trainer of trainers approach is time/cost-effective considering the size of M-DCPS, the brunt of the work, in trickling down the information for the teachers and the maintenance of the new framework ended up resting on the shoulders of selected personnel. At Panther elementary the AP, a bilingual Latina in her mid-forties, is the key administrator involved with EL concerns and RTI, since the principal does not speak Spanish. She has assistance from the psychologist and special education teacher who are also bilingual, and some support from the social worker and the speech pathologist assigned to her building.

During my interview with the AP, the difficulties herein in having few people carry the burden of training and maintaining a framework became apparent. One of the difficulties she shared, teachers’ confusion about the tiered levels of support, is embedded below:

… the principal, we’re, we’re, we’re pretty knowledgeable on the process, but when it comes down to the teachers, there’s still a lot of confusion on their part.
And that's where we find the big disconnect, when we come to a final SST, that teachers seem to think that because you moved to Tier 2 or because you moved to Tier 3, the other tiers stop.

There was also staff confusion about the role of RTI as a general education initiative, teacher confusion about the fact that they were already teaching under the RTI framework and that T1 was already in place in their own classrooms. While the AP was enthusiastic about her work, and willing to talk about how the RTI process was unfolding, during our interview, her frustration was evident, as the quote above illustrates.

According to M-DCPS' protocol, when students are not making progress within T2 of RTI, teachers must submit a "request for assistance" to the administrative team indicating that their student needs more support. This request must be accompanied with several forms that have captured student data throughout the modifications and supports that have been tried at tiers 1 and 2. The classroom teachers are the person responsible for filling out these forms, since they are the person delivering instruction the students. Once the forms are submitted, the SST team schedules a meeting to decide the course of action. However, at Panther elementary the "request for assistance" forms are completed by the AP. During our interview she voiced apprehension over students “falling through the cracks” as the rationale for taking on this responsibility in filling out the documentation, since she feared a fracture in the process either from teachers’ confusion with the forms, lack of action or lack of time:
So I just, take it upon myself. It's really the teacher's responsibility but I take it upon myself to do it.

I do it myself, like I said because of that, because I don't want-- this paperwork turns off a lot of people. And unfortunately the teachers, especially this year with the fact that we moved to Common Core for 4s, we've added a new series-- it's a lot on them. I don't want a student not to go through RTI because the teacher feels intimidated by the paperwork, and it's a lot of forms that need to be filled out. And along with that, Tier 1/Tier 2 Data Profile, when you get to a Tier 3, there's a Problem-Solving Worksheet that has to be filled out, and then there's your Student Support Plan that has to be filled out, and there's your Fidelity Checklist that has to be filled out. When you get-- when you get a case that's going to be open for evaluation, you have a folder this fat. It's a lot of forms.

So there's a lot paperwork involved with RTI.

While the AP’s decision to fill out the forms is well intended, as there are a number of forms associated with the request for assistance documentation and she wants to ensure there is oversight of the framework, by removing this step of the process from the hands of the classroom teacher, she could be contributing partially to the confusion in teachers’ understanding of the RTI process. Through the process of filling out the forms, teachers would have had to indicate students’ progress or lack thereof throughout the first two tiers of support and provide evidence with student data. Therefore, this process would force teachers to, at the very least, become familiar with the terminology of RTI and how the tiers and the PM are aligned to what they are doing in the classroom.

This example of administrative take over was also evident in collaborative portions of the process, where grade-level teams could have discussions about ELs’ progress and next steps. One of the interview questions asked teachers if they had opportunities to meet as a grade-level to discuss ELs progress in RTI.
However, collaboration and discussion about student progress were reserved for the times teachers met with administration. Below are four separate quotes from the second grade team relating this fact:

*I think we don't so much have it at the grade level between teachers, but we talk about it with the administration for sure.*

*Yeah, with the administration definitely yes.*

*Team members, with the 2nd grade teachers - not quite. But I do have conversations with the administration. I mean I do have to talk to the bilingual teacher, which is Mr. L. You know, he has a lot to do with the CELLA testing and the level that the children are at. And then I have conversations with the Assistant Principal and we try to look at the data and all of the numbers and see if there's something that isn't quite, you know, adding up.*

*To be honest with you, not this-- this time around.*

Below is another quote to highlight how controlled the discussions and decisions are:

*Okay, I'm gonna be honest: everything we've done this year, assessment-wise, not, not my classroom - but OPMs, Voyager - we have to take it and submit it to the office.*

*That is our new policy at our school, because we've had so many issues with people that have students that are in the RTI process that have dropped the ball, not done what they were supposed to do, not kept current data, and then when you go back to try to do the next step, Tier 3, they weren't doing any of the things, and then--*

While the teacher is aware of why the process is controlled, as she shares how other people have failed to submit the adequate paperwork, she begins her statement with *"I'm gonna be honest"* which probably indicates the way the process is intended to be is different from how it is happening.
Therefore administration’s attempt could be potentially fostering a culture of dependence in which the teachers’ responsibility to comply with documentation needed for RTI is removed, and as a consequence so is the staff’s opportunity to learn more about the process. This removal of responsibility could also be precluding teachers from feeling investment in the framework they are following.

Confusion about RTI’s primary purpose as a tiered framework of support for general education classrooms was also common. For many teachers, the RTI process “started” when a “request for assistance” was submitted in order to move a student from T2 to T3. Therefore, in teachers’ minds, RTI was still the precursor to special education and many teachers were not aware that what they had been doing in their classroom, or what they had been expected to do at T1 and T2, was in essence RTI. Below are several quotes selected to showcase the prevalence of this confusion.

In the first excerpt I had asked the teacher to talk about ELs’ movement within tiers. As she began to respond I noticed the confusion as to when RTI begins: “This is the end of the second nine weeks so, right after this we have to make a decision on-- to refer to RTI or not”.

Below is a similar exchange, which emphasizes how teachers equate the “beginning” of the RTI process with student movement from T2 to T3, and how many of the students in process are EL:

But recently we’ve had quite a few ELs-- I don’t know if I can put a number on it-- I believe it’s like 3-- 3 or 4 that have moved from Tier 1 to Tier 2. Well, not Tier 1 to Tier-- actually Tier 2 to Tier 3, where we’re gonna start
the RTI process with them. To see if perhaps we can kind of pinpoint where the problem is. Because I do have-- of my 17 students, I have in Tier 2 interventions, I have 11.

This confusion about RTI and special education, which comes through when teachers use the term “refer to” typically used for special education in the context of RTI has been previously documented in the literature (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Yet, this confusion continues to be prevalent. Another point of frustration shared by both administration and teachers was voiced when they discussed T3 implementation. While teachers seemed to understand that they needed to fill the request for assistance forms in order to discuss students’ movement to T3, the confusion at T3 emanated from schools’ ability to deliver this highly specialized intervention considering their resources. In the quotes below, the AP shared the recommended frequency for T3 and the limitations in delivering this highly individualized support, “Typically a Tier 3 intervention is not daily. It's between two and three times a week. We can't do it daily-- it's very hard, it's very hard because personnel-wise—“

The quote below is from a 2nd grade teacher, who understands why T3 cannot be delivered daily. In the excerpt, she is exasperated as she discusses her expectation to deliver T3 for only 10 minutes in the morning. This 2nd grade teacher also happened to be the teacher of the year for the school and one of the teachers I observed during a pre- and post- SST meeting:

I was told at the meeting, that I needed to do it from 8:25 to 8:35? 8:25-- actually is it 8:25? Technically -- I mean I'm here at 7:30, but. 8:25, that is when we have to -- look at my schedule. Yes, so from 8:25 to 8:35, which is 10 minutes, that's my intervention time. That's another part of my intervention time. So that was what I was supposed to be using for this. Which was -- is a very lengthy process just for me to read through the
passage. So what I was doing when I was working with this student was--she would come in early and I would pull her during that time.

The concern about delivery of T3 was also echoed by the TESOL teacher:

So, it's a big--it's a big issue. So far I know that the psychologist is doing Tier 3, and the reading coach is doing Tier 3 for a couple of kids. They pull them out for about 1/2 hour 2 or 3 times a week, and that's their Tier 3 intervention. And some teachers also are asked to do Tier 3, but I don't know how.

Therefore, with a narrow scope of deployment, in which the decision-making remained in the hands of administration, there was a sense of security that students will not be left out of the process, but on the other hand, there was staff confusion.

T2 misalignment. Voyager is a pre-packaged intervention program that represents the entire second tier of intervention (T2) in M-DCPS. While some teachers were not aware that the reading intervention groups they were teaching for 30 minutes, in addition to their daily 90 minutes language arts and 30 minutes writing blocks, was T2 of RTI, teachers were aware of issues with the program. Teachers voiced frustration with the lack of connection between students' performance in Voyager weekly probes, and students' performance in the classroom since the progress made during intervention was not reflected in students' classroom work.

While interventions should be targeted to ensure instruction is bridging the gaps in students' knowledge of a concept/skill and grade level expectation, teachers felt that students' progress in Voyager was not representative of actual student academic growth, since the same students continued to struggle with the same issues, even after months in the program. This concern with Voyager was
also prevalent in multiple instances of my data analysis, as most teachers echoed it during the interviews and the SST meetings I attended. The quotes below portray the concern expressed by multiple teachers:

So she’s able to, you know, get great scores on the Voyager checkpoints. But they’re also very basic. It’s a sound-- they give them three letter combinations and pick the combination of letters that says ‘eee’. You know. Well, there’s an ‘e’-- two e’s, there’s an ‘o’ and an ‘a’-- you know that that’s not gonna be it-- and then there may be an ‘i’ and something else. So, they’re kind of basic. She does well on them. But the portion where she has to do word reading, she continuously gets words incorrect.

So far, I don’t-- I don’t know with the Voyager teacher, because he might be making progress there, because it’s not an intense program. They focus on a lot of phonics, word blends, and combination of vowel sounds, and-- and the comprehension that it has it’s not as intense as a reading program.

While an intervention program should meet the students at their level of need, teachers still needed to interpret the results from these weekly probes along with data from classroom assessments to make sense of student progress. However, there was great discrepancy between student progress during intervention and what they were expected to be doing in the classroom, so much so that within the time frame in which teachers were expected to see progress, there was no crossover between Voyager and class work. Teachers were also concerned because it might have appeared that their students were making great progress when in reality when gains were not reflected in other assessments.

The second grade teacher in the quote below, shares how one of the students she is considering moving to T3 was actually performing really well in the Voyager probes:
For example, my girl, my girl who is in Tier 2 that's an EL, she scores in the 90s, 90 percents like every week. And the Voyager, because it's just sounds, words, but then when she has to read grade-level texts, that has new words and all this vocabulary that she doesn't know, and she has to answer questions on it, that's where she gets an 'F'. So, you know, even though it looks as if in the intervention she's doing really well, which is great for her, I mean-- that will show that she doesn't need to be referred to Tier 3, um, but she's still getting an 'F' on grade-level text.

Although most teachers in the interviews shared a level of frustration with Voyager, one teacher in particular did not. While I suspect that his perspective is different since he was not a classroom teacher, but a support teacher, that delivered intervention through the day, his opinion about the program was different from what the classroom teachers were sharing. Below is the negative case:

Well, I think it's a good program for some students. Because it teaches them specific skills on blending words, blending sounds, recognizing sight words - which is, building fluency. If they don't have the fluency they cannot read any passage. So I think it's-- if it's what the student really need, I think it should work. You know. Now when you have students are-- that you know, or that I know is not language or that they need different services, we have to do it anyways. Until they get phased into the program that they—

Yeah. I mean, we can tell-- we collect data; we have checkpoints. And then after the checkpoints I guess the administration is going to decide what to do next with the students.

Tier 2 is single program and the protocol for deciding which students will receive T2 interventions is based on a single assessment point; a score of 39% or below in the probability of reading success of the FAIR assessment (students in K through 2nd grade), or an FCAT score of 1, which is a level score constituting bottom 10% scorers (students in grades 3 through 5). This narrow use of
assessment data to determine student placement in T2 was shared by the AP, and echoed by all the teachers in the interview. They all knew the percentage

(39) used for placement in Voyager:

_Hmm-hmm. From a Tier 1 to a Tier 2, to move a student to a Tier 2 we basically use the FAIR data, or their FCAT scores. Any student that was a FCAT level 1, we put in, in Tier 2. Any student in FAIR, in the fall FAIR that scored 39% or below, we put 'em on Tier 2. And that 39% or below, we use from K through 2nd. For 3rd through 5th, we use the FCAT scores, and then we also look at FAIR – the maze._

_Any yellow and red bad-- no it's not any yellow, because the yellow band goes from 16 to 85, so, but um, it falls within the yellow and the red band that we put them in Voya-- well, in Tier 2._

Since administration used the results of those assessments administered 3 times a year to determine T2 placement, students ended up staying in T2 for many months at a time. My interviews started in December 11th of 2013, and many of Voyager groups that had been formed at the end of the previous school year were just being discussed during that time. Both second grade teachers echoed frustration with the length of the intervention process:

_Well the thing is that, we are very slow in putting students in Tier 3. Last year, I think only two or three cases were open for Tier 3. But I believe there were almost twenty referrals._

_The process is too slow. And there [are] always issues with data collections. Teachers are not collecting data, or not following the guidelines to-- on Tier 2, and-- there is always-- something happens, and they just have to start again the next year. So, it's a big-- it's a big issue._

This long period in T2 did not help teachers' understanding of RTI, as many equated this extended time with the typical wait time before a referral for special education testing. The quote below is from one of the teachers that had
explicitly shared that she did not know so much about RTI, and as she clearly indicates, perceived the framework as a deterrent:

> Because, we-- you know, the system-- we have to do so many things, before they actually test the student. And-- so all of this time is wasted. So I think the thing that is mostly working against them is the time. The time that it actually takes to get kids the assistance they need.

**Assessment frustration.** At Panther elementary teachers are expected to administer core summative assessments such as the FAIR in grades K through 5, in 3 different assessment periods (AP1, AP2 and AP3), the SAT (once a year) for students in K and 1, and the FCAT (once a year) in grades 3 through 5. In addition, EL students who are recent arrivals or have not exited the ESOL criteria with a score of 5 in the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment (CELLA) have to retake CELLA once a year. For students in T2, teachers must administer the day 5 and day 10 weekly probes that are part of the Voyager program. Teachers are also expected to assess students monthly with a “PM” which at Panther is a term used interchangeably with “ORF”, which is a one minute fluency probe extracted from the reading series McGraw-Hill.

In addition, teachers in the early grades also give their students a weekly cold read passage to assess reading comprehension, amongst smaller formative assessments for spelling, writing and vocabulary. Not surprisingly, when teachers were asked in the interview to discuss the assessments they used for PM and to explain how these assessments informed them about language development and next steps for ELs, teachers’ responses indicated varied levels of discomfort associated with the number of assessments they were expected to administer.
Some teachers shared their concern about the appropriateness of some of the assessments that they had to use. Other teachers questioned the validity of the assessment results as they compared those to student performance in their classroom. In the case of the CELLA, which is used to measure ELs’ progress in the stages of English language development in reading, writing and speaking, teachers’ mistrust was so prevalent that it yielded a code “True ELLs”, which is the term used by the staff to represent the mismatch between CELLA results and ELs actual representation of student’s ability in English. According to the teachers CELLA is a hard test and might have students as low performing when in reality they feel as if the EL has a higher level of English.

Below is an example of concern shared by a 2nd grade teacher, who was not certain about the developmental appropriateness of the assessments she had to administer to her students:

*I just, I think that it’s not necessarily developmentally appropriate, so I give it. And I’m fully behind it in front of my kids, obviously, I can't tell them I think this test is stupid (laughter), I don't like this test. I have to, you know, I get mad at them if they don't do it well, and I tell them they have to go back and underline, and we talked about it in class-- but inside of myself I think it's not developmentally appropriate.*

In the instance below, the TESOL teacher shared his concern with the emphasis on FAIR data, as he cast doubts about its predictive validity for student performance on the FCAT. He also shared how students’ ability to keep up with the reading series adopted by M-DCPS did not necessarily translate to performance on the FCAT. He also voiced the need to explicitly teach students how to answer FCAT questions, as he suggested that knowledge of the assessment content may not be enough for ELs, which comes back to the
concern of validity: Is the assessment measuring test-taking skills or content knowledge in reading? Below are two excerpts from his interview that illustrate this area of concern:

In the . . . schools they have a lot of data, but you know which one is more important, which one is the one that counts the most. You know. Some people go crazy about the FAIR. Yeah but is the FAIR data telling you how the student's going to be doing on the FCAT? Not really. I don't think so. You know.

Because when-- and even with the ESOL, when they-- they keep saying, you know, if the students can do McGraw-Hill - which is the new reading series - if they can do McGraw-Hill, they can do FCAT. But not really, because when you get to the questioning type of-- the type of questions that you have on the FCAT is a different-- is a different wording, on the questions. And-- and they have to actually learn how to do a test-- an FCAT test. They have to know what the question is asking them.

CELLA's reputation for being a difficult assessment was so prevalent that I observed an established culture of referring to the students as “True ELL”. In a school with a high percentage of ELs, the staff wanted to be able to differentiate the ELs they deemed proficient enough to handle the work in English from the ELs that were truly at the beginning stages of English language development.

Below are two different teachers sharing their views on the CELLA’s difficulty. The first instance was shared by the ESOL teacher, who happened to be the person in charge of the “SWAT” team, which was a group of staff members in charge of testing the entire school once a year:

Yeah. And it's basically a test that measures - to me - measures more comprehension than language knowledge. Because they have to understand the story in English. They have to respond in-- in-- respond in English in speaking and writing. So, it's a very comprehensive test to measure how much English you know.
The example below is from a teacher who was not as familiar with the CELLA, possibly because classroom teachers only receive a report from the assessment team with an ESOL level for each student, and are not part of the testing team. However, despite her lack of familiarity with the assessment the teacher was aware of its level of difficulty, and interestingly, her response yielded a code about assessment mistrust, but also non-agency, as it is clear that she removes herself from her students' performance on tests by putting the emphasis on what the student had or had not learned at home:

But from what I understand, part of it has to do with conversational-type questions, or how they would say a certain thing, you know, for example 'him' goes with 'he'. You know, the male kind of words and the female words and, you know. So I feel like those-- if they don't practice that at home, where they spend more time than in here, they may not get that.

FAIR assessment also had direct critiques from teachers. Below is an excerpt from a second grade teacher, who was frustrated with the disconnect between her students’ performance in the classroom and their performance in the FAIR assessment. This fracture in expectation and performance caused her to be frustrated:

Yeah. And I already went and started talking to my Assistant Principal about it because I was so frustrated. Because while I was doing the test with each student I said to myself, 'Yes, awesome. They're on the next-- like I can tell this is not what they read the last time, they're gonna do-- their score's gonna be so much better.' And then I went and printed the scores and it was just frustrating because they-- their percentage score, which is their possibility of, of whatever that is----went down. On everyone. Just went down. I mean even my kids that were in the green, it's all-- and that always happens with the second one because they raise the expectations of it, so even though they've all increa-- not all, because I had two that stayed the same, the two couldn't even read a passage; they had to have the passage read to them again. But everyone else had improved their reading level, so it was just so frustrating that, the-- the
score that you look at doesn't reflect that. The score that-- that puts them in the yellow or the red doesn't reflect that. So I was just so frustrated.

**Conclusion of RTI and PM indicators.** While teachers’ lack of agency is the most salient concept that emerged from the data, the concept does not exist in isolation. Throughout the coding process it became clear how the rollout and implementation of RTI in M-DCPS exerted pressure in teachers’ ability to fully participate in the process, from the selection of adequate interventions to the administration and interpretation of assessments and decision-making.

Teachers’ frustration and confusion with the framework seemed to impact their lack of agency. Being a participant in an RTI model with standard protocol in which a narrow scope of assessment data is used, and in a context in which teacher collaboration and decision-making ability is mediated by the administration, removed teachers’ autonomy to make decisions on behalf of their students. The layering of this rigid protocol in a school where most of the students were in the process of learning English, a condition in which flexibility in interventions is critical in order address content and language development, can shed light as to why teachers’ diminished sense of agency was such a prominent concept in my findings. Teachers’ beliefs about language influenced how they perceived their students, the parents, and their own ability to stimulate change within the RTI context.

**Language Component**

The dichotomous categories, language is an issue and language is not an issue, emerged as teachers pondered the role of language in the ELs’ academic development. This dichotomy in the perception of language was also seen as
teachers were asked about their own ability to differentiate between an EL who was struggling due to the a learning disability from an EL who was simply going through the process of having to learn grade level academic content and English simultaneously.

**Language is an issue.** Many teachers in the study believed that language wasn't the issue in their ELs academic struggle. However, for some teachers, the language issue was related to the students' proficiency in English. This came through in a few interviews in which teachers indicated that students who lacked proficiency in English did not “have a language.” This interpretation of language proficiency is clear in the excerpt of the interview with the 2nd grade teacher, who was Latina and fluent in Spanish. In the excerpt the teacher also makes use of the term “True ESOL” to indicate that this students’ level of performance on the CELLA is a reliable indicator of his ability in English:

> Because he's a true ESOL level 1-- he doesn't really have a language. And it's hard for me, in math, to say everything in English and Spanish, so I just ask the other person to translate, sit with him and translate. And that's what I do with him.

The following quote demonstrates that language is an issue because it helped to identify a student need for additional supports. Here the TESOL teacher shares that ELs’ lack of growth in the CELLA assessments, despite their ability to communicate orally, was a determining factor to detect lack of academic progress for a group of ELs that later on were placed in special education. So in this quote language is an issue, because through lack of progress in the English
proficiency assessment, the teachers were able to "catch" students who needed additional supports:

When I started seeing my groups in 3rd grade, I noticed that it wasn't language, because they all speak English. You know, they were just level 1s and 2s because they couldn't move up on their levels because of the test at the end of the year - the CELLA test. And I noticed there were-- there were-- it was a language issue, because they all speak-- they all spoke English. And then that's when we started doing all the referrals for, you know, Tier 2, Tier 3, and then finally-- some of them left the school, but most of them were placed into the ESE program.

The following excerpt is from a second grade teacher who expressed frustration with recommendations for students who were going through the process of language acquisition. She critiqued teachers who do not tap into students’ native language proficiency and default to labeling a student as low performing or in need of additional supports. For this teacher, language is clearly the issue because language development gets confused with the need for special education or higher tiers of intervention:

Um, I think (pause), that sometimes students who are English-language learners get pushed into-- I don't know, maybe because the teachers don't speak the language-- and that's not their fault, that they don't speak the language, because if we had children that were coming from Poland, or Czechoslovakia, or Africa or wherever is spoken another language then obviously we can't be fluent in every language, but sometimes I see when students have teachers that don't speak Spanish, then those students are just like considered that they can't do anything. That they're low performing, that they don't know anything, because the teacher's not able to see that they can do it in their native language, and so then sometimes I think they might get pushed into like an intervention group in their Tier 2 and their Tier 3 and get referred from ESE when really it was a language issue from the beginning.

Below is the quote from the only teacher in my interviews that responded to the question of challenges ELs faced with an academic based concern. She
also demonstrated knowledge of BICS and CALP as she explained the struggle
her students face with written language despite their ability to converse socially in
English. So for this teacher language is an issue, but the issue is with ELs’ needs
to acquire academic vocabulary, and not her students’ bilingualism:

*Mainly, it's the acquisition of academic language. A lot of them are able to communicate socially. But, when completing an assignment, kind of the language is lost on them. You know, words are not used the same way sometimes on written paper as we use them through having a conversation. So mainly their challenges are vocabulary. And even with cognates. They can be work to-- just this morning I had a child ask me, 'What does this word mean - dictionary.' And I said 'Dictionary? Dictionario.' It sounds the same in English and in Spanish. I mean, it's written almost the same. And she still was unable to kind of transcript from one language to the other. So really just the acquisition of academic-type vocabulary.*

*Language is not an issue.* This concept was also prevalent amongst the teachers I interviewed, often supported by a statement about the students’ ability to speak English well. Of note, this concept is tightly linked to the concept “telling the difference”. In the first quote, the classroom teacher explained how the academic struggles of ELs are not based on their language proficiency but on their socio-economic status (SES). For this teacher, EL students are placed in programs that stigmatize them unnecessarily:

*Because of the vocabulary deficit that's a socio-economic thing. Not a, ah, Spanish-language in the house thing. And so I think sometimes the ESOL kids get, I don't know like ghettoized in the way, into like an ESOL program that follows them when it really was never a language issue to begin with.*

This idea that SES is the external contributing factor to student struggle, not language, was also expressed by the first grade teacher I interviewed. In her
opinion, the students’ geographical location, which was used as a proxy for low SES, explains some of the issues:

*I think some of the factors are-- not only language-- I, I think that some of it could be language. But I think it's-- has to do with the geographical makeup of this area, and the type of clientele we're serving.*

She followed up by saying that regardless of the language she used in the classroom, students struggled to follow her commands. For this teacher, the deficit was inherent in the student regardless of their language dominance:

*Sometimes-- you know, it doesn't matter if I say it in English or Spanish – Sienta-te. Sienta-te - Sit, Sit - and they just don't follow through.*

In the following example, language is not an issue, not because this 4th grade teacher supports her claim by providing anecdotes of students’ ability to speak English, because for her, language is an asset. In the quote the teacher explained how she capitalized on ELs’ native language to teach them vocabulary.

She gave an example of the use of cognates and word parts to help students.

This teacher thought that language was not an issue because she cast students’ bilingualism in a positive light:

*The fact that they do have the Spanish as a second-- as a language that they can use, a lot of the base words, or root words, are Latin. So a lot of the times when they do come across a word they don't know, they switch over into their language to be able to figure out what the word is because there's a similarity there. So that works. Like the other day we were talking about something musical, and the word 'soloist' came out, and the- - and the non-ESOL kids were having trouble, and I'm like 'solo', and I looked at the ESOL kids: 'Think of your Spanish 'solo', what does it mean, que quieres. . . . it's solo', and they were like 'ohhh' -- and then one thing led to another and then the rest of them caught on. So having a second language because of the base words, like the root of words, a lot of times are similar and they're able to grasp meaning from that.*
In the instance below, the second grade teacher shared her concern for an EL with a score of 3 in the CELLA, who was not showing progress in the classroom. Despite his “ESOL” classification, the teacher believed that his struggle was not language based since according to her he is fluent in English. The quote below is representative of how the staff I interviewed at Panther elementary felt about many of their ELs:

“That it’s not a language, but we feel that it might-- might be, perhaps, a learning disability. Because he hasn’t met the-- like progressed in the ESOL level. And I know that-- to me, it's not a language thing. Because he’s fluent in English and he understands, and-- something else is impeding him from progressing, so we don't think it's language.

**Telling the difference.** Most of the codes that support the concept of “telling the difference” emerged from a question in my interview guide that asked teachers how comfortable they felt differentiating a child in the natural process of second language development from a child who has a learning disability. This question was grounded in my assumption that ESOL certified teachers would have awareness of the developmental process of second language acquisition. Here again I was hoping to capture some of the knowledge in how they answered the question.

Teacher responses were by the most part guided by their belief that if they could assess their student, either formally or informally, in their native language, they felt confident in their ability to differentiate between a learning disability and second language acquisition process. Below are selected quotes from five different teachers; the first three quotes are actually very similar, in which they suggest tapping into students’ native language for clarification.
In the first quote, this second grade teacher’s response indicated that she is familiar with some of the theories on language development. She talked about the language transfer and how if a student can demonstrate proficiency in certain skills in their native language, those skills will transfer to English.

So, yeah, basically if they’re able to respond to me in their native language in an intelligent way, then you know you can see that it’s a language problem, that it’s not, like, a process thing or they don’t understand. And then, some of them, like . . . who came-- I mean he can read-- he reads in his native language, so that skill is just gonna transfer. He needs a little bit of time for it to transfer, but if he knows how to read and write sentences, and he can explain himself and talk about a story in Spanish then he’ll be able to do it in English.

The quote below echoes some of the responses under “language is not the issue”. This fourth grade teacher shared that if you assess students in their native language and there is struggle as well, then that’s an indication of something more than the steps in language acquisition development:

And if you give them an assessment in their own language, and they cannot understand that either, it’s not really the language because they’re being assessed in their own language, too, so.

This third quote, the teacher shares a level of reservation about her “credentials” to make the distinction, but like the two teachers above, she mentions the use of the students’ native language as a gauge in helping determine the difference:

I don’t have the credentials, I guess, to kind of distinguish between the two, but I think once you’ve been in the classroom for a number of years, you can tell the difference between there being that gap in language. Especially when you’re able to speak their language. And in-- in their language, there’s still not much understanding of what it is you’re trying to say to them. I mean that’s a big indicator to me. Ah, you know if I ask you to do something in English, I
also say it in Spanish, because I have, you know, children that have recently got here.

The third quote is interesting as it differs from how most teachers replied to this question. For example, this teacher does not mention the use of the students’ native language as a resource, which could be because she does not speak additional languages herself. Another interesting fact comes from the assumption this teacher makes, in that by sheer placement of the student in an ESOL program, the student is supposed to progress.

Well, usually they've been in the ESOL program a long, long time. Which by the end of a certain amount of time, you can expect them to move from one level to another. If a child has been in one level for many years, and it happens because they were placed in ESOL usually in Kindergarten. And if they come in, and by 3rd grade, they haven't reached another level, there must be something else there, that they're struggling. So, you could usually tell.

**Conclusion of language component.** A few teachers viewed language, or ELs’ bilingualism under a positive light. One teacher saw the opportunity to capitalize on the students’ native language in order to learn new vocabulary in English. Another shared that students’ bilingualism will serve them well in the future, however, for many teachers students’ emerging English language was an issue. One teacher shared the exasperation of her colleague who has to teach beginning ELs. For the teachers that believed language was not an issue by suggesting that the struggling student, who did not make enough academic gains after 4 years receiving ESOL supports, the teacher disregards the time frame evident in the literature for ELs to develop academic English, which can range from 4 to 7 years (Collier, 2002; Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Therefore, as
language learning is a complex process so is the understanding and beliefs about how it affects students, even for teachers that have been exposed to courses in academic language development. Thus, language influences how teachers feel about their ability to teach their students. One teacher sees an opportunity for growth while others see it as a deterrent.

**Parent – Agent/ Barrier**

The third theme related to teachers’ beliefs about parents is a multilayered concept, since on one hand, teachers’ believed parents are responsible for students’ success as so much emphasis is placed on the home; on the other hand, they believed that parents who do not speak English or have enough education or economic means cannot help students succeed. Parents are then viewed as both the agent and the barrier to student success.

**Teacher agency.** The first quote is an excerpt from the interview with a second grade teacher in which she shared that parents’ ability to support students’ academic success is contingent upon on their ability to speak English, their level of education and economic means:

*I think one of the basic challenges is that at the house-- at home, they don't have anybody that could give a good example how English is spoken, so they're non-English speaking and not very well educated. So I think that's one of the biggest challenges that they have.*

*And their vocabulary is low, and they're not-- especially in this area, they don't get exposed to a lot of different experiences.*

*I've had students-- not this year but I've had students who have never been to the beach here in Miami. They're very limited in resources, so they don't expand beyond the neighborhood.*
In the following quote, a second grade teacher agreed with the dependency of student success on parental support, but unlike the teacher above, did not equate parents’ ability to provide support with their socio-economic status:

When-- once again, we refer back to the parents. When they have very good support at home, you see it in the classroom. That they always bring their homework, even if they’re low socio-economic, they get exposed to the books, they get exposed through different mediums that is not necessary monetary. So when you see that, and that the parents’ input in their education and participation in the school.

The following three quotes are examples of how these teachers perceived parents’ lack of English proficiency as the culprit for the academic struggles of ELs:

With the students that I do have, the majority of them that are EL that are still struggling come from homes where their parents are not English-speaking. So they go home and they are not able to work on home learning with their parent. They have no one to read to them in English. They don’t have anyone that they can read to. So that’s-- that’s a big issue.

So they’re going to have a difficulty with that. And reading comprehension, it’s gonna be difficult because they have no help at home. So that’s why I think a lot of our ESOL students are performing at the level they are. They don’t have that assistance at home.

Umm, so main challenges they’re working with mainly is home language. Their parents-- a lot of their parents, like my students, I can’t even talk to the parents one on one at all. We have to get an interpreter because a lot of their parents don’t speak English. So the main challenge is they have no one [at] home to assist them with their classwork.

Teachers in the last three quotes blamed non-English speaking parents as the responsible party for ELs lack of success in school even when they provided an example of school-based skills, such as reading comprehension, to illustrate lack of parental support. The number of instances in which parents, and
additional factors such as ELs’ level of English, were portrayed as the responsible entity for ELs’ challenges or successes in school helped to support absence of teacher agency as a significant component of the findings. From the 9 interviews and 4 meetings I attended, only once did a teacher respond to the question of student success with examples of reading strategies she was using to drive student success in the classroom.

**Family as the problem.** For the majority of the teachers in my interview, the responsibility for ELs’ lack success in school rested in the parents’ ability to support their child’s education. Below is an example of a second grade teacher that said that supportive parents made her life easier:

*I mean I think that there are students who come and they’re really motivated to learn the language and I think it comes from home that their parents are pushing them, like their parents are looking at their homework, making sure they’re doing it, they want to know how they’re doing in school, they’re coming and talking to their teacher, they’re involved in their child’s education and when you have a parent like that it makes your job easier.*

For most teachers the overarching belief was that parents were unsupportive because they did not speak enough English, their level of education was low and/or that they did not have the economic means to provide students with enriching experiences. In the quote below from a second-grade teacher, she touches upon every factor listed above to explain the EL’s academic struggle, the parent as the culprit for lack of academic success and the reasons why the parent cannot provide the adequate supports:

*I think one of the basic challenges is that at the house-- at home, they don't have anybody that could give a good example how English is spoken, so they're non-English speaking and not very well educated. So I*
think that's one of the biggest challenges that they have. And their vocabulary is low, and they're not-- especially in this area, they don't get exposed to a lot of different experiences. I've had students-- not this year but I've had students who have never been to the beach here in Miami. They're very limited in resources, so they don't expand beyond the neighborhood. And reading comprehension, it's gonna be difficult because they have no help at home. So that's why I think a lot of our ESOL students are performing at the level they are. They don't have that assistance at home.

The first grade teacher in the quote below, reinforces this notion as child/parent as the problem. She believed that the challenges for ELs are inherent, that these students are born with a delay:

But I think it's-- has to do with the geographical makeup of this area, and the type of clientele we're serving. In the... population, I don't think that children have a lot of parental support and are not-- you know, developmentally they're just behind, it seems, from birth.

The belief illustrated above, that the problem is within the child, was also shared by teachers as they talked about parents. For many teachers, parents' language was an issue, their inability to speak English was considered a deficit that impacted their ability to foster support for their ELs. This belief that parents' lack of English proficiency rendered them inadequate to support their children with academic growth was shared multiple times.

In the quote below, the ESOL teacher casts parents under a negative light, as he shared that in addition to not being able to support ELs in English, parents have an unwillingness to do it in their native language:

Well, the-- the major challenge that I see is the students do not have a lot of help at home, when it comes to learning English. And even-- even you tell them-- when you tell the parents, you need to, you know, even if you don't know English you need to do things with the-- with the student-- with the child in, in their home language. With a book in Spanish, you know. Talk about the book. Not even that basic skills they can do. Because they
don't have the time, or they just are not interested in helping them that way at home. So that is a major challenge for EL students. They have no English when they leave school. It's just home language, and they don't even do reading in their home language—

And again, another example shared by the fourth grade teacher illustrates the prevalence of the notion that parents' lack of proficiency in English precludes them from supporting the students' academic growth.

They're supposed to read a book 30 minutes. But if your parents don't speak English, than you don't really have anyone to read to do you? Or to correct you, understand what I'm saying? If you're saying the word wrong, they don't know. So I said do you have anybody to help you at home? She said, 'No.' Not even an older sister? 'No.' So it's-- it's-- it's rough.

Students' academic success was attributed to the level of parental input, with success represented by positive parental input. On the other hand, student failure was blamed on lack or inadequate parental input. So parents were both the culprit for failure and success. For example, one teacher noted, “So they're going to have a difficulty with that. And reading comprehension, it's gonna be difficult because they have no help at home. So that's why I think a lot of our ESOL students are performing at the level they are. They don't have that assistance at home.”

By placing the condition of success on the home environment teachers (indirectly) cast the home environment as the critical component for ELs academic growth, instead of focusing on the teaching they are doing in the classroom. This perhaps unintentional removal of responsibility for both success and failure is what lend to the concept of teacher lack of agency.
Parents “for consent”. Though significant emphasis was placed on parental support for student success, parental presence was limited both physically in the building and through engagement and participation in the SST meetings I attended. During my interview with the AP, I asked how parents were engaged when students were moved to a higher tier of RTI. She replied that parents did not need to consent for their children to receive more tiered interventions, unless the student had to be removed from a special class (music, art or physical education) for the intervention:

They get notified. For Tier 2 you don't really need consent, as far as putting them in you know Voyager. Sometimes, if you're going to pull them, like if we’re gonna pull-- we at our school don't do it, but some schools do it, they pull them out of PE, or out of art, to do that intervention then they do notify the parent, and the parent has to give consent, because you’re pulling them out of some kind of core instruction kind of per se-- Spanish is really more like an elective unless it's for an ESOL student.

You don't really, they don't really need to consent for Tier 3. You know, that's an interesting question, I don't know that they need to consent for a Tier 3, because it's an intervention that we. . . . at the school level, it's not anything that we're going to keep them after school, or um-- your consent-- they do need to give you consent for screenings. Like the vision, the hearing, the social history, the bilingual. But to move to Tier 3, not that I'm aware of. If they sign you that Consent For Screening, then they're okay.

Similarly, during the four SST meetings I observed, parental presence in the meeting was minimal. The overall impression I felt was that parents were invited to sign consent forms rather than to collaborate and discuss interventions and next steps for the student. In one of the pre- and post- SST meetings, the mother of the child being discussed did not speak English, and the classroom teacher of the student did not speak Spanish, the AP, who is the decision maker for ELs at Panther, had to simultaneously lead the meeting and act as translator.
Even then, the mother’s input was only requested as she was given forms to consent for testing.

In another meeting, the student’s mother had requested to participate via conference call since she could not miss work. Her participation was limited. Prior to calling her on the phone, the team discussed the objectives, concerns and next steps. Once the team felt comfortable with their decision, which was to provide the mother with a doctor referral letter as the team strongly believed the student’s issues would be solved through medication for ADHD, the conference call started. The pre-call meeting without the mother lasted approximately 30 minutes while the phone call lasted 5 minutes.

**Conclusion of Parent –agent/barrier.** There was great emphasis on ELs’ success being dependent on parental support, however, during my interviews and observations I did not notice a strong parental presence at Panther elementary. Teachers believed that parents are responsible for ELs’ academic success, however parental participation in the meetings I observed was reduced to the signatures they provided in the forms mandated by the district.

**Summary of Findings**

While my intent was to find a link between teachers’ knowledge of language development and its manifestation in practice, the data I analyzed brought a different path. Teachers’ strong beliefs that their ELs’ success was contingent upon what they perceived to be adequate parental support, mitigated their ability to take on credit for their students’ academic growth and/or failures. Teachers’ sense of agency was negatively impacted by the way RTI was
implemented in the school. With a rigid T2, a narrow scope of assessment data for decision-making and limited access to collaboration, teachers’ ability to make decisions was limited. Teacher sense of agency was also limited by their beliefs about language and parents. While a few teachers regarded students’ native language as an asset to be capitalized on during instruction, the overall feeling that emerged was that students’ and parents’ limited English was a hindrance to their ELs’ ability to succeed academically.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how teachers working with ELs within a RTI framework make academic decisions for their students based on the data they collect under the cycle of PM. I had assumed that by interviewing teachers that were ESOL endorsed and had been working in a school that was an early adopter of RTI, I would be able to capture teachers’ basic understanding of language development and RTI as they answered my interview questions. One of the assumptions, rooted in my theoretical framework, was that teachers would be aware of the distinction between BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1985) and that that knowledge would be translated into practice that demonstrated language awareness/sensitivity in decision-making for ELs.

As the process of data collection and analysis finished and the thematic statement emerged, my original assumptions were overshadowed by the concept of teacher agency. The responses from teachers reflected beliefs that factors other than teacher instructional practice impacted student performance. However, this concept did not emerge in isolation. Teachers’ sense of agency was influenced by the adoption of a rigid RTI framework with standardized T2 in which decision-making followed a lock step approach intentionally held in the hands of administration. Teachers’ sense of agency was also impacted by their own beliefs about language. Language became a dichotomous concept whereas for some teachers, students’ lack of proficiency in academic English was the deterring factor to academic success, while for others language was a
mere backdrop to the contextual situation of the students. For those teachers that did not believe language was the direct issue in students’ academic success, they either saw students’ native language in a positive light, or they considered the lack of family support at home a stronger barrier to academic success. Since the concept of agency was influenced by the way in which RTI was implemented at Panther elementary, but also by teachers’ beliefs about language and parents.

**RTI and ELs**

The literature that specifically examines ELs’ responsiveness within a RTI framework is limited compared to the number of articles that deal with RTI for non-EL students. However, there is promise in RTI for helping ELs grow academically as some intervention studies with encouraging findings have suggested. For example, ELs benefit from evidence-based explicit instruction that is delivered to small groups in a systematic way (Haager & Windmueller, 2001; Kamps et al, 2007; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater & Cirino, 2006; Solari & Gerber, 2008).

Yet, much like the idiosyncrasies inherent in the process of language development, ELs’ responsiveness to intervention will vary according to each student. Thus, ELs’ teacher must be able to understand and interpret their students’ data in order to make informed decisions. The importance of teacher collaboration, where they have opportunities to observe more experienced teachers and have discussions is a critical component to an intervention that will adequately address the needs of students learning a language (Haager & Windmueller, 2001).
However, the PM process and decision-making at Panther elementary was guided by the AP and followed a standardized interpretation of PM performance regardless of EL status. There was little room for discussion and making sense of assessment data amongst teachers. This protocol was evidenced in one teacher’s statement “I’m gonna be honest: everything we’ve done this year, assessment-wise, not, not my classroom - but OPMs, Voyager - we have to take it and submit it to the office.”

Whereas during the interviews one teacher shared strategies she used with her ELs that represented her knowledge of language development, overall, teachers’ responses reflected a distance from the PM process. This distance from the process is potentially detrimental for the academic growth of ELs, considering that the current recommendation in the literature for the adoption of a problem-solving approach that allows for flexibility, collaboration and discussion revolving around assessment use and the selection of adequate intervention for ELs, as a team based process (Haager, 2007; Klingner, Hoover & Baca, 2008; Pool, Carter & Johnson, 2012; Richards-Tutor, Solari, Leafstedt., Gerber, Filippini & Aceves, 2013; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008).

The current system adopted for RTI at Panther elementary does not foster the kind of collaboration that can support ELs. On a larger scale, the district’s use of a single program for T2 and rigid assessment benchmarks for decision-making hinder the development of a culture of collaboration in which teachers can make decisions that are tailored to the needs of their ELs. On a school-level scale, when administration makes the decision for student movement and completion of
PM paperwork, it removes the opportunity for teachers to be more involved in the process. If teachers are to impact growth for ELs within RTI, it is imperative for their input to be part of the PM and decision-making since through a collaborative approach to RTI teachers will feel “a greater sense of autonomy and personal efficacy as educators, and a clear sense of shared leadership” (Rinaldi, Averill & Stuart, 2010, p 51).

Knowledge of Language Development

One of the original ideas behind my research question was based on my assumption that if teachers had a basic understanding of the research behind language acquisition development, such as being able to differentiate between BICS and CALP, that background knowledge would translate into instructional practice and consequently permeate the decision-making process. It was my hope to capture this cascading process in my interviews, with teachers who had been trained in theories of second language acquisition and would apply that knowledge to assessment data and make adequate academic decisions for their ELs.

In 1992, the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) put forth the digest debunking 5 myths of language acquisition. While the article is over 20 years old, some of the common myths of language acquisition have prevailed in the literature of ELs and clearly emerged in the findings. The myths are: “1) children learn second languages quickly and easily; 2) the younger the child, the more skilled in acquiring a second language; 3) the more time students spend in a second language context, the quicker they learn the language; 4) children have
acquired an L2 once they can speak it and 5) all children learn an L2 the same way” (p. 129). The belief that learning a second language in the academic context is an effortless process for children based on the fact that they are young is not supported by research. Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2000) report that adults have higher rates of second language acquisition than children, particularly since the assessment of rate and setting of language learning are more familiar to older learners who have been in school (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979). Therefore when teachers discredited language as a critical factor for an ELs’ academic development, and corroborated with examples of students’ oral language use, the misconception that once a child has conversational English they can perform academically are strengthened, as one teacher noted, “So, when I started seeing my groups in 3rd grade, I noticed that it wasn’t language, because they all speak English”.

Similarly, when teachers fail to acknowledge that a student’s native language has an impact on their academic development, they also fail to address the connection that can be achieved from supporting their students through their native language. In a study investigating the cross-linguistic role of cognitive academic language proficiency on reading growth, Laija-Rodriguez, Ocho and Parker (2006) reported that the “best predictor of L2 reading growth was primary language development” (p.103). Likewise, in a pre-school program with three- and four-year-old children, bilingual students who participated in an all-Spanish language program improved their oral vocabulary and early letter identification in Spanish with no detriment to their English-language development as compared
to the control English-only class (Duran, Roseth & Hoffman, 2010). Native language support remains a critical scaffold for students acquiring English as noted by Collier (1992), “the greater the amount of L1 instructional support for language-minority students, combined with balanced L2 support, the higher they are able to achieve academically in L2 in each succeeding academic year, in comparison to matched groups being schooled monolingually in L2” (p. 205).

It is imperative for teachers to understand how positive language supports can influence academic growth for ELs. If we want ELs to be successful academically, teachers need to understand the importance of language trajectories, and be allowed to collaborate, discuss and advocate on behalf of adequate intervention and practices for ELs even if the only programs available are in English only.

**Collaborative decision-making and understanding of language.** Even in a context in which the intervention selected for ELs is predetermined, teachers who understand how language development influences student academic growth can target the delivery of explicit evidence-based instruction in small groups, which can promote the shrinking of a performance gap between ELs and that of native English speakers (Haager & Windmueller, 2001; Kamps et al, 2007; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater & Cirino, 2006; Snow, Burns & Griffith, 1998; Solari & Gerber, 2008).

ELs’ teachers need to be allowed to collaborate with their peers in order to discuss interventions, assessment data and have a voice in determining the next steps of their students within the PM process. It is also critical for ELs’ teachers
to discuss the role of language in the learning trajectories of their students and be given opportunities for professional development that are targeted to a better understanding of time sensitivity in decision-making, interpreting validity of assessment results, selecting adequate curriculum and instruction strategies that are proven to support ELs and making responsiveness determinations based on valid instruments. At Panther elementary teachers were missing this critical opportunity to collaborate and participate in the decision-making process for their ELs. The lack of collaboration was evident during the interviews and meeting observations, where discussion regarding student assessment data was not addressed.

**Parental Role**

The third theme of parent-agent/barrier emerged through the codes as teachers depicted their perceptions of ELs’ parental role in either supporting or hindering the academic progress. For many teachers, the families of the students were portrayed as the problem, the reason behind ELs lack of academic success, even in the development of reading comprehension and academic vocabulary development, which are school-based skills. Yet, during the observations and interviews, parental collaboration was not sought out, as noted by the AP during an interview, “*They get notified. For Tier 2 you don’t really need consent, as far as putting them in you know Voyager*”, but parents were sought out for their consent, according to the schools’ needs.

Klingner and Harry (2006) study addresses the problematic of not having parental participation paired with negative views of parents in the outcome of
ethnic minority children, “Our data show not only that the pervasive negativity drastically reduced the possibility of parental participation, but also that negative views of parents could actually have a direct influence the outcomes for some children (p. 2277)”.

Parent-school collaboration is also one of the critical tenets under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA). Parents receive a copy of the Procedural Safeguards, which is a legal document indicating their rights as parents and the rights of students when a referral or request for testing is made. In addition, current recommendations under RTI for collaboration with parents are clear that school personnel should, “inform and engage parents in every aspect of the RTI implementation process and sustain transparency regarding interventions” (The Ten Regional Title IV Equity Assistant Centers, 2008, p. 9; Technical Assistant Paper, 2006).

Valdes’ (1996) ethnographic study of Mexican families in the United States documented how cultural differences and expectations interfered with a strong partnership between home and school. For the Mexican families in her study, the families viewed a clear distinction between their role as caretaker and the schools teachers’ roles as educators outside the home. For the families in the study, interfering with the schools’ work would be considered disrespectful. This difference between school expectation and parental role in families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds is also evident in the special education referral and placement of students (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997). Where schools viewed families as dysfunctional, researchers found that an organized system
was in place when the researchers conducted their interviews at the families’ homes.

Therefore, cultural differences may explain how teachers’ sense of agency might be impacted by their perceptions of ELs’ parents. If teachers’ perceptions of parental support are rooted in expectations different from the cultural norm of the families, they might perceive parents as less capable to help their students, and to be able to meaningfully participate in meetings (Rogoff, 2003). Nonetheless, the recommendations in the parent literature support a collaborative approach between families of culturally and linguistically diverse students and schools, in which schools make a conscious effort to involve and teach parents about the expectations of the schools, but also learn from parents about students’ linguistic and cultural background (Harry, 2008; Harry, Rueda & Kalyanpur, 1999; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney & Kushner, 2006). Sanders (2009) recommended meaningful collaboration between a school district’s office of parent involvement and a local community-based parent-involved organization (CPIO) to foster parental involvement and leadership of parents in school. Perhaps with a strong parental leadership, parental presence and input can be increased at the school, particularly during critical decision-making meetings, whereby genuine exchanges in which parents are sought out for their knowledge of their students become just as frequent as their signatures in consent forms. Regardless of the method adopted to increase parental support, in an environment where parents receive the brunt of the criticism for ELs’ lack of academic success, it is important for the parents’
perspective to be heard. Through a mutual understanding of school and home expectations teachers can teach and learn from parents, a process that can foster a level of understanding that is critical to mitigate the perception of parents from different cultures as deficient (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004).

**Teacher Agency**

The concept of teacher agency that emerged in the findings has been discussed in the literature for many years under the construct of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). For Bandura self-efficacy is one’s belief that people are capable to achieve in a task they set for themselves in a particular domain. Guskey and Passaro (1994) suggested that teachers with strong sense of efficacy were less likely to be influenced by external conditions, since their perception of their own ability to influence student outcomes is not strongly related to their perception of external variables. Goddard, Hoy and Hoy (2004) pointed to how a collective sense efficacy supports strong sense of self-efficacy in teachers, while a weak collective sense efficacy diminishes it, “when teachers are empowered to influence relevant school decisions, they are likely to report more confidence in the capability of their faculty to educate students than would be the case if teachers were given less control over decisions that affect their professional work” (p. 10).

Teachers who perceive their teaching as efficacious will not be heavily influenced by the perceived external factors, while a strong sense of collective efficacy will also support teacher self-efficacy beliefs. The findings in the self-efficacy literature reflect the findings in my study in which teachers’ sense of
efficacy is diminished, with the exception of one teacher that believed in her students’ bilingualism and capitalized in their native language for instruction. The teachers in the study, for the most part, collectively pointed towards external variables as the reason for their students’ lack of academic success. Therefore, in order for teachers to feel empowered to support ELs under RTI, teachers must be encouraged to collaborate and take ownership of the PM cycle and decision-making process to fully understand and participate in the framework under which they are operating (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Procotor & Cardarelli, 2010). Teachers working with ELs also need language supports that highlight the use of evidence-based explicit and systematic instruction, which should include the use of strategies and assessments that have been carefully selected for ELs (Haager & Windmueller, 2007; Kamps et al., 2007). Teachers and schools should also participate in collaborative interactions with parents of ELs in order to foster a mutual-learning environment in which parents are able to provide a voice instead of being cast as at fault for student failure. With a strong emphasis in collaboration, participation and support, teachers might restore their sense of agency and support ELs academic growth within an RTI framework. Teachers must be able to deliver appropriate evidence-based systematic instructional strategies for ELs; interpret assessment data and determine responsiveness of their students; be cognizant of their students’ language needs and use that lens to filter instruction and assessment data. Teachers must also foster a collaborative relationship with parents of ELs in order to better understand their
own students’ backgrounds considering how much emphasis is placed in the home environment.

**Limitations**

A limitation to this study was the duration of engagement on site. While I visited Panther elementary 12 times in a period of 3 months, this span of time felt constrained. It would have been ideal to spend a full year at the school observing the trainings the teachers I interacted with received, as well as the decision-making meetings that typically occur throughout the 3 assessment periods in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the decision process.
References


Appendix A: Initial interview guide

1- Please describe the RTI process at the school.

2- What kinds of support systems or trainings did you receive on RTI?

3- What does each tier look like?

4- How do you decide on student movement between tiers?

5- How do parents participate in the RTI process?

6- What types of forms are used?

7- How often do teachers meet to discuss student data? What do those meetings look like?

8- How are ELs included in the RTI process?
Appendix B: Teacher Questionnaire

1- What is the subject area and grade level that you currently teach?

2- What is the student make-up of your class?

4- Do you speak any additional languages?

5- How comfortable do you feel using your additional languages?

6- Which certification type do you hold?

7- How many years of teaching experience do you have?

8- What is your level of education?
Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Guide

1- Describe some of the academic challenges the ELs you are working with face? What are the factors that you think contribute to those challenges?

2- Describe some of the academic successes of your ELs? To what do you attribute those successes?

3- Have any of your ELs moved between tiers during the school year? Please describe the process.

4- In your class have any ELs in particular been referred to special education? What was the outcome?

5- What were some of the indicators used for referral?

6- Which assessment data did you use to determine the students’ native language proficiency?

7- Which assessment data did you use to determine the students’ proficiency in English?

8- What was the decision to move between the tiers based on?

9- How comfortable do you feel differentiating between a child who is developing a language and child who has a learning disability? How could you tell the difference?

10- Do you or the team member have discussions around the referral of ELs?

11- What is currently not working academically for the language development of ELs?

12- What is working for ELs?
13-How many ELs have you served in the RTI framework? What are the native languages of these students?

14-What assessments are administered to the ELs you teach, in what time frame?

15-Tell me about each of the assessments used for progress monitoring. What do these assessments tell you about the child’s language proficiency in English and/or the child’s native language?

16-Walk me through some cases. Show me the data you have looked at for 1-2 individual EL students and tell me how what you saw in the assessment data informed your decisions.