

Principles for Differentiating Instruction for ELLs

In this helpful *Middle School Journal* article, Hunter College professor Laura Baecher and New York City teachers Marcus Artigliere, David Patterson, and Adrian Spatzer address the challenge of differentiating instruction for English language learners. Lots of teachers worry about how to do this, asking questions like, *Am I supposed to make up five different lesson plans every day? How am I supposed to maintain classroom management if everyone is doing something different? Are you telling me to ‘track’ students in my classroom?*

The authors begin by distinguishing between sheltered and differentiated instruction. Here are some common sheltered practices, which involve whole-class techniques aimed at making lesson content more accessible to lower-proficiency students:

- Linguistic adaptations – Making language more comprehensible by modifying speed, complexity, and syntax;
- Scaffolding – Activating background knowledge, using pairs and small groups, and getting students working independently;
- Cultural responsiveness – Building English language skills based on knowledge of students’ home languages; not discouraging use of the first language; making connections to students’ cultural backgrounds; and creating a classroom environment that highlights rather than avoids cultural comparisons and contrasts;
- Print modifications – Providing an enlarged text that is read aloud, adding visuals to a text, and providing audiotaped versions.

Differentiation, by contrast, is geared to specific subgroups of students and involves variations in instructional content, the teaching process, and student products.

How can regular classroom teachers differentiate to support their ELLs’ success? The authors suggest these principles:

- *Know ELLs’ strengths and weaknesses in English.* Teachers should use high-quality reading, writing, listening, and speaking assessments and not be misled by students’ level of oral proficiency.
- *Set a common objective and differentiate linguistic input and output.* Teachers should be clear about the knowledge, skills, and understanding that all students should have by the end of the lesson, and then adjust the linguistic demands of the materials and what ELLs will need to produce. For example, in a lesson aimed at getting students to recognize that stress patterns in a poem help to convey its meaning, the language objective is getting students to be able to use stress and intonation to present a poem aloud to the class. Differentiation by domain:

- Content – Higher-proficiency students are given a longer poem with two or more different stress patterns, lower-proficiency students get a short poem with one main stress pattern.
- Process – Higher-proficiency students practice identifying stress marks independently, lower-proficiency students work in small groups with the teacher.
- Product – Higher-proficiency students orally present a six-line poem without referring to notes, lower-proficiency students orally present a three-line poem and may refer to notes.

Thus all students aim for the same objective, getting there in different ways.

- *Identify a base activity for higher-level students and tier downward.* A common mistake, say the authors, is starting with low-level activities geared to low-proficiency students (drawing a picture, copying text, putting things in order, or looking up words in a dictionary) and then formulating a lesson objective that isn't challenging for any students. Start the other way around, they urge: set a common lesson objective that every student will find interesting and challenging and figure out ways to make it manageable for all students.

- *Make differentiation manageable for teachers.* The example above shows how this can be accomplished. "Differentiation should be achieved through small variations to a base activity, or the process may become too daunting and time-consuming for teachers," say the authors. "Differentiation can then become part of everyday practice rather than an occasional event."

- *Make learning manageable for students.* Some teachers worry that differentiation waters down the curriculum for ELLs. Quite the contrary, say the authors; it makes robust lesson objectives do-able for low-proficiency students and ramps up their learning.

- *Avoid pairing high-proficiency with low-proficiency students.* "The higher-level student is often working below his or her capabilities," say the authors, "and the lower-level student merely copies or imitates without really developing needed language skills." It's better for the teacher to gather a leveled group in a small circle and reteach objectives, modify content, and offer support – or, with higher-proficiency students, offer additional challenge questions, encourage interaction, and clarify understandings.

- *Use flexible rather than fixed groups.* Homogeneous groups are fine for differentiated skill instruction, but ELLs should regularly interact with native-speaking students in varying teacher-formed groups.

- *Offer a choice of activities to let students do some of the differentiating.* Students should occasionally be able to choose an activity they believe is at the right challenge level for them.

- *Don't let low language proficiency prevent higher-level cognitive work.* "A low level of language proficiency will prevent ELLs from expressing conceptual understanding in English," say the authors. Bloom's taxonomy is a useful tool for differentiating prompts and questions to different levels of cognitive complexity.

- *Allot the same number of minutes for a set of differentiated tasks.* When some students have 10 minutes and some have 20 minutes, it raises equity and classroom management problems. It's also good to have students from different groups share thoughts and ideas when they finish the activity.

"Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners as 'Variations on a Theme'" by Laura Baecher, Marcus Artigliere, David Patterson, and Adrian Spatzer in *Middle School Journal*, January 2012 (Vol. 43, #3, p. 14-21), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at lbaecher@hunter.cuny.edu, marcus.art@gmail.com, dpatterson7@schools.nyc.gov, and Adrian.spatzer@gmail.com.