

# Differentiated instruction for English language learners as “variations on a theme”

Teachers can differentiate instruction to support English language learners.

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U.S. schools are experiencing a rapidly growing population of English language learners (ELLs). By 2015, ELL enrollment in U.S. schools will reach 10 million and, by 2025, nearly one out of every four public school students will be an ELL (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, n.d.). Contrary to common assumptions, most ELLs are native-born U.S. citizens, not immigrants. Seventy-six percent of elementary school ELLs and 56% of secondary school ELLs are native-born, and more than half of the ELLs in public secondary schools are second- or third-generation U.S. citizens (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwatoro, 2005). This suggests that educators may not have been meeting the needs of ELLs over the course of their school lives, resulting in insufficient development of their content knowledge and literacy.

Young adolescent ELLs are perhaps our most vulnerable population in schools. At this point in their lives, concerns about peer acceptance are acute, yet middle grades ELLs often are considered different because of language, race, dress, and cultural practices. The intense desire to “fit in” may cause many of them to reject their home culture and language as they struggle with issues of acculturation (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). This makes it difficult for teachers to comfortably require ELLs to take risks in producing English, yet this is essential in developing skills in a new language (Harklau, 1999). The academic stakes become raised at the middle level, and, unlike elementary school students, students in the middle grades move from

teacher to teacher, which makes it more challenging for teachers to get to know their particular family, cultural, and language backgrounds. While development of literacy in the first language has progressed steadily for many ELLs, many others have interrupted formal education or have spent years returning to their home countries and back to the United States, resulting in gaps in their academic skills (Robertson & Lafond, 2008). Research has helped practitioners understand the complexity of the academic achievement of ELLs in U.S. schools and has identified many of the key variables at play. These include the level of first language literacy, years and type of schooling in the home country, length of residence in the United States, and the nature of academic English (Collier, 1987). For school-age ELLs, this academic English requires linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence (Canale, 1983), and specific semantic and syntactic knowledge to meet high literacy demands across multiple genres (Shlepegrell, 2001).

One of the ways teachers may be told to meet the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms is to differentiate instruction, yet the National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, National Science Teachers Association, and National Middle School Association (now AMLE) do not use the term “differentiation” in their national standards for teacher preparation. Therefore, *what* differentiated instruction actually looks like and *how* teachers can integrate it into their routines

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and procedures may be unclear. This leaves teachers posing questions such as: 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? But I was told to always use heterogeneous groups—are you telling me to “track” students in my classroom?

As part of a larger study of the connection between teacher preparation and teachers’ induction years, researchers documented activities in classrooms with high percentages of ELLs through collaborative inquiry between teachers and a college of teacher education. The purpose of this article is to distinguish sheltered content instruction from differentiated instruction, provide an overview of key principles for differentiating instruction for ELLs, and share descriptive accounts from three middle level English as a second language (ESL)/English language arts (ELA) teachers. It is hoped these will provide readers with some concrete ways to differentiate instruction to support ELLs.

## Sheltered versus differentiated instruction

Because schools cannot wait for their ELLs to reach a high level of English proficiency before introducing academic content in English, various sheltering techniques have been developed and researched over the past 20 years, of which the best-known are the Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Echevarria & Short, 1999;) and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994). These sheltering techniques have been developed for mainstream classroom teachers to help them provide appropriate scaffolding for their ELLs to access content area learning.

Sheltering techniques are whole-class teacher adaptations designed to make content accessible to ELLs and to provide instruction in English language skills. They may involve an array of discourse, textual, task, and environment decisions. Sheltered content instruction is an overarching approach that may include differentiated instruction as part of the teacher’s plan to create access for ELLs at varying levels of English proficiency. These adaptations have been shown to correspond to higher student achievement with academic language tasks (Echevarria & Short, 2010). Excellent resources for

**Figure 1** Common sheltered content instruction practices

<p><i>Discourse adaptations</i> provide oral language that is comprehensible to the learners by modifying speed, complexity, and syntax.</p>
<p><i>Scaffolding student activities</i> includes activating students’ background knowledge, engaging them in learning through pairing and grouping, and initiating independent work after a model or guide has been provided.</p>
<p><i>Cultural responsiveness</i> involves building English language skills based on knowledge of students’ home languages (Wong-Fillmore &amp; Snow, 2000); not shunning the use of the first language (Cook, 2001); making lesson connections to students’ cultural backgrounds and creating a classroom environment that highlights, rather than avoids, cultural comparisons and contrasts (Flores-González, 2002; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2003).</p>
<p><i>Print modifications</i> include providing an enlarged text that is read aloud, thus supporting left-right directionality and providing a model for how these words are pronounced; adding visuals to a text; or providing audiotaped versions of text (Drucker, 2003).</p>

sheltering content have become widely available, and content teachers of ELLs in the middle grades have likely become familiar with the sheltering practices depicted in Figure 1.

Over the course of a unit of instruction, and on a daily basis, ELLs need to be able to successfully access content and participate fully in learning activities. Sheltering techniques support teachers in making whole-class adaptations to their instruction, which will likely include some differentiation of instruction.

Differentiation is generally tailored to specific subgroups of students rather than the whole class and involves the teacher in creating variations of the main activities of the lesson. It also provides the opportunity to become more focused on language development activities within the content lesson. Watkins and Lindahl (2010) noted:

[T]eachers may already have lessons that make content information more accessible to students, but these lessons may not provide adequate language support for ELLs with regard to content area literacy skills. ... Teachers must target ELL needs, considering both language skills and those skills contributing to content area literacy, as they plan content lessons. (p. 24)

Teachers who have already developed an understanding of the purposes and methods for sheltering content for ELLs, then, need a clearer understanding of how to differentiate based on language proficiency.

## Differentiation based on English language proficiency

Tomlinson's (2001) framework for differentiating, or tiering, tasks based on *content* (what the teacher provides as learning input), *process* (how the teacher has structured the activity), or *product* (what the students are expected to produce) has been widely used by educators to organize the many different ways an activity can be modified for different learners. However, available examples of differentiated activities are typically based on students' learning styles or preferences rather than on levels of English language proficiency.

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The level of the learner's literacy in the native language and the demands of academic language influence the learner's progress toward English language proficiency, which may range from pre-production to intermediate to highly proficient. The World-class Instructional Design and Assessment consortium has developed "can-do" descriptors in all dimensions of literacy (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for ELLs across six proficiency levels for grades 6 through 8 (see [http://www.wida.us/standards/CAN\\_DOs/index.aspx](http://www.wida.us/standards/CAN_DOs/index.aspx)). This tool can help teachers recognize what ELLs at each of these proficiency levels could be asked to do in a lesson activity.

In the context of differentiation for ELLs, it is important for classroom teachers to feel capable of making instructional choices that will support access to content learning and develop language skills. Although most schools have an ESL teacher on staff who may provide "push-in" or "pull-out" services, these services are often disconnected and sporadic and may depend on

institutional supports in the form of common planning time and co-teaching models (Baecher & Bell, 2011). However, classroom teachers can effectively support their ELLs within their own lessons by developing greater expertise in differentiated instruction and through collaborative professional development with ESL specialists.

## Principles of differentiating for ELLs

Why differentiate instruction? Most teachers are accustomed to planning the classic developmental lesson consisting of a single objective, a set of activities, and a unified closure. Differentiation up-ends that norm, asking us to consider how well suited that single lesson is for students who have varied learning needs and, in the case of ELLs, varied levels of English proficiency and literacy skills. The metaphor of a bowler who continually aims down the center, despite the pins left standing on either side, represents the ramifications when teachers continue to "bowl down the middle" (Irujo, 2004) and neglect the needs of students with special learning needs. Differentiation demands that teachers make some alterations to their base lesson plans to provide access to content learning for ELLs. It is based on the premise that the teacher, not the students, must adjust the learning activities. Several principles may guide teachers attempting to address common concerns of moving from a "one-size-fits-all" classroom to a differentiated one that will support the academic achievement of ELLs.

**Principle 1. Know ELLs' strengths and weaknesses in English.** ELLs' level of proficiency might be determined via local or state tests, in-class diagnostics, and one-on-one conferencing. Teachers are often misled by students' oral proficiency, assuming a corresponding level of reading and writing proficiency; so, when teachers assess ELLs they must include listening, speaking, reading, and writing diagnostics.

**Principle 2. Set a common content objective and differentiate the language objective.** Determine what content or conceptual understanding is desired by the end of the lesson and then identify the language demands presented by the materials (linguistic input) and the language opportunities presented by what the students will need to produce, either orally or in writing (linguistic output). Differentiation will then be based on something the teacher will do to adjust the linguistic input by sheltering the content or by making a process

**Figure 2** Ways to differentiate a speaking activity

<b>Content Objective:</b> Students will recognize that stress patterns in a poem serve to convey its meaning.		
<b>Language Objective:</b> Students will be able to use stress and intonation to orally present a poem aloud to class.		
<b>Differentiation Domain</b>	<b>Lower-Proficiency</b>	<b>Higher-Proficiency</b>
<b>Content</b>	Students will be given a short poem with one main stress pattern.	Students will be given a longer poem with two or more different stress patterns.
<b>Process</b>	Students will practice identifying stress marks working in small groups with the teacher.	Students will practice identifying stress marks independently.
<b>Product</b>	Students will orally present a 3-line poem and may refer to notes.	Students will orally present a 6-line poem without referring to notes.

or product adaptation. See Figure 2 for an example of a content and differentiated language objective to develop speaking skills.

**Principle 3. Make differentiation manageable for the teacher.** Notice that Figure 2 presents a possible content, process, or product differentiation based on language proficiency and does not involve students in radically different activities or the teacher in creating many different tasks. Differentiation should be achieved through small variations to a base activity, or the process may become too daunting and time consuming for teachers. Differentiation can then become part of everyday practice rather than an occasional event. A teacher might begin by thinking about the “base” activity they would design for their native-speaking students who require little scaffolding. Once the learning objective and activity are established for this group, content, process, and product adaptations can be designed. Usually, one modification in one of these areas is preferable to multiple changes in all three.

**Principle 4. Make learning manageable for the students through differentiation.** Often, teachers believe the content is being “watered” or “dumbed” down when differentiated materials, tasks, or products are introduced. However, if the original task or material is well beyond the student’s language ability, this portion of the lesson is likely to be completely wasted. If, on the other hand, the material or task has been restructured, reconceived, or simplified in linguistic demands in a way that the learner can be actively involved in the learning, the lesson then becomes productive.

**Principle 5. Identify a base activity for higher-level students and tier downward.** For an English language arts teacher with ELL students, planning may begin with the majority group of native English-speaking students independently reading an unadapted text, with certain scaffolds in place to give lower-proficiency students access to the text. There is a danger in over-scaffolding when teachers begin with lower-proficiency students in mind first, thus risking that higher-level students will find the task too easy. Whenever possible, the learning goal should be the same for all the students; differentiated instruction for ELLs should not mean different learning goals. For instance, if the base activity is to learn about speaker’s tone, the ELL activity should *not* be about drawing a picture, putting things in order, copying text, or looking up words in the dictionary. These are common lower-order activities often assigned to ELLs, with the last one especially over-used and counter-productive. Selecting the correct definition of an unknown word from a dictionary requires great understanding of the context in which the word is being used, knowledge of its grammatical form, and an ability to interpret the language of the definition itself.

**Principle 6. Use yourself rather than a higher-level student to serve as the differentiation in the lesson.** When teachers consistently pair higher-proficiency with lower-proficiency ELLs, neither truly gains. The higher-level student is often working below his or her capabilities, and the lower-level student merely copies or imitates without really developing needed language

skills. Think about opportunities to set the class to work on a task and bring a leveled group in a circle around you to reteach objectives, modify content, or offer support for lower-proficiency students, or to offer additional challenge questions, encourage oral interaction, or clarify understandings for higher-proficiency students.

**Principle 7. Use flexible rather than fixed grouping.** Students do not have to know you are differentiating, and it can be stigmatizing if teachers consistently place the same students together for instruction. Purposefully vary (as opposed to letting students choose) the group configurations regularly so that ELLs have the opportunity to interact with native-speaking students on appropriate tasks. At the same time, do not be afraid to use homogeneous groups when a differentiated task has been prepared at each group's level of proficiency.

**Principle 8. Offer a choice of activities to let students do the differentiating.** Teachers can offer a simple option on a lesson activity, providing an

opportunity for students to select an activity they believe is at the right level of challenge for them.

**Principle 9. Recognize that cognitive complexity is intertwined with language proficiency.** A low level of language proficiency will prevent ELLs from expressing conceptual understandings in English. Teachers should use Bloom's Taxonomy and other planning tools to intentionally differentiate prompts and questions at different levels of cognitive complexity.

**Principle 10. Allot the same number of minutes for a differentiated task.** If the teacher provides some students 20 minutes to complete a reading and only 10 minutes to others, students will likely finish at different points in time. This may cause some difficulties in terms of classroom management. Teachers should consider allowing students to share thoughts and ideas at the closure of a lesson to support community building in the room and to enable all members of the class to have something of value to contribute from their activity.

### Case study 1: David

During the past school year, all three of my sixth, seventh, and eighth grade ELA classes contained a sizable number of ESL students who were also long-term English language learners (LT-ELLs). Most of these LT-ELLs were conversationally fluent but struggled with academic discourse, formal writing, and understanding many grade-appropriate texts.

My running records for the first three months of the year, combined with a McLeod reading survey, an Accelerated Reader STAR reading test, and a Scantron assessment showed that they had difficulty understanding new texts because of complex vocabulary, constructions, and rhetoric and that they were often frustrated when it came to writing.

I used this information to redesign my daily instructional format and replaced it with an approach that emphasized three new features: the development of academic vocabulary, the mastery of basic grammar skills, and the use of more provocative and culturally stimulating classroom content. After these changes, I expected to see a measurable rise in my students' STAR reading tests, McLeod surveys, and classroom grades.

First, using Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL), I constructed Do-Nows around the practice of answering inferential questions that spotlighted the academic or domain-specific language of the text we were studying. Second, I devoted at least three blocks per week to the study of rules and usage, using the sentence-composing approach to grammar development, with its emphasis on sentences from popular middle school literature. Finally, I sought fresh content in the form of culturally diverse texts that were provocative and appealing.

None of these new strategies went particularly smoothly. In each case, the speed with which the stronger students completed the AWL and grammar tasks far exceeded [that of] the LT-ELLs. I was forced to use my Academic Intervention Services (AIS) period four days per week to focus on these two areas. I also had difficulty ensuring mastery of the most basic grammar skills, and I asked other content area teachers to stress these lessons with mixed success.

This work became a large part of my classes, and I struggled to gauge the precise results of it. After December, however, formative assessments showed that students were able to express themselves with fewer errors. In early May, summative assessments showed that my LT-ELLs' average grade equivalency on the STAR reading test rose by .8, above the class average, and their McLeod survey showed a modest, half-grade increase. The grades of the LT-ELLs had gone up by an average of five points, reversing a trend from the year before.

I learned that, in the future, I must fully integrate all three features within each unit, which I am now currently doing. My looping students are demonstrating a greater grasp of rules and usage and are able to recognize some academic vocabulary that flummoxed them in the past. I still need to administer more comprehensive and better-designed diagnostics at the beginning of each unit to more specifically pinpoint areas of need.

## Examples from three middle level ESL teachers: David, Marcus, and Adrian

The following examples of how to differentiate instruction for ELLs come from middle level teachers who routinely address the language demands of content materials. David's example (Case study 1) highlights several key strategies middle level English teachers can incorporate into their practice when working with ELLs. First, he used several diagnostic tools to

assess his students' areas of English proficiency. He then determined specific language targets—grammar conventions and academic vocabulary—and provided more in-class time for his ELLs to focus on those areas while keeping them involved in the same content-area readings as their peers. He recognized the importance of changing his own approaches, emphases, and materials to accommodate his learners rather than having them try to make up for their areas of weakness on their own.

Marcus' example (Case study 2) centers on a creative writing project in which he focuses his differentiation

### Case Study 2: Marcus

My eighth grade ESL class had 30 students ages 13 and 14. All students were Chinese (Mandarin speakers) and had been in the country for two years. There was a wide range of reading ability (levels A through K) within this class. Eighth grade students enter a classroom with a wealth of knowledge and experience, and in this particular class, all students were literate in their first language, and many were avid readers in Chinese. I sought to capitalize on their prior knowledge and existing love of reading. My classroom had a large library that included books from all levels and genres and featured books in students' native languages. Students could select books at their appropriate reading level.

While their cultural backgrounds may have seemed homogenous, their needs were not. I had had inter-visitations with all of their content area classes and noticed that their culture had not been discussed, and students rarely used their native language in these classes. Therefore, I sought to cultivate an environment in which students' culture and language were respected and viewed as an asset to learning.

The relative linguistic homogeneity presented an instructional challenge for me to create meaningful speaking opportunities in English. In addition, Mandarin was a symbol-based language with no cognates in English. This made vocabulary acquisition and instructional planning difficult but also provided an opportunity to use students' native language as an instructional tool. To promote language acquisition, I used the native language as a resource whenever possible. I used examples of their first language on charts and in speech to help students draw on prior knowledge and make the connections between the first and second language.

Two students were at a level J in reading. Both students' responses indicated that they had had an understanding of some of the elements of plot. Chun's response to the first assessment contained characters, conflict, and events but lacked a setting and a resolution. His use of language indicated that he had an understanding of how to use capitals, punctuation, articles, and quotes in English, but needed support with tense and description.

Ming's response to the first assessment indicated that she could create characters, conflict, events, and a setting, but her story did not contain a resolution. Her use of language indicated that she had an understanding of articles, quotes, capitals, and punctuation but needed support with description and tense structures.

I developed lessons related to the needs indicated in the assessments, and I conferred with these students, giving them oral and written feedback. I used Post-It notes to provide positive feedback, ask questions, and comment on their work. I encouraged both students to use what they already knew from earlier units and shared with them how writers can use their five senses to provide more detailed descriptions when writing. We discussed how writers often create stories for audiences (readers) and that these readers expect certain elements to be in a story. To bolster both students' understanding of the structure of plot, I gave [them] graphic organizers in their native language that outlined characters, events, conflict, and a resolution. Both students showed remarkable improvement and incorporated much of my instructional feedback into the second assessment and subsequent writing assignments.

Students' work was assessed by their peers in the writers' celebration described page 20 and by direct teacher feedback using a teacher-created rubric to assess, praise, and comment on work. This rubric assessed both language and content goals.

The students made substantial and measurable improvement. Since the close of this unit of study, students' reading and writing stamina and volume have improved tremendously. In addition, they had begun to make fewer tense and verb errors in writing and speaking. They had become more self-aware of these errors as they regularly applied self-monitoring techniques, often catching and correcting tense errors in writing without teacher assistance.

Because the motivation was high throughout the project, students took risks in their writing. They produced various story ideas and increased the volume of their writing, speaking, and reading, thus leading to enhanced language and content development.

### Case Study 3: Adrian

At MS 45, we had a student-run and student-written newspaper that was comprised of 20 students, 17 of whom were intermediate or advanced ELLs in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. I served as the ESL/ELA lead teacher and newspaper advisor. The curriculum was developed and differentiated for both ELLs and non-ELLs, and although it was hard to get started at the beginning, it had become a huge success over the past few years. The newspaper staff consisted of writers, photographers, editors, layout artists, and graphic designers. Many students took on more than one role.

Although most of the students were ELLs, they had differing levels of English proficiency. Some were easily able to write their articles but had a harder time with speaking in the planning meetings or conducting interviews, while other students were the opposite. When we had instructional sessions, I needed to provide differentiated supports for the activities. For example, when students were learning about persuasive writing, I asked the advanced students to look through issues of the *New York Times* to discover how opinion is often written in first person, with support from quotes and interviews. They looked for transitions, such as “in my point of view,” “in my opinion,” and then they reported back. For the same learning goal, I asked my beginners and intermediate students to investigate issues of *Metro New York* and count how many [times the] words “I,” “you,” “we,” “your,” and “we” were used and report back.

When it came to editing their articles, students were given support through multiple peer-revisions and were provided a checklist of items to look for, which increased in length and complexity from lower- to higher-proficiency students.

around targeted feedback for two particular students. Marcus incorporates a number of principles of both sheltered content instruction and differentiation for ELLs in his teaching. First, he highly values his students’ home language and culture and uses them as a bridge to learning English. In this way, he is also able to anticipate the types of language errors his students will make and plan to address those points in his lessons. He focuses on two higher-level students and their strengths and challenges, demonstrating both the principle of diagnosing students’ needs and remembering to address accelerated students. He uses their work to guide his individual and small-group differentiated feedback and activities in their writing process, employing the principle of using himself as a guide rather than another student. He also maintains the same learning goal for the whole class, thus enabling the classroom to join together in a publishing celebration at the same time, even though their written products are at different levels. By addressing content learning and language use in assessment as well as instruction, he was able to make differentiation manageable for both himself and his learners.

Adrian was working with low-literacy ELLs and wanted to support their language development and keep them motivated. Her differentiation strategies were framed within task-based learning. Adrian’s approach provided opportunities for differentiated language development within the context of producing and publishing an authentic product, the school newspaper. By allowing students to craft their own original articles, she employed a genre that was limited

in terms of linguistic load while still offering students the opportunity to explore thematic content appropriate for their age and level of life experience. By having a real audience and purpose for writing, she built in authentic motivation. She incorporated content and process adaptations so that all of the learners could be working toward a common goal at appropriate levels of complexity. She also capitalized on a key process in differentiation—the use of collaboration. By purposefully creating partnerships with lower- and higher-proficiency learners, she created opportunities for the less-proficient students to become integrally involved.

## Conclusion

As middle level teachers serve growing numbers of ELL students in their classrooms, their skills in differentiating instruction will need to expand. Differentiated instruction will take different forms depending on the styles of the teacher and students, but it should become more familiar to teachers as they more routinely implement it. Rather than thinking of differentiation as individualized learning plans for every single student, teachers should consider it “variations on a theme,” beginning with a base project, task, or learning goal that fits a particular class, then providing supports the learners will need to develop content knowledge and language and to stay appropriately challenged. Addressing the needs of ELLs can actually be an opportunity for teachers to grow and develop new skills, materials, and approaches that may benefit all learners in the classroom.

### Extensions

Consider the adaptations you already make to support your ELLs as they work to meet the demands of your content area curriculum. What is your understanding of the difference between "sheltering" and "differentiating" instruction for ELLs? Does differentiation based on language proficiency differ from differentiation based on other factors?

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## 2012 AMLE Call for Nominations

Now is the time to become more involved in advancing the field of middle level education. AMLE is accepting nominations for the 2012 Board of Trustees election. Members are encouraged to nominate themselves or a colleague.

*Nominations must be submitted by January 28, 2012.*

[www.amle.org/election](http://www.amle.org/election)





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