**Utilizing Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners with Disabilities**

*by Robi Kronberg*

As more educators face the challenging and often daunting task of teaching English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities, it is becoming increasingly imperative that teachers are equipped with sound pedagogy as well as a wide repertoire of instructional tools and strategies designed to create accessible and successful learning opportunities for all students. Principles of *differentiated instruction*and*universal design for learning*, as well as the methodology and strategies inherent in our collective knowledge base of English language acquisition and special education, have the potential to provide a useful combination of theory and practice to support successful student achievement. Implementing these educational frameworks with fidelity requires educators to think thoroughly and intentionally about who they teach, what they teach, and how best to teach.

**Differentiated Instruction Overview**

Much has been written and debated about differentiated instruction in the past 10 years. While different definitions exist, many scholars and practitioners agree that differentiated instruction embodies both a set of principles and a repertoire of instructional practices that are proactively implemented for the purpose of meeting the varied needs of all students. Non-negotiables of differentiated instruction could be considered to include respecting individuals, owning student success, building community, providing high quality curriculum, utilizing assessment to inform instruction, implementing flexible classroom routines, creating varied avenues to learning, and sharing responsibility for teaching and learning (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).

Some educators believe that differentiated instruction is difficult to empirically validate as it includes an amalgamation of many different teaching theories and practices. Other researchers and practitioners point to a history of studies that validate components inherent in differentiated instruction and conclude that differentiated instruction has a positive basis in research. In spite of the ongoing debate, many school districts have embraced differentiated instruction as a professional development focus and have encouraged teachers to implement educational practices that embody the principles of differentiated instruction. Because of the significant recognition of differentiated instruction as a viable means to meet the needs of diverse learners, its potential to be effectively utilized with ELLs with disabilities is worthy of continual examination.

A positive note for educators: the vast majority of the principles and strategies deemed to support ELLs with disabilities transcend applicability to only one type of student. In short, many of the principles and strategies represent sound educational practice for all students. It is a daily occurrence to hear a teacher remark, “I differentiated today’s lesson specifically for six students and realized that my other students also benefitted from the varied text choices and the visual organizer.” Good teaching for a few is most often good teaching for all.

The remainder of this article discusses and illustrates how several constructs of differentiated instruction can be utilized to support ELLs with disabilities.

**Knowing and Respecting Your Students**

Quality differentiation for all students must be rooted in a knowledge of and respect for specific students. This knowledge base includes students’ prior academic experiences, cultural beliefs and practices, linguistic strengths and needs, learning preferences, interests, and prior and current academic performance. When teaching ELLs with disabilities additional information is essential. It is important for teachers to know each student’s level of English language proficiency (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010). Knowledge of each student’s linguistic proficiency in the student’s native language, as well as the student’s prior experiences with formal schooling, are also important. Relative to information about disability, it is essential for educators to know specific information about each student’s disability; how the disability impacts learning, including language learning in both their native language and English; and the services, goals, and accommodations/modifications that are described in the IEP (Individualized Education Program). A teacher who knows his or her students well is far likelier to create respectful and engaging learning opportunities for all students, including those with diverse language and learning needs.

**Creating Varied Avenues to Learning**

A primary goal for all educators who aim to differentiate is to create access to curriculum and instruction so that all students can be challenged, but not overwhelmed, by academic demands. Determining an appropriate level of challenge within academic content can be particularly challenging for ELLs as linguistic proficiency plays a significant role in the ability to understand academic content. English language learners face challenges in all four areas of language: reading, writing, speaking and listening. These challenges are made more complex when combined with students’ specific disabilities (e.g., storing or retrieving information, focusing attention, spatial relationships, abstract reasoning, language processing, visual-perceptual processing) and the effect of the disability on educational performance.

When designing lessons, the teacher rooted in the framework of differentiated instruction continually utilizes assessment data to guide upfront instructional planning as well as day-to-day instruction. Of particular importance when planning instruction for ELLs with disabilities are decisions about *frontloading* instruction. Frontloading introduces students to important aspects of the soon-to-be taught curricular content in order to increase understanding of the content. Teachers can choose to frontload such topics as: critical academic vocabulary; big ideas; essential understandings; specific purposes for reading, speaking, listening, or writing; and text structures that will be encountered. When frontloading for ELLs with disabilities, teachers should consider language-related needs as well as disability-related needs.

**Planning Effective Instruction**

When planning effective instruction for ELLs with disabilities, it is important to be cognizant of two distinct areas of need – linguistic needs and disability-related needs. Relative to linguistic needs, it is important for a teacher to consider what specific academic language students will need to know in order to understand the content and communicate mastery of the focus skill/s. English language learners, both with and without disabilities, often struggle with academic vocabulary and therefore benefit from explicit instruction on essential vocabulary words as well as the language used to demonstrate understanding of a specific focus skill. An example involves the focus skill of *sequencing.* For students learning about the sequence of events in a historical context, students must understand the academic terminology inherent in the time period being studied. Additionally, in order to speak of, write about, or read and comprehend text it will be necessary for students to also understand the languageused to articulate events in sequential order. A student with emergent language skills may benefit from being explicitly taught basic sequencing words such as *first, next, then,*and*last*. A student with more advanced English language skills might benefit from explicit instruction in more sophisticated sequencing terms such as *initially, in the interim, towards the end,*and*finally.* Designing instruction that addresses the academic content (historical time period), as well as the focus skill (sequencing) and the language used to communicate both requires thoughtful and intentional lesson planning. A teacher might choose to frontload the terminology of sequencing and several targeted vocabulary words from the social studies lesson. Ongoing instruction would include repeated exposure to academic content as well content-embedded language in text material, teacher presentation, and student discourse. Some students who are native English speakers may also benefit from the same frontloaded lesson and could be easily included in targeted small group lessons.

Relative to disability-related needs, it is important for the teacher to plan instruction that will address learning strengths and needs as specified on students’ IEPs. Using the above lesson focus, a teacher could further differentiate the lesson to include accommodations and/or modifications needed by certain students. For example, one student requiring multisensory presentation might need to see the sequencing terms in repeated contexts as well as repeatedly hear the terms. Another student might benefit from placing the sequencing words on the floor and retelling the key events in chronological order while stepping on the correct sequencing term. Yet another student might need a color coded visual organizer which lists key events in chronological order and includes a word bankof appropriate sequencing terms for later use in a writing task. Still other students may benefit from a picture dictionary or a captioned video highlighting the social studies topic being studied. As with the previous example, these instructional options may be specifically implemented to meet the needs of targeted students, but could be made available should other students find these varied approaches helpful to facilitate their own content understanding.

When instructional planning includes attention to both linguistic needs and disability-related needs, it is likely that a teacher will incorporate instructional strategies that are responsive to the range of learner needs. Two of the many strategies that are frequently discussed in the literature of differentiated instruction, instruction for ELLs, and individualized instruction for students with disabilities are *instructional scaffolding*and*collaborative peer instruction*. Instructional scaffolding involves providing temporary support to a student who is not yet at independent mastery of a task or skill. Scaffolded supports can include such things as modeling, written organizers or templates, and verbal coaching. Collaborative peer instruction includes a variety of means through which students formally and informally interact around instructional tasks.A teacher who has a thorough knowledge of his or her students might differentiate a writing lesson by providing a framed paragraph (scaffolding) for students needing guided writing support while encouraging other students to examine in-depth writing samples to determine writer style and voice. All students may end the lesson by working in small groups to share their insights as writers.

Delivering information to ELLs with disabilities must enhance student comprehension. The literature on teaching both ELLs and students with disabilities consistently encourages teachers to present information slowly and succinctly, chunk information into manageable pieces, allow for wait time, build-in checks for student understanding, and provide opportunities for students to relate the content to prior knowledge and experiences. The use of *sheltered instruction,*a methodology developed for ELLs that addresses both language and content instruction, specifically addresses the need for teachers to repeat and restate instruction; slow the rate of delivery; provide visual references, physical gestures and realia to increase student understanding of spoken and written words; simplify the use of complex language; and use high-frequency words (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Fortunately, there is ample evidence to suggest that these same strategies benefit not only students with disabilities and ELLs, but can support all students in successfully accessing grade level curriculum and instruction.

**Conclusion**

The literature on the use of differentiated instruction with English language learners who have disabilities is limited. However, there is clear consensus that the use of sound educational practices will benefit all students. Collaboration among practitioners who have different skills and knowledge, defensible implementation of educational practices, and ongoing formative and summative assessment of student growth and instructional effectiveness are imperative as we continue to explore the intersection between differentiated instruction and the achievement of ELLs with disabilities.

**References**

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