

## Chapter 5

# Differentiating Instruction for Young English Language Learners in the Content Areas

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the practice of differentiating instruction for young English Language Learners (ELLs) in the academic content areas. While ELLs are the most rapidly growing demographic in US K-12 public schools, they are also the most diverse, and will thus benefit from dynamic instruction that meets their needs to provide challenge, success, and fit. Based upon earlier applications of differentiated instruction (such as those in Tomlinson, 1999), this chapter proffers four examples of differentiated activities for young ELLs in math, science, social studies, and language arts. It then extends traditional implementation of differentiated instruction to include students' funds of knowledge and their linguistic repertoire, thereby providing teachers of young ELLs more holistic means to extend student engagement with the content and the type of language favored in academic settings.*

### INTRODUCTION

Differentiated instruction (DI) is considered both a philosophy of and an approach to education designed to address learner variance in classrooms by providing challenge, success, and fit for today's diverse learners (Tomlinson, 2001). English Language Learners (ELLs) in particular will vary along factors such as level of literacy in their first language (L1), level of academic content-area knowledge, socioeconomic status, whether the student is foreign-born or not, family situation and other personal experiences (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Thus, differentiating the *content* of lessons, the *process* by which the teacher presents the new information, and the *products* created by students may be an effective route to provide ELLs in K-12 public schools with maximum access to core curricula.

Teachers may wonder how to differentiate instruction for ELLs due to language issues, core curriculum standards and high-stakes testing (Van Lier & Walqui, 2012). However, supporters of DI assert

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that differentiation and rigorous standards-based requirements are not mutually exclusive; while the curriculum standards dictate what must be taught, DI can be the way in which to teach it (Tomlinson, 1999). Nevertheless, with a focus on providing access to the core curriculum via differentiation strategies, there remain essential pieces for ELLs that can and should be addressed via DI: how to connect to students' culture and how to explicitly scaffold their academic language development, to promote success along with their grade-level peers.

This chapter examines DI from an applied linguistics perspective relative to the teaching of ELLs in U.S. K-12 public schools. First, a definition of differentiated instruction is provided, supported by a brief review of both general education and second language acquisition (SLA) research. More specifically, the author makes the case for the consideration of students' funds of knowledge—"the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; p. 133)—as a critical piece to the learner profile by which teachers can differentiate activities. In addition, the chapter recognizes the importance of first language (L1) development in the role of second language (L2) development (Cummins, 1979) and how to account for the L1 in DI design, as well as highlight the need for interactive classroom structures that promote the role of oral language in literacy development for young learners (August & Shanahan, 2006).

To illustrate these principles in practice, this chapter offers concrete examples of DI in social studies, science, math, and language arts that integrate various cultural components and also meet sample content and language objectives (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013). The activities described include Tiered activities in social studies and language arts (one activity at different English proficiency levels), a Cubing activity in science (one activity with six different process/product higher order thinking skill options), and a RAFT perspective writing activity in math (one content concept with several different perspective/modality options). To conclude the chapter, assessment of differentiated instruction relative to ELLs is explicated, along with suggestions for further reading and classroom application.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Defining "Differentiated Instruction"**

Both discord and agreement exist in defining differentiated instruction (used synonymously here with the term "differentiation" and abbreviated hereafter as DI), making it a somewhat nebulous construct to characterize. The discord exists primarily in identifying whether DI is a pedagogical philosophy, or more of an instructional methodology. In this case, *methodology* is defined a system of methods, principles, and rules for regulating teaching practices, while a *philosophy* deals more with the conceptualization of basic principles underlying DI.

### **DI as a Pedagogical Philosophy**

Scholars who describe DI as more of a philosophy agree on basic defining characteristics. The first is the obvious presence and acknowledgement of learner differences in classrooms. The second is the role of educators in responding to those differences and creating opportunities for learning. The third is the notion of a focus on the student and their respective interests and abilities.

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