Differentiation in the Middle School Classroom: Teaching English to Diverse Learners

BY JIM CUMMINS, Ph.D.

The term *differentiation* refers to the process whereby teachers adjust their instruction to take account of the academic strengths, background knowledge, interests, and learning needs of students in their classrooms. Differentiated instruction recognizes that in typical classrooms there are major differences among students with respect to their prior personal and academic experiences; consequently 'one-size-fits-all' instruction simply won't work very well.

The range of experiences that learners bring to the classroom can be seen in the diversity that exists within English language learners (ELLs). Not only is there a range of language proficiencies in both their home language (L1) and English among ELLs, but they also vary in their countries of origin, the extent to which they have experienced regular as opposed to interrupted schooling prior to coming to the United States, and the socioeconomic status of their parents with respect to income and educational levels. The majority of ELLs have been born in the United States but many experience difficulties in attaining the academic English skills necessary to fully access the curriculum, despite the fact that they may be relatively fluent in conversational English.

In order to differentiate instruction effectively, teachers obviously must get to know their students. Standardized test results from prior years can provide relevant information about students' previous academic accomplishments and challenges. However, test results can also be misleading and provide only a partial picture of the students' academic potential. For example, standardized test results for ELLs are likely to underestimate their academic strengths and potential for at least 5 years after they start learning English. There are two reasons why these students typically require at least 5 years (and frequently longer) to attain grade expectations: (a) academic language proficiency is more challenging to acquire than conversational fluency because of many more low-frequency words and complex grammatical constructions than is the case in everyday conversational interactions; and (b) ELLs need to

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'run faster' than native-speakers of English because they are attempting to catch up academically to a moving target insofar as every year native speakers continue to expand their academic language proficiency including reading and writing skills.

The fact that standardized tests need to be interpreted cautiously highlights the importance of the formative classroom-based assessment that we carry out routinely in the context of teaching academic content. This ongoing assessment provides us with extremely useful information about how well our students are learning and what kinds of instructional differentiation might be appropriate to enable individual students or groups of students to access the curriculum. Based on our interactions with students, observations of their work in class, and assessment of the academic work they produce,

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we get to know a lot about their talents and challenges as well as their interests and learning preferences. This ongoing accumulation of knowledge enables us to fine-tune our instruction in increasingly effective ways.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

With the exception of some students who may have been diagnosed with special educational needs, all students are expected to attain state-specified standards in the different content areas. Thus, differentiation does not imply lower academic expectations for students who may be experiencing difficulty in attaining grade-level standards. These students should be given the same opportunities to engage in higher-order thinking and creative academic work as their peers. We will need to provide more extensive instructional sup-

ports to enable some students to carry out challenging academic tasks that other students are able to perform more or less independently. However, the intellectual challenge should not be diluted. All students will benefit from instruction that incorporates high teacher expectations and high intellectual challenge. Differentiation enables us to provide different levels of instructional support according to the learning needs of diverse groups of students.

State-mandated standards serve as the basic organizing element for instruction. Teachers work from the standards as the starting point for instructional planning to identify content and language objectives in their lesson plans. This approach is consistent with the principle of *backward design*, advocated by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), where we start with a clear and detailed statement of the desired learning outcomes and then develop activities and tasks that are appropriate to enable students to attain these specified learning outcomes.

Student engagement will be enhanced when the learning activities or tasks are structured around 'big ideas' or essential questions. Grant Wiggins (2010) noted that "an idea is big if it helps us make sense of lots of otherwise meaningless, isolated, inert, or confusing facts." A big idea serves as a conceptual framework or lens that enables us to see connections between phenomena and bring them into focus so that we can better understand how they operate. According to Wiggins, the notion of a 'food chain' is a big idea insofar as it connects a variety of animal behaviors and plant matter to a larger system of energy exchange, allowing us to "then see the role of predators, garbage, and our relationship to nature in a completely new and [more] helpful way than before."

In working towards a deeper understanding of big ideas, the tasks we design should be intellectually substantive and relevant to students' lives, interests, and local or global issues. The instructional strategies we employ to support students to carry out these 'rich' tasks should be designed not only to teach specific academic content but also to generate in an intentional and predictable way particular academic language forms and functions that are central to students' educational success. Ideally, teachers will draw students' attention to and reinforce their awareness of academic language in content classes across the curriculum (e.g., science, math, history, etc.) rather than just in teaching English.

We can distinguish four broad strategies that are central to effective instruction and expansion of students' language and literacy skills. Teachers build differentiation

into their use of these instructional strategies for all students. However, differentiation is particularly important in enabling ELLs to understand instruction and catch up academically.

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FOUR ESSENTIAL INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Effective language and literacy instruction for middle school students will include the following four overlapping components:

• Maximize literacy engagement;

• Scaffold comprehension and production of language;

• Connect instruction to students' lives and affirm their identities;

• Reinforce language knowledge and awareness across the curriculum;

MAXIMIZE LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

The case for literacy engagement as a primary determinant of achievement is both logical and empirical. Logic dictates that literacy engagement is crucial because academic language is found primarily in printed text rather than in everyday conversation. Thus, students' opportunities to broaden their vocabulary knowledge and develop strong reading comprehension skills are likely to be greatly enhanced when they have abundant access to printed texts and engage actively with these texts.

This logic is reinforced by a massive amount of research evidence that documents the causal relationship between literacy engagement and the development of

reading and writing skills (e.g., Cummins, 2007; Krashen, 2004; Lindsay, 2013). The overall trends can be illustrated by the findings of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies. The PISA studies that have been carried out for almost 20 years focus on the achievement of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science and involve hundreds of thousands of students in more than 70 countries around the world.

The PISA findings have shown consistently that "the level of a student's reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student's interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages" (OECD, 2004, p. 8). University of Baltimore cognitive psychologist, John Guthrie (2004, p. 5) reinforced this conclusion, noting that students

> whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income.

The OECD (2010) has also reported that there was about a one-third overlap between the negative effects of low socioeconomic status and the positive effects of reading engagement. The implication is that schools can potentially 'push back' about one-third of the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage by ensuring that students have access to a print-rich environment and become actively engaged with literacy.

The following differentiation strategies can support students in becoming actively engaged with literacy:

• Encourage students to respond to reading selections in relation to their prior knowledge, life experiences, and interests. This response could take place orally through discussion in cooperative learning groups and be followed up through group or individual writing responses;

• Encourage students to extend their understanding of underlying themes in reading selections by carrying out additional research either individually or in groups. For example, students could explore the theme of

'standing up for what's right' by researching individuals from their own cultural backgrounds who championed social justice. ELLs could carry out and write up this research in both their L1 and English and could also use informants from their own families or communities to identify advocates for social justice.

• Encourage ELLs to use electronic bilingual dictionary supports (e.g., apps on cell phones such as Google Translate) as aids to comprehension and enable students from the same language backgrounds to work together for some projects in which they can use both their L1 and English for discussion and planning. Students would report the findings or conclusions of their project in English to the rest of the class.

• Encourage creativity in students by supporting them in using new media to carry out group projects based on what they have read and/or researched (e.g., video or iMovie).

SCAFFOLD COMPREHENSION AND PRODUCTION OF LANGUAGE

The metaphor of scaffolding is frequently used to describe the temporary supports that teachers provide that enable learners to carry out academic tasks that would otherwise be beyond their abilities. These supports can be reduced gradually as the learner gains more expertise. In order to provide appropriate scaffolding, it is important that teachers have a good sense of their students' current linguistic and academic abilities and also that they have identified the language demands of the lesson that might cause difficulties for students, especially ELLs. In short, scaffolding involves providing a variety of instructional supports to ensure that students' exposure to academic language results in them learning academic language. These instructional supports include the following:

• Use of graphic organizers and other visual supports (e.g., diagramming concepts);

• Demonstrations and hands-on experiences;

• Collaborative group work;

• Language clarification (explanation, dictionary use, etc.)

• Teach effective learning strategies (e.g., planning tasks, visualization, note taking/summarizing, questioning for clarification, etc.);

• Encourage students to draw on their multilingual

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repertoires as a stepping stone to English (e.g., initial writing or note-taking in L1 as a means of transferring knowledge and skills from L1 to English);

• Use sentence frames (Lewis & Wray, 1997) to support students' use of academic language in response to texts (e.g., Before I read about this topic I thought that.........But when I read about it I learnt that .... etc.).

CONNECT TO STUDENTS' LIVES AND AFFIRM THEIR IDENTITIES

Researchers agree about the importance for reading comprehension of activating and building students' background knowledge. Pressley, Duke, and Boling (2004, p. 51) express this point as follows: "there are many demonstrations in the research literature that background knowledge improves comprehension and memory of text ... a clear implication of this literature is that building world and cultural knowledge that will be encountered in the child's future reading is essential if students are to comprehend those readings at a high level." Learning can be defined as the integration of new knowledge and skills with the knowledge and skills we already possess. Therefore, activating prior knowledge and building background knowledge as needed is an essential component of effective instruction for newcomer students.

However, activating background knowledge goes far beyond simply reminding students of what they learned in a previous lesson. Student engagement will be enhanced when we support them in connecting the texts they read to their cultural knowledge and their entire

life experiences. Teachers can encourage students to explore their personal responses to texts by asking questions such as "Have you ever seen (felt, experienced) something like this?" "Have you ever wanted something similar?" Students can also work in groups to explore critical responses to texts by discussing questions such as: "Is what this character said valid?" "What evidence does he/she advance to support his/her perspectives?" "Are there any alternatives to this situation?" etc.

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Connecting instruction to students' lives by evoking personal and intellectual responses to texts represents not only a form of differentiation but also affirms students' identities. Students who feel that their voices are heard and their culture and identity validated in the classroom are much more likely to engage academically than those who feel ignored or devalued. The publication of student writing and creative project work (e.g., on a school or classroom web site) is a highly effective means of reinforcing students' academic and cultural identities.

REINFORCE LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Academic language proficiency includes knowledge of the less frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language. As students progress through the grades, they encounter far more low-frequency words, complex syntax (e.g. passive voice), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation. Many of these low-frequency words come from Latin and Greek sources (e.g., predict, photosynthesis, sequence, revolution, etc.). Students are required to

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understand linguistically and conceptually demanding texts in the content areas (e.g. literature, social studies, science, mathematics) and to use this language in an accurate and coherent way in their own writing. Use of nominalization, where abstract nouns are created from verbs or adjectives, is common in academic text (e.g., acceleration, estimation, prediction, etc.). Almost all of these words will have cognate relationships with languages such as Spanish that also derive from Latin and Greek sources.

In order to accelerate students' learning of academic language, teachers need to take advantage of every opportunity to draw students' attention to how language works in subjects across the curriculum and to stimulate students' curiosity about language. This focus on language awareness includes explicit vocabulary instruction in the context of students' engagement with print, and explicit instruction about the discourse conventions of particular genres of language. For bilingual students, it would also include drawing students' attention to cross-lingual connections (e.g., cognate relationships). For example, teachers can encourage students to keep 'cognate notebooks' where they make note of Spanish-English cognates that they encounter in the texts they read (e.g., *encounter – encontrar*).

It is also important for teachers to explicitly articulate language objectives as part of their lesson plans and to differentiate these language objectives according to the language levels of particular groups of students. Jennifer

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Himmel (2012) defines language objectives as follows: "Language objectives are lesson objectives that specifically outline the type of language that students will need to learn and use in order to accomplish the goals of the lesson." She points out that language objectives involve the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) as well as:

- Language functions relevant to learning the lesson content (e.g., hypothesizing, explaining, etc.)

- Technical and general academic vocabulary required to understand the lesson

- Language learning strategies that support comprehension of content (e.g., note-taking, questioning, making predictions, etc.)

Lily Wong Fillmore has articulated and extensively field-tested one useful strategy for differentiating instruction designed to reinforce students' knowledge of academic language. She terms this the juicy sentence strategy. In order to draw students' attention systematically to

the ways in which complex text encodes meaning, the teacher leads small groups of students in a 15- to 20-minute instructional conversation focused on a single sentence drawn from one of the texts the class is working on. When students engage with complex text day after day and gain experience in unpacking the meaning, they develop what Wong Fillmore calls a 'habit of mind' that enables them to notice and pay attention to how language works.

What kinds of sentences should teachers choose? Wong Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) suggest that the most appropriate kind of sentence is "one that is so complex it begs for explication, is grammatically interesting, and is focused on an important point in the passage." These sentences will often pack lots of information into extended noun phrases, use passive verbs, and contain complex grammatical structures. They may also contain unfamiliar vocabulary, cohesive devices, and figurative language. Teachers obviously can choose sentences according to the language levels of particular groups of learners and adjust instruction so that it is challenging but also accessible to students.

Wong Fillmore emphasizes that the juicy sentence strategy must be a genuine instructional conversation. The strategy will not be successful if teachers just explain to students how the language works rather than engaging them actively in trying to figure out the relationships between the meaning of the text and the language used to express this meaning.

CONCLUSION

The instructional philosophy underlying differentiation is very different than the traditional orientation that designates some students as learning 'at grade level' and others as 'struggling' or functioning below grade level and therefore requiring remediation. Too frequently, this traditional orientation inadvertently stigmatizes ELLs and other students who are identified as 'below grade level.' By contrast, differentiation recognizes that students in typical classrooms vary significantly in their prior learning experiences, educational opportunities, and exposure to English. When differentiation is normalized and viewed as intrinsic to effective teaching, teachers adjust their instruction to take account of this reality and to maximize the academic engagement of all students.

This orientation to differentiation enables us to look at instruction through two lens: (a) the lens of the teaching-learning relationship in a narrow sense, represented by the strategies that teachers use to provide comprehensible input and effective literacy instruction, and (b) the lens of identity negotiation, which is represented by the messages communicated to students regarding their identities—who they are in the teacher's eyes and who they are capable of becoming. Perhaps the most important thing that teachers can do to promote students' mastery of academic English is to organize the classroom as a learning community where the voices of

all students can be heard. When students feel strong respect and affirmation from their teachers and peers, it generates a powerful sense of belonging to the classroom learning community and motivation to participate fully in that community. Reading texts that students can relate to their personal histories or their growing understanding of the world generates the motivation to keep on reading. Writing narratives and analyses that express their growing sense of self, their identity, allows students to map out where they have come from and where they are going.

Students are much more than their score on a standardized test and they will engage academically when teachers recognize their talents, interests, and accomplishments. Getting to know our students both as learners and as people is the first step towards effective differentiated instruction.

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