

Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners

A Guide for K-12 Teachers



Shelley Fairbairn
Stephaney Jones-Vo

Instructional Strategies

Across All Levels

- Ensure that your classroom welcomes all students by representing the culture of each student, using pictures, flags, souvenirs, etc.
- Learn key words and phrases in ELLs' first languages in order to build relationships with students and create a welcoming environment.
- Afford access to the curriculum by using realia, pictures, diagrams, models, demonstrations, graphic organizers, nonverbal communication, videos, computer-assisted instruction, etc.
- Apply the same academic content standards to the learning of all students (non-ELLs and ELLs alike).
- Build your ELLs' learning capacity by explicitly and continuously teaching social and content/academic language (including cross-curricular academic words such as compare/contrast, analyze, synthesize), using visual support and contextualized examples.
- Inform your students of the daily objectives for each lesson in terms of both language and content.
- Tailor instruction and assignments/assessments to the language proficiency level of each student.
- Ensure that directions are clear; confirm that students understand them.
- When giving oral directions, also provide written directions.
- Capitalize upon ELLs' backgrounds and prior experiences.
- Activate ELLs' interests and prior knowledge as they relate to content.
- Honor ELLs' first languages and cultures in the classroom.
- When possible, use students' first languages to support learning in the content areas.
- Teach cross-linguistic features (e.g., cognates, grammatical constructions, prefixes, suffixes, and root words) to expand student language ability.
- Involve ELLs' families in school activities to support student achievement, communicating with families in the language that they understand best.
- Support the development and maintenance of literacy in ELLs' first languages to enhance their acquisition of English.
- Offer access to multicultural and first-language books.
- Make available high-quality, age-appropriate, and visually supported lower-reading-level books that are aligned with content curriculum.
- Facilitate multiple, regular, and consistent opportunities for ELLs to interact with native speakers through cooperative learning activities and heterogeneous grouping.
- Embed the development of higher-order thinking (e.g., application, analysis, synthesis, creation, evaluation) throughout instruction.
- Make the abstract comprehensible by first demonstrating concrete applications or examples (e.g., modeling with manipulatives, experiential activities).
- Focus error correction on specific, level-appropriate aspects of language.
- Scaffold ELLs' learning by facilitating tutoring by other students or volunteers.
- Create a print-rich environment using word, language, and concept walls or posters that include pictorial support.
- Socialize students into their new culture by explicitly guiding them in norms of behavior, speech conventions (e.g., polite ways to make requests or apologize), nonverbal communication (e.g., body language, personal space, eye contact), and other facets of the culture.
- When utilizing the assistance of (bilingual) paraeducators, provide them with clear guidance regarding their roles and how to work effectively with students and families.
- Include appropriately identified ELLs in gifted and talented programming, across proficiency levels.
- Maintain English language support for ELLs who receive special education services across proficiency levels.
- Take steps to ensure that ELLs across proficiency levels have equal access to and participation in extracurricular activities.

In General

- Provide sensory support for *every* lesson (e.g., real objects, pictures, hands-on materials and experiences, nonverbal communication, demonstrations, modeling, simulations).

Listening

- Teach basic commands by modeling actions (e.g., "Please close the door," "Open your book.")
- Use simplified, correct language, repeating or paraphrasing as needed.
- Allow sufficient wait time (likely several seconds).
- Promote higher-order thinking processes during oral teaching by simultaneously modeling the completion of graphic organizers.
- Employ think-alouds to model both processes and language.

Speaking

- Encourage participation in discussions by eliciting nonverbal or brief communication.
- Prompt and scaffold oral language production by modeling content and academic language and providing sentence examples and models (e.g., "The rabbit has fur. _____ has _____ scales.").
- Concentrate on student meaning rather than on correctness of expression.
- Build confidence by rewarding all attempts to communicate.

Pre-reading and Reading

- At the school and program levels, for L1-pre-literate students, immediately implement a high-quality, research-based, culturally and linguistically sensitive reading development program.
- For reading-related activities, use extensive visual support (e.g., posters, pictures), since Level 1 students are typically unable to derive meaning from print alone.
- Support grade-level content curriculum with high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level books aligned with content curriculum that provide extensive visual support.
- Teach pre-reading skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, concepts of print, phonics).
- Lay a foundation for comprehension: build background and help students to make connections to prior learning and experiences.
- Read or sing visually supported stories or texts to students, using props and acting to increase comprehension and develop oral language skills necessary for reading.
- Incorporate shared, shared-to-guided, and guided reading.
- Implement language experience stories.
- Promote the development of higher-order thinking skills by modeling the use of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, T-charts, and concept maps.

Writing

- Ask students to communicate through cutting and pasting images or drawing.
- Prompt and scaffold written language production by modeling content and academic language and providing sentence examples and models (e.g., "The rabbit has fur. The _____ has scales.").
- Incorporate modeled, shared, and guided writing activities.
- Accept drawing, copying, and labeling and self-generated approximations of words and phrases in lieu of grade-level writing.
- Concentrate on student meaning rather than on correctness of expression.
- Promote the development of higher-order thinking skills by modeling the use of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, T-charts, and concept maps.

In General

- Provide sensory support for *every* lesson (e.g., real objects, pictures, hands-on materials and experiences, nonverbal communication, demonstrations, modeling, simulations).

Listening

- Use simplified, correct language, repeating or paraphrasing as needed.
- Allow sufficient wait time (likely several seconds).
- Promote higher-order thinking processes during oral teaching by providing graphic organizers, modeling their completion as needed.
- Employ think-alouds to model both processes and language.

Speaking

- Encourage participation in discussions by eliciting phrases or simple sentences.
- Prompt and scaffold oral language production by modeling content/academic language and providing sentence examples and models (e.g., "The rabbit has fur. _____ has _____ scales.").
- Concentrate on student meaning rather than on correctness of expression.
- Build confidence by rewarding all attempts to communicate.

Pre-reading and Reading

- At the school and program levels, for L1-pre-literate students (continue to) implement a high-quality, research-based, culturally and linguistically sensitive reading development program.
- For reading-related activities, use extensive visual support (e.g., posters, pictures), since Level 2 students are often unable to derive meaning from print alone.
- Support grade-level content curriculum with high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level books aligned with content curriculum that provide extensive visual support.
- Teach pre-reading skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, concepts of print, phonics).
- Lay a foundation for comprehension: build background and help students to make connections to prior learning and experiences.
- Read or sing visually supported stories or texts to students using props and acting to increase comprehension and develop oral language skills necessary for reading.
- Incorporate shared, shared-to-guided, and guided reading.
- Implement language experience stories.
- Promote the development of higher-order thinking skills by modeling the use of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, T-charts, and concept maps.

Writing

- Prompt and scaffold written language production by modeling content/academic language and providing sentence examples and models (e.g., "The rabbit has fur. _____ has _____ scales.").
- Incorporate modeled, shared, and guided writing activities.
- Accept phrases or simple sentences in lieu of grade-level writing expectations.
- Concentrate on student meaning rather than on correctness of expression.
- Promote higher-order thinking skills by modeling the use of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, T-charts, and concept maps.

In General

- Provide sensory support for *every* lesson (e.g., real objects, pictures, hands-on materials and experiences, nonverbal communication, demonstrations, modeling, simulations).
- Explicitly teach and require students to use increasingly complex content/academic vocabulary and sentence structures.

Listening

- Prompt and scaffold students' language development by using increasingly complex language, paraphrasing as needed.
- Allow sufficient wait time (likely several seconds).
- Facilitate and support higher-order thinking processes during oral teaching by providing students with graphic organizers, modeling their completion, as needed.
- Employ think-alouds to model both processes and language.

Speaking

- Provide opportunities to produce extended oral discourse through activities such as reporting and presentations.
- Prompt and scaffold extended oral language production by providing visually supported sentence-level frames and models for high-quality academic discourse (e.g., "As a result of the interaction of ____ and ____...").
- Concentrate on students' meaning to a greater extent than on correctness of expression.

Reading

- At the school and program levels, for L1-pre-literate students, (continue to) implement a high-quality, research-based, culturally and linguistically sensitive reading development program.
- Use high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level books aligned with content curriculum that provide extensive visual support.
- Lay a foundation for comprehension: build background and help students to make connections to prior learning and experiences.
- Incorporate shared, shared-to-guided, and guided reading.
- Facilitate and support the development of higher-order thinking skills using graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, T-charts, and concept maps.

Writing

- Provide opportunities to produce extended written discourse through activities such as journaling, report writing, and preparing presentations.
- Prompt and scaffold extended written language production by providing visually supported sentence-level frames and models for high-quality academic discourse (e.g., "As a result of the interaction of ____ and ____...").
- Incorporate modeled, shared, and guided writing activities.
- Accept increasingly complex sentences in lieu of grade-level writing expectations.
- Engage students in writing activities that elicit expanded sentences using a range of complexity.
- Concentrate on student meaning to a greater extent than on correctness of expression.
- Facilitate and support the development of higher-order thinking skills by using graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, T-charts, and concept maps.

In General

- Provide sensory support for *every* lesson (e.g., real objects, pictures, hands-on materials and experiences, nonverbal communication, demonstrations, modeling, simulations).
- Explicitly teach and require students to use content/academic vocabulary and grammatically varied language about concrete and abstract topics, with diminishing errors.
- Provide scaffolding and support needed for students to engage in grade-level assignments/assessments.

Listening

- Scaffold language development by modeling and prompting increasingly academic and grammatically varied language about both concrete and abstract topics.
- Promote higher-order thinking processes during oral teaching by providing students with graphic organizers.

Speaking

- Provide opportunities to produce extended oral discourse, increasingly inclusive of abstract thought.
- Scaffold extended oral language production by providing visually supported discourse-level frames and models for high-quality academic discourse (e.g., "In accordance with our hypothesis, the results of our experiment demonstrate _____. This means that _____.").
- Insist on increasingly correct and precise language.

Reading

- Use a combination of grade-level texts (with scaffolding) and high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level books aligned with content curriculum that provide visual support.
- Provide students with graphic organizers to enhance higher-order thinking.

Writing

- Provide opportunities to produce extended written discourse, increasingly inclusive of abstract thought.
- Scaffold extended written language production by providing visually supported discourse-level frames and models for high-quality academic discourse (e.g., "In accordance with our hypothesis, the results of our experiment demonstrate _____. This means that _____.").
- Insist on increasingly correct and precise language.
- Provide students with graphic organizers to enhance higher-order thinking.

In General

- Explicitly teach and require students to use precise and grammatically varied language across all grade-level-appropriate topics and contexts, expecting and allowing minimal errors.
- Engage students in the same tasks assigned to grade-level peers, diminishing scaffolding and support.

Listening

- Scaffold language development by modeling and prompting precise and grammatically varied language across all grade-level-appropriate topics and contexts, expecting and allowing minimal errors.

Speaking

- Provide opportunities to produce extended discourse using precise and grammatically varied language across all grade-level-appropriate topics and contexts.
- Emphasize the use of increasingly complex and precise language.

Reading

- Use grade-level texts, providing scaffolding as needed.

Writing

- Provide opportunities to produce extended written discourse using precise and grammatically varied language across all grade-level-appropriate topics, contexts, and genres.
- Emphasize the use of increasingly complex and precise language.



Assignment/Assessment Strategies

Across All Levels

- Ensure that academic assessment targets the same academic content standards set for all students (non-ELLs and ELLs alike).
- Consider students' language proficiency levels, and differentiate assessments/assignments accordingly.
- Ensure that directions are clear; confirm that students understand them.
- Differentiate standards-based scoring rubrics according to students' language proficiency levels. (Weight grading to emphasize content understanding more than linguistic perfection at lower levels of proficiency.)
- Share differentiated rubrics with students at the time that assignments are given.
- Utilize the same supports used in instruction (e.g., pictures, charts, graphs) when assessing students.
- Encourage students to demonstrate content knowledge, skills, and abilities, regardless of level of language proficiency, using a variety of differentiated performance-based and authentic assessments (e.g., demonstrations, dioramas, collages, journals, art projects, maps, models, posters).
- Allow ELLs to exercise personal choice in assignments (when appropriate) and to apply their background knowledge in order to enhance motivation.
- If traditional paper and pencil tests must be used with ELLs, focus on essential learning when creating them; create tests that are aligned with content objectives, of reasonable length, and matched to the linguistic levels of students.
- Use a variety of assessment procedures to obtain an accurate picture of what students know and can do in the content areas.
- Focus error correction on specific, level-appropriate aspects of language.
- When grading, avoid comparing students with each other; grade students according to predetermined standards for success that are aligned with students' language proficiency levels.
- Provide students with as much time as they need to complete assessments (unless the test is one that measures speed, such as a math computation test).
- Employ appropriate language-related accommodations (e.g., a word-to-word dictionary, giving directions in the student's first language) for classroom and large-scale assessments, in accordance with students' English proficiency levels.
- For large-scale standardized achievement tests, use only accommodations consistently used in the classroom and approved by the test developers.
- Explicitly prepare students with background knowledge and test-taking strategies needed for participating in classroom and large-scale standardized testing.
- Work creatively to include gifted ELLs in gifted and talented programming across proficiency levels.
- Ensure that appropriate assessment tools and procedures are used to identify ELLs for special education services, if indicated.

In General

- Focus on content knowledge rather than errors and omissions.
- Allow students to complete assessment procedures under the guidance of a bilingual teacher or paraeducator.
- Weight graded components according to students' linguistic strengths.
- Make the assignment/assessment process comprehensible by explaining the directions orally and providing visual support (e.g., realia, icons, manipulatives, modeling and models).

Listening and Speaking

- Evaluate comprehension by means of student nonverbal communication (e.g., locating or selecting by pointing, mimicking, "thumbs up/thumbs down," gestures).
- Ask for demonstration of understanding (e.g., pointing; drawing; matching; copying; using pictures or realia to sequence, categorize, prioritize, or evaluate).
- Prompt the repetition of a teacher cue or a short response.
- Test orally using everyday language to elicit individual words and brief chunks of language.
- Allow first-language oral responses, when appropriate.

Pre-reading and Reading

- Use high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level materials that provide extensive visual support, expecting comprehension to be dependent upon visuals provided.
- Elicit physical response (e.g., locating or selecting by pointing, hand raising).
- Ask for demonstration of understanding (e.g., sequencing, drawing, matching, mimicking).
- Prompt the repetition of a teacher cue (speaking or singing).
- Ask students to retell visually supported stories and texts presented with props and acting.
- Test orally using everyday language to elicit individual words and brief chunks of language.
- For students literate in the first language, support first-language reading by providing appropriate materials.

Writing

- Elicit beginning writing (e.g., drawing; copying or labeling; production of letters, words, numbers, and phrases).
- Use visually supported graphic organizers that students complete with pictures, words, or short phrases to check for understanding.
- Require students to supplement early writing with visual support to enhance meaning (e.g., drawing, magazine pictures, clip art).
- For students literate in the first language, welcome first-language writing, as appropriate.

In General

- Create and use assignments/assessments that allow students to demonstrate content knowledge, skills, and abilities without language mastery.
- Focus on correct answers rather than errors and omissions.
- Allow students to complete assessment procedures under the guidance of a bilingual teacher or paraeducator.
- Weight graded components according to students' linguistic strengths.
- Make the assignment/assessment process comprehensible by explaining the directions orally and providing visual support (e.g., realia, icons, manipulatives, modeling and models).

Listening and Speaking

- Test orally using everyday and general content/academic language to elicit phrases and simple sentences.
- Allow occasional first-language oral responses.

Pre-reading and Reading

- Use high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level materials that provide extensive visual support, expecting comprehension of frequently encountered words and phrases, often dependent upon visuals provided.
- Prompt the repetition of a teacher cue (speaking or singing).
- Test orally using everyday and general content/academic language to elicit phrases and simple sentences.
- For students literate in the first language, support first-language reading by providing appropriate materials.

Writing

- Elicit writing of phrases and simple sentences.
- Use visually supported graphic organizers that students complete to write phrases and simple sentences to check for understanding.
- Require students to supplement writing with visual support to enhance meaning (e.g., drawing, magazine pictures, clip art).
- For students literate in the first language, allow occasional first-language writing, as appropriate.

In General

- Create and use assignments/assessments that allow students to demonstrate content knowledge, skills, and abilities without language mastery.
- Consider allowing students to complete assessment procedures under the guidance of a bilingual teacher or paraeducator.
- Consider weighting graded components according to students' linguistic strengths.
- Make the assignment/assessment process comprehensible by explaining the directions orally and providing visual support (e.g., realia, icons, manipulatives, modeling and models).
- Simultaneously assess content and language development (e.g., through summarizing, story retelling, questioning and responding, analyzing, evaluating).

Listening and Speaking

- Test orally using and expecting more precise and specific content vocabulary and increasingly complex grammatical structures. (Language should reflect sentence-level frames and models used during instruction.)

Reading

- Use high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level materials that provide extensive visual support, expecting comprehension of increasingly complex sentence- and paragraph-level text.
- Test orally using and expecting more precise and specific content vocabulary and increasingly complex grammatical structures.
- When traditional paper and pencil tests must be used, employ simplified English and visual support (e.g., clip art, graphs).

Writing

- Elicit writing of increasingly complex sentence structures using a developing range of content/academic vocabulary.
- When traditional paper and pencil tests must be used, employ simplified English and visual support (e.g., clip art, graphs).

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In General

- Engage students with scaffolding and support.
- Consider weighting graded components according to students' linguistic strengths.
- Make the assessment process comprehensible by explaining the directions orally and providing visual support (e.g., realia, icons, manipulatives, models), as appropriate.
- Simultaneously assess content and language development (e.g., through summarizing, story retelling, questioning and responding, analyzing, evaluating).

Listening and Speaking

- Use and require increasingly academic and grammatically varied language about both concrete and abstract topics. (Language should reflect discourse-level frames and models used during instruction.)

Reading

- Use a combination of grade-level texts (with scaffolding) and high-quality, age-appropriate, lower-reading-level materials that provide visual support.
- Use traditional paper and pencil tests wisely, employing visual support (e.g., clip art, graphs) and linguistic scaffolding, as needed.

Writing

- Elicit writing of increasingly academic and grammatically varied language about both concrete and abstract topics. (Language should reflect discourse-level frames and models used during instruction.)
- Use traditional paper and pencil tests wisely, employing visual support (e.g., clip art, graphs) and linguistic scaffolding, as needed.

In General

- Engage students in grade-level assignments/assessments with minimal scaffolding and support.
- Simultaneously assess content and language development through grade-level assignments/assessments.

Listening and Speaking

- Use and require extended discourse including precise and grammatically varied language across all grade-level-appropriate topics and contexts.

Reading

- Use grade-level texts, providing scaffolding as needed.

Writing

- Use and require extended discourse including precise and grammatically varied language across all grade-level-appropriate topics and contexts.



Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for ELLs

Student Descriptors

Level 1

Level 2

Level 3

Level 4

Level 5



Listening. Begins to recognize often heard words and phrases that are supported contextually; requires frequent restatement or paraphrasing, and begins to develop awareness of the sound system of English.

Speaking. Possibly silent; produces often heard words memorized phrases, or self-generated language to express meaning or ask questions; supports communication with nonverbal cues; begins to produce the range of sounds of English.

Reading. Gains meaning primarily from visual support (e.g., pictures, graphic organizers, icons); if literate in the first language, may start to transfer those skills to English when provided with high-quality, visually supported reading instruction; preliteracy students may begin to develop reading skills in English when provided with high-quality, visually supported reading instruction.

Writing. May draw, copy written text, or write or dictate individual letters, words, or phrases (or approximations thereof) to convey meaning.

Aligned with the five proficiency levels described in Gutthob, M., Carrasquillo, L., Evans-Martin, G., & Kane, A. (2008). *PreK-12 English Language Proficiency Standards*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL and the WIDA English language proficiency standards.

Listening. Develops ability to respond to frequently heard language with continued dependence on content; paraphrasing and repetition; begins to build content and academic vocabulary.

Speaking. Uses phrases and simple sentences; likely omitting key words to communicate about common experiences and situations; begins to produce content and academic vocabulary; errors often inhibit communication.

Reading. May recognize and read words and phrases frequently encountered; gains meaning from simple and familiar text with visual support (e.g., pictures, graphic organizers, icons).

Writing. Dictates phrases and simple sentences; writes phrases and simple sentences with occasional content and academic vocabulary when supported; errors often obstruct meaning.

Listening. Interprets meaning of sentence-level communication in social and general academic contexts; understands main ideas of more complex oral discourse; particularly when supported visually; continues to build repertoire of content and academic vocabulary and sentence structures.

Speaking. Generates simple sentences with minimal errors; though more complex sentences contain errors that may inhibit communication; may appear fluent because of near mastery of social language; whereas content and academic language continues to develop related to concrete and abstract concepts; uses more precise and specific content and academic vocabulary and increasingly complex grammatical structures.

Reading. Derives meaning from increasingly complex sentence- and paragraph-level text, but requires visual and teacher support; draws upon background knowledge and previous experiences to make sense of longer text.

Writing. Writes increasingly complex sentences with a wide range of social vocabulary and a developing range of content and academic vocabulary related to concrete and abstract concepts; errors sometimes obstruct meaning.

Listening. Understands social and academic discourse of differing lengths and levels of complexity; comprehends a wide variety of social and content/academic vocabulary related to both concrete and abstract concepts; particularly with visual or contextual support.

Speaking. Generates grammatically varied speech in a wide variety of social and academic contexts using content/academic vocabulary related to concrete and abstract concepts; errors do not typically obstruct meaning.

Reading. Comprehends increasingly complex text on known topics; while unknown topics continue to require visual or contextual support.

Writing. Produces social and academic text using increasingly precise content/academic vocabulary and increasingly complex grammar and mechanics related to concrete and abstract concepts; errors do not typically obstruct meaning.

Listening. Comprehends a broad spectrum of social and academic discourse; attends to language with an increasing amount of linguistic complexity; understands most grade-level content/academic vocabulary; approaches the range of grade-level performance exhibited by English-proficient peers.

Speaking. Produces a broad spectrum of extended discourse with increasing linguistic complexity and vocabulary mastery; approaches the range of grade-level performance exhibited by English-proficient peers.

Reading. Comprehends text of increasing linguistic complexity and vocabulary related to a variety of grade-appropriate subjects and genres; approaches the range of grade-level performance exhibited by English-proficient peers.

Writing. Writes text varying in length, complexity, vocabulary mastery, and level of academic discourse; approaches the range of grade-level performance exhibited by English-proficient peers.