

## **Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners: Strategies for the Secondary English Teacher**

*The author shares differentiation strategies that maintain consistent whole-class learning objectives, while meeting the needs of adolescents learning English as a new language.*

### **Introduction**

The growing population of English language learners (ELLs) in the nation's schools is not limited to states like New York, California, Texas, and Florida, where their numbers have been high for many years; now, midwestern and southeastern states are seeing the greatest increases. For instance, the population of ELLs in Wisconsin saw a 140% increase between 1998 and 2008 (NCELA, n.d.). Instruction for ELLs is now of relevance to all teachers in the state, who may or may not have a background in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of key strategies that support effective instruction for ELLs in secondary English classrooms, with illustrative examples shared by both English as a second language (ESL) and English teachers. It is hoped that these will provide readers with some concrete ways to differentiate instruction to support ELLs.

### **English Language Learners in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom**

Research on the academic achievement of ELLs in U.S. high schools has helped to identify the numerous factors which make learning academic content in a new language "double the work" (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Variables connected to students' ease or difficulty include the level of first language literacy, years and type of schooling in the home country, length of residence in the U.S., and the nature of academic English (Thomas & Collier, 2002). High schools present high literacy demands, in multiple genres, and require linguistic, discourse,

sociolinguistic and strategic competence (Canale, 1983) as well as specific semantic and syntactic knowledge (Shlepegrell, 2001).

In their various content classes, English language learners must pull together their emerging knowledge of the English language with the content knowledge they are studying in order to complete the academic tasks associated with the content area. They must, however, also learn *how* to do these tasks—generate the format of an outline, negotiate roles in cooperative learning groups, interpret charts and maps, and such. The combination of these three knowledge bases—knowledge of English, knowledge of the content topic, and knowledge of how the tasks are to be accomplished—constitutes the major components of academic literacy (Echevarria & Short, 1999, p. 5).

The level of the learner's literacy in the native language and the demands of academic language influence the learner's progress towards English language proficiency, and explain why it might take 5-7 years to develop academic language (Collier, 1989; Cummins; 1994). One common misconception about working with ELLs is that simply immersing them in English will bring about language proficiency. This is problematic for two reasons: first, interaction between ELLs and native English speaking students is usually very limited, and when it occurs it is limited to brief exchanges (Harklau, 1999).

Even cooperative learning activities where students are assigned academic tasks and are required to participate may

assume language skills that ELLs do not possess at their current level of L2 proficiency, such as being able to question, agree, disagree, interrupt, present an opinion, and ask for clarification or assistance appropriately (Harper & deJong, 2004, p. 154).

Second, interaction between ELLs and their peers does not provide the focus on academic language that is critical for learning. Harper and deJong emphasize that “teachers need to draw students’ attention to the structure of English language used in specific academic contexts and provide appropriate feedback that ELLs can use to further their oral and written academic language development” (p. 154). This “attention” to language can be seen along two, inter-related dimensions: (1) how the teacher adjusts the input to make the content comprehensible and (2) how the teacher structures classroom activities so that the learner develops English language skills. In this article, the first dimension is seen as “sheltering” and the second as “differentiated instruction”.

### **Sheltered Instruction for English Language Learners**

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 twenty years, the best-known of which are the Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Echevarria & Graves, 2005) and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994). Sheltering techniques have been developed for “mainstream” or content teachers (non-ELL specialists) to help them provide their ELLs access to content area learning.

Sheltering techniques are whole-class (not individualized) teacher adaptations designed to make content accessible to ELLs, as well as provide instruction in English language skills, and involve an array of discourse, textual, task, and environment decisions. These adaptations, outlined below, have been shown to correspond to higher student achievement with academic language tasks (Echevarria & Short, 2010).

### **Discourse adaptations**

One of the ways classroom teachers create access to content learning for their ELLs is by modifying their speech to provide a greater amount of “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985). Modifying speed, complexity, and syntax is done provides oral language that is comprehensible to the learners. Discourse adaptations supportive of student achievement include:

1. Frontally facing learners while giving directions, rather than doing so with their back towards the class;
2. Using the same words and phrases repeatedly rather than using a variety of expressions;
3. Employing gestures and intonation to convey key concepts or words;
4. Writing the words or using visual supports to oral speech;
5. Paraphrasing or restating student statements.

### **Scaffolding student activities**

Teachers of all children employ scaffolding techniques in the classroom as a routine matter of good practice, but particular techniques are essential to support ELLs. Scaffolding practices activate students’ background knowledge, engage them in the learning through pairing and grouping, and initiate independent work only after a model or guide has been provided. These practices have been linked to student learning, and may include:

1. Activating schema prior to engaging in a task;
2. Use of think-pair-share or turn-and-talk structures to build in oral language use and processing time on tasks;
3. Use of “I do-we do-you do” modeling or demonstrations prior to student work period;
4. Provision of key words, pictures, or sentence frames to support student work;
5. Summarizing or reviewing key learning points or principles.

### **Cultural responsiveness**

Teachers’ cultural responsiveness is another ingredient in ELL student success. When instruction, materials, and activities marginalize students’ cultural experiences, learning is less

likely to occur. Culturally responsive practice with ELLs involves familiarity with students' home languages (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000), encouraging appropriate use of the first language to mediate comprehension (Cook, 2001), making lesson connections to students' cultural background, and creating a classroom environment that highlights rather than avoids cultural comparisons and contrasts (Flores-González, 2002; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2003). It also involves an awareness of how materials, texts, or activities may pose comprehension difficulties for the non-native student. For instance, comprehension difficulties could arise from many different dimensions--including an inability to make text-to-self or text-to-world connections perhaps because they have not experienced some of the contexts described in the texts they are reading. Specific activities for culturally responsive instruction may include:

1. Understanding group practices as well as individual student variations;
2. Use of textbooks, bulletin boards, and classroom materials that avoid stereotypical representations;
3. Being aware of linguistic and cultural bias in testing instruments;
4. Providing opportunities to develop reading skills by selecting stories that will be culturally proximal to the learner;
5. Recognition that bilingual students use both languages to learn.

### **Print modifications**

For the secondary English teacher, modification of printed classroom materials may be of special relevance, since the content of English classes—literature—is primarily text-based and other access points to the learning may not be available. In a science class, for example, there will likely be many hands-on activities, pictures, and visual support for the language, and even in a social studies class, texts are filled with pictures and captions. English is a language whose orthography may differ dramatically from many of the learners' first languages, and has an especially low sound-symbol correspondence. When the reading material is unmodified, the ELA teacher may still offer support to ELLs by (1) providing an enlarged text that is read aloud, thus supporting left-right directionality, and a model for how these words are pronounced; (2)

setting up structures for paired-reading with a fluent reader; or (3) providing audiotaped versions of text (Drucker, 2003). However, creating access to content-area material very often requires modifications to textbooks or other print material designed for native-English speaking children. Without these modifications, ELLs may be either completely or partially unable to read the text unassisted. With these modifications, the ELL may be able to independently read printed material. Print modifications might include:

1. Selecting an abridged or adapted version of a text;
2. Providing a word bank or glossed text;
3. Re-writing the text in language at the student's level;
4. Adding in visuals to illustrate text;
5. Using a graphic novel or comic book version of a text.

### **Developing Reading Skills**

In developing fluency in reading for ELLs, secondary English teachers are well served by looking to the practices of elementary teachers, who systematically use Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), along with leveled reading materials to support intensive (guided) and extensive (independent) reading, and providing guidance for students to select “just right” books (Parks, n.d.). By selecting books that are high-interest, culturally or thematically relevant, and at the level of the learner's English proficiency, English teachers support the development of the reading skills of adolescent ELLs.

Reading an abundance of very easy LR (leveled readers) at the beginning stage of an ER (extensive reading) programme enables any level of learners to feel self-confident, to unlearn the habit of translation and become used to reading without a dictionary (or translation), which enables a smooth and easy transition to higher levels of books. (Takase, 2009, pp. 461-462)

Narrow reading is another approach that benefits ELLs (Hadaway, 2009). In a Narrow Reading approach, the teacher stays with a single author, a single topic area, or single genre, rather than moving from novel to novel in a disconnected manner. By staying within a narrow reading area, ELLs can become familiar

with an author's style, the vocabulary associated with a particular concept or content, or the features of a genre, thus recycling language and avoiding the need to continually build up background knowledge.

### **Setting the stage for language production**

For ELA teachers, working with ELLs presents special demands. In an English class, not only will students be expected to read and comprehend works of literature, but the way students must also express their learning will be through high-level academic discussions and written essays and products, which also are linguistically demanding. Teachers of content working to shelter their instruction do all they can to make the materials, texts, activities, and concepts accessible to their ELLs; however, while all of the previously mentioned adaptations can serve as "work-arounds" to materials and activities far beyond the linguistic abilities of the learner, they cannot be assumed to develop language skills. To do this, teachers must also actively promote language learning.

In the productive skills of speaking and writing, ELA teachers can support ELLs' language development by:

1. Providing response formats appropriate to the learners' oral proficiency levels, such as yes/no, either/or, short answer, or extended response;
2. Preparing them for participating in class discussions by pre-assigning roles, scripts, questions, or set phrases;
3. Responding to journal writing with more direct feedback regarding word choice and grammar errors;
4. Supporting emerging writers with techniques like the Language Experience approach, which allow the learners to express their ideas orally with a scribe recording their speech;
5. Maintaining individualized vocabulary notebooks, where ELLs can attend to high-frequency academic words they will likely encounter across the curriculum.

Over the course of a unit of instruction, and on a daily basis, ELLs need to be able to successfully access content area material, and to be able to participate in classroom learning

activities. The above categories provide a framework when planning instruction for ELLs.

### **Differentiation for ELLs in the English Language Arts Classroom**

As an English teacher with a diverse population of students that include a percentage of ELLs, instructional planning likely begins with considerations of the needs of the majority group--native-English speaking students. After first establishing a common lesson objective for the majority, adaptations to this lesson, called "differentiation", can then be made. The connection between differentiation and sheltering is that sheltering is an overarching array of techniques from which teachers wishing to differentiate instruction for ELLs at varying levels of English proficiency may draw. Sheltering techniques provide a menu of options that can be used to modify content and make it comprehensible to ELLs, but are not keyed to specific language proficiency levels. In the case of ELL instruction (as opposed to differentiation for gifted students, students with learning disabilities, or students with particular learning styles), decisions on how to differentiate are based on language proficiency. This level of proficiency might be determined via local or state tests, in-class diagnostics, and one-on-one conferencing. From there, the teacher can then review the material and the task required for their native English speakers, and "tier" the activity to meet the ELLs at the appropriate level.

Differentiated instruction has become familiar mainly through the work of Tomlinson (2001), who has categorized the adaptations that the teacher makes in order to meet learners' needs as content, process, or product adaptations:

- Content adaptations for ELLs might include shortening a lengthy text, providing visuals with the text, or offering a parallel, simpler text, perhaps in the form of a play instead of a novel;
- Process adaptations could involve offering the learner support in doing the task, perhaps through cooperative groups, pairs, or by allowing use of an electronic dictionary, glossary, or use of notes;
- Product adaptations might involve assigning the learner to write a

paragraph in lieu of an essay, 5 statements instead of 10, or the option to create illustrations to show comprehension rather than writing narrative.

It needs to be stated that these differentiated tasks should be manageable and achieved through small adaptations, or they will become too daunting and time-consuming for teachers. 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 is established for this group, content, process and product adaptations could be

designed. Usually, one modification in one of these areas is reasonable, rather than multiple changes in all three. However, Table 1 illustrates one base activity with possible adaptations in the three areas.

Often, teachers believe the content is being “watered” or “dumbed” down when differentiated materials, tasks, or products are introduced. It is important to underscore a couple of key points here. First, if the original task or material is so beyond the student’s language ability as to render them unable to be involved successfully, then this portion of the lesson is likely to be completely wasted. If, on the other hand, the material or task has been

**Table 1. Sample of Differentiated Instruction for ELLs in a Secondary English Classroom (Adapted materials in Appendix A)**

“Base” activity: Designed for native-English speaking students		
Students will read the complete Maya Angelou poem, “And still I rise” and then write a paragraph to describe the speaker’s tone, citing evidence from the poem to support their argument.		
Differentiated activity: Designed for non-native English speaking students		
Content	Process	Product
Provide ELLs an abridged version of the poem with only stanzas 1 and 8. Selected words and word phrases will be glossed in margin notes, such as: “bitter, twisted” and “trod”.	Play these two stanzas (the first and last) only on audio for the whole class to hear the way the poet reads her work. ELLs will work on the writing with a partner.	ELLs will concentrate on the meaning of tone in the poem by writing several sentences, which will be supported through the use of sentence starters and a word bank.
Explanation for Sheltering Technique		
These are print modifications. Shortening the length of the material but retaining its authenticity is especially important for teaching tone. Unfamiliar words are glossed as word strings or chunks by the teacher, since ELLs often do not have enough language or context understanding to select the correct definition from a dictionary. Many vocabulary items are loaded with connotation that depend upon cultural knowledge and cannot be understood through a dictionary denotation.	These are scaffolding techniques, designed to create more access to the content. By playing the poem as read by the author, much of the emotion and tone will come through, transcending limited vocabulary knowledge. By being able to work with a partner, the ELL will have an opportunity to negotiate meaning, thus supporting understanding. At this point, students who share a common first language with their partner should be allowed to use this to discuss the task, a principle of culturally responsive teaching.	The adaptations here minimize the linguistic load of the activity while allowing ELLs to participate in arriving at the main understandings of their peers. The word banks direct the learner to descriptive adjectives, which are useful to focus on when writing about tone or characterization. By highlighting several lines of the text that show the speaker’s tone, students can focus on the writing rather than attempting to understand the entire passage.

restructured, reconceived, or simplified in linguistic demands, such that the learner can be actively involved in the learning, this is time that then becomes productive. Elitism or inflexibility on the part of the teacher should not become a barrier to a student's access to active learning. Second, note that the instructional objective for both the base and the ELL-differentiated tasks are constant. 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 into order, copying text, or looking up words in the dictionary. These are common lower-order activities often assigned to ELLs, with this last especially over-used and counter-productive, as 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.

### **Examples from High School ESL Teachers-Melissa and Dawn**

The following examples may further illustrate ways to adapt instruction for ELLs. These are shared by two high school ESL teachers, who routinely address the language demands of content materials. Melissa reports:

As a high school English as a second language teacher, I often differentiate for my ELLs as a means of accommodating their different English levels. In a recent literature unit, this was easy to do by including visuals for vocabulary words, playing the audio book for the novel, and modifying the directions for a BioPoem. This particular unit focused on *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth George Speare. The students read this historical novel in conjunction with their U.S. history class where they were learning about Colonial America and the Puritans and Quakers. The story, which takes place in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, is about a young girl who leaves her native Barbados and finds things very different in Colonial America, a theme that many ELLs can relate to. In order for students to better understand difficult vocabulary

words and the lifestyle of the times, visuals were provided for ideas such as soap and candle making and a blacksmith and cobbler. In order to differentiate process, I listened to the audio CD with the students. The audio for *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is read by Mary Beth Hurt who does a wonderful job of making a distinction between the various characters with her voice. Finally, one project assigned to the students was a BioPoem modeled after class BioPoems of the characters. Some students were asked to use simple, one-word adjectives to describe themselves while others had to write in complete sentences. It is important to differentiate instruction for ELLs in order to support student comprehension and learning.

#### Resources:

Speare, E.G. (1996). *The witch of blackbird pond*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Speare, E. G. (2006) *The witch of blackbird pond*. Audiobook, read by Mary Beth Hurt.

Melissa's example highlights several key strategies high school English teachers can incorporate into their practice when working with ELLs. First, she has chosen a book more commonly used in middle school for her high school students. This balances the desire to use authentic literature with the need for readability. If the unit of study is thematic or content-based, then various groups could all be reading at level about the same topic, for instance, Puritans in New England. One group could read *The Scarlet Letter*, another could read *The Crucible* and another could read *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. The teacher can maintain whole-group activities and discussions while at the same time providing leveled reading groups, a practice common to elementary classrooms. Another technique Melissa shares is the use of an audio-recording, which serves to support students' comprehension of the various characters and visualization of text. The ease and availability of digital audio lends itself to classroom use, and ELLs can be provided with ipods to listen while in class or at home. This supports their pronunciation and connection between oral and written language, especially challenging for

learners whose first language is orthographically distant from English, such as Arabic or Chinese. She has also spent time in building schema for students who would have no mental imagery for colonial times in America; so rather than “activating” schema, when presenting literature set in unfamiliar contexts, time is spent creating that schema.

Dawn was working with ELLs with interrupted formal education, and wanted to support their language development and keep them motivated. Her differentiation strategy was to use technology and theater as supports for her learners. She reports:

As a Literacy and ESL teacher, I must differentiate activity guides and tasks for SIFE and ELLs with learning disabilities. Last spring, my classes read folktales from around the world. I used this theme as a literature unit because of the students’ interest in animals and world cultures. The story we focused on mostly was *The Raven Steals the Light*, a story from Haida culture. From online sources and the children's book by Gerald McDermott, I used the software program called *Comic Life* to adapt the story in an age-appropriate yet accessible way. With images found online and ELL-friendly text, students were engaged in this adaptation about how the Raven, a Haida deity, brings light to the world. Using pictures, students previewed key vocabulary with me. The same images used to represent vocabulary were included in panels of the adapted story. Through this repetition, and games like Jeopardy, students’ vocabulary retention improved greatly. Students’ character associations with the vocabulary also were enhanced through repeated visuals and text. These images would later help students design puppets and props for the shadow puppetry adaptation of this story.

After reading the text and completing study guides about the story, students worked with a teaching artist from an arts organization called *Puppetry in Practice*. Our visiting teaching artist guided students in having a deeper understanding and interpretation of “The

Raven Steals the Light.” Their interpretation grew as they made shadow puppets of characters. They also practiced narrating the story in their voices. Students were able to express mood with music. As students were being directed, their conversational and academic language grew as they were hearing instructions repeated. High-beginner ELLs were given longer lines to read while low-beginner ELLs had fewer lines. The high-beginner ELLs also helped the low-beginners with reading and speaking. We knew students understood the story very well when they were being creative with their character delivery, puppet movements and musical cues. Students performed “The Raven” shadow puppetry shows in front of other students, staff and the principal! This group process was really memorable and has long-lasting effects. My students today still remember and talk about their experiences re-telling “The Raven” story-They’re very proud of their achievements as they should be. Many of them came away with a lot more confidence speaking in English because of it.

Resources:

"Raven Steals the Sun," <http://www.magma.ca/~jbremner/blog/months/RavenStealsSun.htm>

McDermott, Gerald. *Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest*. Harcourt, 1993.

Comic Life, <http://plasq.com/products/comiclife/mac>

Pan American International IHS, Shadow Puppetry 2010! <http://panamericaninternational.ning.com/>

Dawn’s approach created access to literature and developed students’ oral language. By choosing a folktale, she found a genre that was limited in terms of linguistic load, while still offering her adolescents thematic content appropriate for their age and level of life experience. Instead of moving through a series of different texts, she stayed for a longer amount of time with the single text and used it as a

springboard to developing students' speaking skills. By turning the text into a performance piece, she allowed for students to visit and revisit the same language, and attend to their pronunciation as she was given insight into the extent to which they had understood the material. By having a real audience and purpose for rehearsing the show, she built in authentic motivation. She also capitalized on a key *process* 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 in the lessons. Tapping into outside of school resources is another way to bring ELLs into contact and interaction with adult native-English speakers.

Conclusion

As English teachers continue to encounter non-English speaking students in their classrooms, their skills in differentiating instruction will continue to expand. Tapping into the vast resources available online makes both sharing and discovering the strategies of other teachers easier than ever. A few lesser known sites to recommend when planning for ELLs include: the Teachers Network at <http://www.teachersnetwork.org/teachnet/esl.cfm>, and the University of North Carolina School of Education at [http://www.learnnc.org/search?ed\\_type=lesson+plan&tag=english+language+learners](http://www.learnnc.org/search?ed_type=lesson+plan&tag=english+language+learners), which both include lesson plans for ELLs, as well as the International Children's Digital Library at <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/index.shtml> which makes books in students' native languages available free for download.

By using the joint frames of sheltered instruction and differentiated instruction presented here, it is hoped that teachers can more readily make choices from a menu of options in ways that make sense for them and their ELLs. Taking a closer look at how classrooms operate to create access into learning can reveal the many ways in which our nation's newest immigrants enrich the classroom experience of their peers and teachers.

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**Appendix A: “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou Activity Adapted for ELLs**

<p>You may write me down in history          With your bitter, twisted lies,          You may trod me in the very dirt          But still, like dust, I'll rise...</p> <p>Out of the huts of history's shame          I rise          Up from a past that's rooted in pain          I rise          I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide...</p> <p>Leaving behind nights of terror and fear          I rise          Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear          I rise          Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,          I am the dream and the hope of the slave.          I rise          I rise          I rise.</p>	<p><u>bitter, twisted lies</u>: mean, terrible lies  <u>trod me</u>: step on me and push me down</p> <p><u>huts of history's shame</u>: a history of being taken as slaves from Africa  <u>rooted in</u>: started in, came from</p> <p><u>leaping</u>: jumping high</p> <p><u>wondrously</u>: wonderfully, beautifully</p> <p><u>ancestors</u>: my grandparents and great-grandparents, great-great...</p>
<p>I believe the repetition of the phrase “I rise” shows that the speaker feels _____. When the speaker says “You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies...but still, like dust, I'll rise”, she is saying that _____</p> <p>_____. Overall, the tone expressed by the speaker of this poem is _____ (sad, angry, depressed, proud, triumphant).</p>	