Differentiation is a way of teaching that recognizes variations in learner background, including differences and commonalities. It is the process of delivering more effective instruction to address learner needs on the basis of such factors as interest, learning style, multiple intelligence profile, grouping orientation, and learning environment. English Language Learners bring two additional dimensions for consideration in differentiating instruction: language and culture. This Bulletin examines these dimensions.

**LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**

English Language Learners (ELLs) typically have different levels of English language proficiency as they engage in mainstream classroom learning. Proficiency, however, is not a uniform condition; it varies across individual language skill levels and includes a variety of considerations. The following are some of the variations which can occur across proficiency levels.

**Listening.** What is the degree to which learners comprehend oral language, ranging from simple directions to subject matter in a content lecture? How are transition words (e.g., however, in spite of, even though, etc.) comprehended through the discourse of verbal exchange of ideas or directions? Are idiomatic expressions understood when used?

**Speaking.** To what extent can learners be understood when they engage in conversation, give a presentation, or interact in group work? Do they know differences between informal versus formal forms of oral language? Are they given opportunities to improve their grammatical knowledge and use of spoken English in their learning?

**Reading.** To what degree are learners engaged in and can improve upon their mastery of print language in the form of increasing their vocabulary knowledge and comprehension skills? Are they given a range of strategy options as they predict what they are going to read, comprehend their reading, and process what they have read?

**Writing.** Can ELLs convey ideas, organize their thoughts and use appropriate
mechanics? Are they aware of the range of specific uses of language, as well as the organizational frameworks in writing science, social studies, or math?

The contexts for identifying aspects of language correction and use across skill levels needs to be addressed in the process of teaching content! This requires sensitivity towards how learners use language as they listen, speak, read and write in content learning.

CULTURAL ORIENTATION

Culture provides us with inherent orientations affecting our individual perceptions. They vary across cultures and among other things affect specific responses towards schooling: Identity. Identity can either be an orientation towards collectivism (the group) or individualism (the self). Depending on this orientation, an ELL will vary in inclination towards individualized as opposed to collaborative learning.

Hierarchy. The belief in equality as a natural condition characterizes this orientation and affects attitude towards authority in a variety of encounters. In the classroom it can affect the respect accorded to a teacher’s authority in following directions and engaging in unsupervised or independent work. Hierarchy orientation affects a teacher’s "power distance" in interacting with students and varies according to age and conditions of learning.

Gender. Gender involves the more specific belief in equality of male and female roles. This can affect an ELL’s view towards sharing status with males and females in a variety of classroom contexts and interactions.

Truth. This cultural orientation addresses the unknown and the ambiguous. In the classroom this affects the extent to which students engage in risk taking.

Virtue. This orientation related to time and tradition. Those who sacrifice the concerns of today for the benefits of the future tend to have a long term orientation and value timeliness; those who focus more on the benefits of today are likely to forfeit long term achievements and be more casual towards time use. Students with a short-term cultural orientation can have difficulty doing the challenging work of studying to meet increasing long-term cognitive demands of content subjects.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Pay attention to your ELLs’ individual listening, speaking, reading, and writing performance as they engage in learning. Pay special attention to their oral and writing errors. Consistent errors indicate either omission, overgeneralization, or a transfer from the students home language.

2. Ask questions to get some indication of ELLs’ cultural orientation. Identity, hierarchy, gender, truth, and virtue orientations affect schooling and ultimately impact academic success. Through conversations with individual students, obtain information on attitudes and advise in helping students understand the values inherent in achieving academic success.

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Differentiation of content instruction for English Language Learners begins with an understanding of how language and culture impacts learning. As ELLs become more sophisticated users of language in learning content, they will need more guidance with appropriate language features and word choices. Similarly, teachers must be sensitive to the individual cultural orientations of ELLs because those issues affect how differentiation can be effective.

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