Differentiation

ADJUSTING LANGUAGE COMPLEXITY in TEACHING

Grade level instruction includes 1) the delivery of conceptually appropriate content; and 2) the language around which the content information is both comprehended in listening and reading and articulated orally and in writing. Academic success across the grades is predicated on this notion.

Differentiating content instruction to English Language Learners (ELLs) needs to be examined from the perspective of separating language from concepts. In most instances it is possible to understand content-related concepts using simple rather than complex language. In other words, it is possible to "unwrap" language around concepts to enable students with limited language to understand information. Understanding and implementing this language process is the subject of this Bulletin.

FIVE LEVELS OF LANGUAGE DELIVERY FOR TEACHING CONTENT

The following language framework can be used to deliver instruction to ELLs who are not yet able to achieve grade level use of language. The framework, developed by a consortium of states to address the assessment of ELLs in achieving content standards, is defined accordingly:

1. Entering. This level is defined as the ability to understand and use concepts at a nonverbal or single word level. It is characterized by a student's ability to point to and name items, follow simple directions and commands, and answer yes/no questions. Young learners will be at an emergent literacy stage at this level, whereas older learners will be at an initial reading level. Common tasks and activities at this level of language usage are those which require identifying, describing, comparing, and/or sequencing.

2. Beginning. At this level of language usage, ELLs can generate phrases and simple sentences. They can ask and answer yes/no questions; demonstrate use of 'wh' questions (who, what, when, where, etc.); generate simple questions; begin to use past, present, future tenses, plurals, pronouns, and prepositions; and write simple sentences. ELLs are generally at an initial stage of reading.
at this level, i.e., they increase their sight word vocabulary and increase the number of words they can strategically identify.

As with the entering level of language use, ELLs at this level can engage in tasks which require identifying, describing, comparing, and sequencing.

3. Developing. ELLs at this level of language use can connect oral and written language in the form of continuous "text", i.e., orally begin to describe in detail or write simple paragraphs. This involves greater fluency with past, present, and future tenses, plurals and pronoun use; facility with descriptive words, simple conjunctions, and negatives; beginning use of abstract vocabulary, compound and complex sentences; beginning to recognize and understand metaphorical and idiomatic language; writing guided paragraphs; and beginning to summarize and draw conclusions. ELLs are typically at a transitional and basic literacy stage of reading, i.e., they begin increasing their fluency through continued reading of familiar texts, as well as increase their competencies to read for different purposes and expand their vocabulary.

Tasks involving classifying, analyzing, inferring, justifying, and persuading can be used by ELLs at this level.

4. Expanding. ELLs at this level of language use usually can engage in expanded use of continuous "text", orally and in writing. With their greater language proficiency they can use complex conjunctions along with all of the descriptors in the developing level, and write paragraphs independently. Literacy development begins to become refined at this level, with students continuing to expand their vocabulary, reading rate, and higher order thinking.

At this level, ELLs engage in tasks involving problem solving, synthesizing, and evaluating.

5. Bridging. ELLs at this level continue to refine and expand their use of increasingly sophisticated text and vocabulary use and increase their use of complex sentences and academic language. Tasks continue to include problem solving, synthesizing, and evaluating.

IMPLICATIONS OF ADJUSTING LANGUAGE COMPLEXITY FOR ELLS

1. Recognize that ELLs may have varying language proficiencies in each of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. For example, they may be at a developing level in writing, but at an expanding level in speaking.

2. Think about how to "unwrap" the language of an activity by examining how to simplify the language in order to make the task clearer and more accessible to ELLs. Generally speaking, students emerging from an ESL support program will be at a developing level of language proficiency. This means that they still require a great deal of differentiating in the ways described above in order to successfully perform tasks.

3. Pay attention to the language of instruction. For ELLs, it's all about language first; then it's about understanding concepts. Although they are intinsically linked, language and concepts are separate from one another.

Even though ELLs cannot use language similarly to native speakers, this does not mean they cannot think.

SOURCES

Gottlieb, Margo (2004). English Language Proficiency Standards for English Language Learners in Kindergarten through Grade 12.
