Understanding ESL Learners: Differentiating Instruction

ESL teachers know that differentiating instruction is the most effective way to teach ESL students, who come to class from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances. A comprehensive ESL program involves three major activities: direct language instruction, the creation of a culturally inclusive environment, and differentiation and modification of curriculum. These three activities are described below.

**Direct Language Instruction**

When using direct language instruction, teachers
- analyze the language needs of ESL learners and the language demands of academic curriculum;
- include language learning goals as part of lesson objectives;
- plan instruction that addresses specific language needs: grammatical and phonological structures, communicative and academic language functions, vocabulary development, discourse patterns; and
- work collaboratively with support staff to address language-development needs.

**Culturally Inclusive Environment**

In a culturally inclusive environment,
- resources, events and extracurricular activities reflect cultural diversity, and provide realistic and positive images of various cultural groups;
- schools find creative, meaningful ways to involve immigrant parents and offer services such as interpreters, bilingual aides, cross-cultural counselling, and mentorship and tutoring programs;
- signs, notices and displays are multilingual; and
- students' first language is valued and encouraged.

**Differentiation and Modification**

In differentiation and modification,
- classroom content, processes and products are adjusted to reflect the unique needs of ESL learners;
- instruction is scaffolded to enable ESL students to achieve grade-appropriate outcomes;
- teachers offer a variety of resources, grouping arrangements, assignments and tasks;
- teachers use various strategies to build background knowledge, make connections and encourage communication;
- teachers embed learning strategies into instruction;
- students can demonstrate understanding in many ways; and
- lessons are engaging and relevant, encourage higher-level, critical-thinking skills and focus on essential elements of core curriculum.
Differerentiating Instruction for English as a Second Language Students

**Adapting Content**
- Develop survival language/oral language skills first with beginner-level ESL students.
- Use techniques such as KWL or think/pair/share to activate and/or build background knowledge and experience.
- Use a variety of visuals, realia, manipulatives and other concrete materials to teach.
- Make extensive use of key visuals and graphic organizers.
- Focus on concepts and principles instead of facts through the use of graphic organizers such as compare and contrast, Venn diagrams, timelines, etc.
- Identify and develop key vocabulary through the use of word walls, predictograms, word sort, semantic mapping, concept frames etc.
- Provide literacy scaffolds such as framed sentences and paragraphs, patterned stories, framed research and lab reports.
- Reteach concepts/content in mini lessons.
- Use a variety of resources including multiple texts at different reading levels, Internet, CD-ROM software, video, picture files, etc.
- Consider students’ culture/background when choosing resources.
- Provide authentic experiences through field trips, guest speakers, simulations, etc.

**Instructional Strategies**
- Provide beginning-level ESL students with a buddy (with the same first language if possible).
- Use the Language Experience Approach.
- Allow for first-language discussions and use of bilingual resources.
- Present new information and instructions orally and in writing.
- Model and demonstrate procedures and thought processes through pantomime, role play, etc.
- Use gestures, facial expressions and body language.
- Modify speech by speaking slowly and clearly.
- Provide audio tapes of novels, texts and lectures.
- Engage students in cooperative/collaborative learning tasks such as jigsaw, reciprocal teaching, reading buddies, dialogue journals, literature circles.
- Provide learning centres or stations to allow learners to explore topics or practise skills independently.
- Focus on the development of specific language-learning strategies.

**Suggested Activities for Demonstrating Learning**
- Do needlework
- Build a planetarium
- Develop a collection
- Design and conduct an experiment
- Plan a journey
- Make an etching or a woodcut
- Do a demonstration
- Create recipes
- Demonstrate preparation of food
- Choreograph dances
- Design a new product
- Write songs
- Design a simulation
- Develop an exhibit or experiment
- Create a photo essay or album
- Make a video documentary
- Create illustrations
- Design or create musical instruments
- Compile information or brochure
- Draw a set of labels
- Put on a puppet show
- Create wall hangings or murals
- Go on an archaeological dig
- Design and make costumes
- Generate charts or diagrams to explain ideas
- Create a slide show
Differentiating Instruction

Differentiating Instruction

Adapt instructional strategies (process) in whatever way necessary for students to reach the desired outcome.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

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• Model and demonstrate procedures and thought processes through pantomime, role play, etc.
• Use gestures, facial expressions and body language.
• Modify speech by speaking slowly and clearly.
• Provide audio tapes of novels, texts and lectures.
• Engage students in cooperative/collaborative learning tasks such as jigsaw, reciprocal teaching, reading buddies, dialogue journals, literature circles.
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• Focus on the development of specific language-learning strategies.

Offer a variety of ways for students to demonstrate achievement of an outcome. Students can use a variety of activities to show knowledge in spite of limited English proficiency.

OUTCOME

• Allow students to demonstrate understanding in ways other than writing (for example: graphic organizers, art, performance, demonstrations, models, posters, etc).
• Allow students to take tests orally.
• Allow beginning ESL students to use texts, notes, dictionaries and other aids during tests so that the tests become learning opportunities.
• Allow extra time.
• Provide students with readers or scribes.
• Modify test questions by simplifying language.
• Use a wide range of assessment options.

Available Resources

Demonstrating Learning

For a booklet
Informations for a booklet
Compile information for a booklet or brochure
Draw a set of blueprints or a graph
Put on a puppet show
Create wall hangings or murals
Go on an archaeological dig
Design and make costumes
Generate charts or diagrams to explain ideas
Create a slide show
Publish a history of one’s family, community or home town
Do a pantomime
Paint or collect pictures or diagrams
Create an advertisement
Make a diorama
Make a calendar
Make a tape recording
Make a map
Make a collage or piece of art
Devise a survey
Draft and circulate a petition
Design a webpage
Make a travel poster
Create a bulletin board
Devise a game or puzzle
Make a mobile
Compile a portfolio of sketches
Develop a display
Make a time line
Learning Strategies

There are a variety of learning strategies, including metacognitive, cognitive and social affective. These three strategies are described below.

Metacognitive Strategies

- **Advance organization**—Previewing the main ideas and concepts of the material, often by skimming the text for the organizational pattern
- **Advance preparation**—Rehearsing the language needed for an oral or written task
- **Organizational planning**—Planning the sequence and parts of ideas to be expressed orally or in writing
- **Selective attention**—Paying attention to key words, phrases, linguistic markers, sentences or types of information
- **Monitoring**—Checking one's comprehension and oral or written production while they are taking place
- **Self-management**—Creating the conditions that enhance learning
- **Self-evaluation**—Judging how well one has accomplished a learning activity

Cognitive Strategies

- **Contextualization**—Placing a word or phrase in a meaningful sentence or category
- **Elaboration**—Relating new information to known information, and making personal associations
- **Grouping**—Classifying terms or concepts according to their attributes
- **Imagery**—Using visual images (either mental or actual) to understand and remember new information
- **Inferencing**—Using information in the text to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes or complete missing parts
- **Note taking**—Writing down key words and concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic or numerical form during a listening, reading or viewing activity
- **Resourcing**—Using reference materials appropriately
- **Summarizing**—Making a mental or written summary of information gained through listening or reading
- **Deduction/induction**—Applying or figuring out rules to understand a concept or complete a learning task

Social Affective Strategies

- **Cooperation**—Working together with peers to solve a problem, pool information, check a learning task or get feedback
- **Questioning for clarification**—Eliciting additional explanation, rephrasing, examples or verification from a teacher or peer
- **Self-talk**—Reducing anxiety by using mental techniques that enhance feelings of confidence and competence


Recommended Resources

Help! They Don’t Speak English Starter Kits, downloadable from www.escort.org.
National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, www.ncela.gwu.edu.