

The Three Principles of Differentiation

Research in the field of applied linguistics has shown that language acquisition requires comprehensible input and an engaging, environment where the student has plentiful opportunities to interact with the language in a meaningful way.

Work in the field of brain research also tells us that students need to exercise critical thinking and study skills to be successful in school, even as they are still learning their second language. Using language as part of the critical thinking and problem-solving process facilitates acquisition of academic language and language as a learning tool.

The Center for Applied Linguistics has drawn upon this research to organize differentiation for second language students along three principles:

- Increase comprehensibility
- Increase opportunity for interaction
- Increase critical thinking and study skills.

Classroom teachers who regularly integrate elements of these three principles into their lessons are effectively differentiating instruction to meet the needs of their diverse learners.

Comprehensibility

This principle involves the ways in which teachers can make content and classroom language more understandable to their students. This should include constructing background knowledge and providing many nonverbal clues such as pictures, objects, demonstrations, gestures, and intonation cues. Other strategies that should be incorporated include building from language that is already understood, using graphic organizers, hands-on learning opportunities, and cooperative or peer tutoring techniques.

Interaction

A number of strategies have been developed that increase students' opportunities to use both their language skills and new content material in direct communication. These include cooperative learning, study buddies, project-based learning, and one-to-one teacher/student interactions. When students talk to each other about class work, they learn important language and content through conversations that are less complex and easier to understand than teacher lectures. It also provides additional opportunities students need to process and apply the language they are learning.

Critical Thinking

Accommodations for ELLs have traditionally focused on concrete, hands-on activities and re-teaching, limiting the students' access to abstract concepts and processes that stimulate higher-order thinking.

Students need to develop more advanced higher-order thinking skills as their language competency increases. Strategies for developing critical thinking skills include asking students higher order thinking questions, "think-alouds," explicitly teaching and reinforcing study skills and test-taking skills, and holding high expectations for all.

Reflection

Think about your classroom. What artifacts or evidence do you have currently that support the Three Principles?

Included in this module, are model lesson videos showing classroom teachers using the principles of differentiation effectively. Please continue to explore this topic by printing the video capture sheets and viewing the model lessons provided.