

Differentiated Mainstream Content Instruction

Outcome: In this segment of Module 4, we will review the ideas associated with differentiated mainstream content instruction and how these ideas can lead to greater cognitive academic language development for our students.

The majority of teachers work in school settings where sheltered content models are not currently an option. What can a mainstream teacher do to help second language students acquire academic content while they are still in the process of acquiring the English language?

Building the vocabulary and language structures students need to do well, involves understanding the context of students in America's schools today.

Imagine that you were dropped into a school in Mexico City and do not speak Spanish or only social Spanish. What about school would cause you confusion and might interfere with your academic progress? What are the words to the Mexican version of the Pledge of Allegiance or their national anthem? What does homework look like in a Mexican high school? What are the elements of a research paper in Spanish? What are the words I need in Spanish to ask for help in solving a math problem or clarifying the steps in a chemistry experiment? How can I expect to read 19th century Spanish literature when I barely know enough of the language to make conversation about the weather?

Academic English is a variety of English used in academic texts. Academic English tasks include reading text books, recording or writing down the key ideas from lectures, writing summaries, research projects, essays, etc. It also includes a wide range of genres. It is not possible to "do" science, "do" economics or "do" mathematics with only conversational language. A student must "do" academic work with academic specific academic language.

Academic English can be broken down into the following categories:

- The language of school
- The language of study skills
- The language of critical thinking

Many mainstream teachers take for granted that students understand the routines and content of school communication.

Second language students new to American schools have to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary, rules and routines related to attendance, course requirements, school transportation, and the expectations for school assignments as well as grading and reporting procedures. Concepts like participating in extra-curricular activities or school athletics may be new to students from some cultures. The social world of American schools is also full of specialized vocabulary and slang that students need to feel comfortable and socially accepted.

Teachers can help second language students by scaffolding the business of school in the same way they scaffold academic content by incorporating elements from the three principles of differentiation.

Comprehensibility:

- Reinforce the information presented in loudspeaker announcements in written form on the board or in handouts.
- Follow consistent classroom routines. Using classroom job and center charts as visual support to assist students in keeping track of routines.
- Be sensitive to commonly used cultural terms or acronyms that may be unfamiliar to second language students like Brownies and Cub Scouts, Code Blue, or the PTA, and take time to define or paraphrase the information or have other students explain the terms in the student's native language.

Interaction:

- Assign "buddies" to new students with the specific task of clarifying school routines or customs, including social expectation like dress, lunchroom behavior and attendance at other school events.
- **Direct ELLs to homework clubs and other school-sponsored groups where they can find support and information.**

Critical thinking:

- Break down or divide instructions, directives, projects and assignments into a series of tasks. For example, make sure that ELLs understand each stage of crisis implementation procedures like Code Blue and Code Red. Explanations should be reinforced in the student's native language and picture cues, if possible.
- Reinforce all oral directives in written or visual form.
- Provide feedback on assignments that distinguishes between how the student did the assignment and the quality of the content or response.

How can the three principles of differentiation support the Language of School?

Also, second language students, especially older students, often need assistance in learning how to study. By explicitly teaching study skills, teachers give students an important tool that they can use throughout their academic careers. One key way to do this is to show students how to develop and use graphic organizers as a student-initiated support for learning. Some valuable graphic organizers include:

- Outlines for summarizing, for making predictions
- Timelines for organizing and sequencing events chronologically
- Flow charts for showing progression and influence on an outcome, for showing cause and effect, and for sequencing the steps of the scientific or writing process
- Mapping for examining movement and spatial relations
- Graphs and charts for organizing and comparing data
- Venn diagrams for comparing and contrasting
- Text features for reading informational texts

Think about your students and their study skills. Which strategy would be most helpful to teach your students?

In many instances, LEP students need coaching and practice to improve their cognitive processing and production of content material. In order for them to do this effectively, it is important for their teachers to build upon the skills and knowledge students have already mastered. Each lesson should include critical thinking and/or study skills. Some of these skills may have been initially developed in the students' first language and will transfer to English.

The teacher should examine content topics through the students' listening and speaking skills first; then expand the topic through reading and writing activities. Since students' oral language skills often develop more rapidly than their written skills, teachers can check on the students' comprehension orally and clarify any trouble spots before introducing reading or writing activities. By scaffolding in this way, students are able to be more successful with written tasks.

When planning each lesson, teachers must create opportunities to focus on thinking skills. Thinking skills can be developed through teacher-student

questioning or through scheduled activities like problem solving and decision making:

- Predicting, organizing, and inferencing can be addressed in the warm-up and motivation phases of a lesson
- Observing, reporting, and classifying, which can be done orally, in writing or with pictures, can be addressed in the presentation and application phases of a lesson
- Sequencing, summarizing, and justifying are skills that suit lesson reviews

The last critical step in developing an English language learner's cognitive academic language is to help students learn new vocabulary. Students should not be expected to learn long lists of isolated words; it is better to select a small number (e.g., seven or less) and work with them over a period of a few days

These words should be selected based on how frequently they are used in the classroom, the relevance for understanding key concepts, and the relevance to the students' lives.

Tools like word banks can be used, for example, a large piece of paper that is put on the wall or a personal picture dictionary to which new words are added as they are learned. Students can refer to these resources as they work on activities.

With careful consideration and planning by the teacher, the English language learner can acquire cognitive academic language and discover academic success within the mainstream classroom.

What aspects of your teaching already mirror the ideas of differentiated mainstream instruction? Which aspects need the most attention?