Modifying Curriculum and Instruction for Emergent Bilingual Learners

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Question: How do we *modify* curricula, instruction, lesson delivery, and language use to ensure language development and content learning for emergent bilingual students?

Differentiating Instruction

Differentiated instruction is fundamental to ensuring equitable instruction for students with varied learning styles, cultures, and needs. Differentiated instruction can also increase the likelihood that curricula and instruction will be relevant for all learners.

Tomlinson (1999, 2000b, 2001, 2005) writes that "at its most basic level, differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom" (2000b, p. 2). She notes four 'classroom elements' that teachers might differentiate:

1. Content—what the students need to learn or how the students access the information;
2. Process—activities engaged in by the students to make sense of or master the content;
3. Products—culminating projects that ask the students to rehearse, apply, and extend what they have learned in a unit;
4. Learning environment—how the classroom works and feels.

Educators should approach differentiated instruction using the four elements above. Emergent bilingual students come from a myriad of backgrounds and each student's needs should be considered. Importantly, differentiation must be carefully designed if it is to be effective; therefore, differentiated instruction is not *"just good teaching,"* as some have argued.

Subban (2006) reviewed studies on differentiation effectiveness, noting "three broad, related concepts that necessitate a differentiated approach (Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch, 1998)" (p. 939). First, "the learning environment should be safe and non-threatening," second, "students must be appropriately challenged" and "comfortable enough to accept the challenge that new

learning offers," and third, "students must be able to make meaning of the ideas and skills through significant association." Strahan, Kronenberg, Burgner, Doherty, and Hedt (2012) explored differentiation as "a responsive approach to teaching rather than a set of strategies" (p. 1) and developed a corresponding logic model.

A preliminary logic model for creating academic connections through differentiation
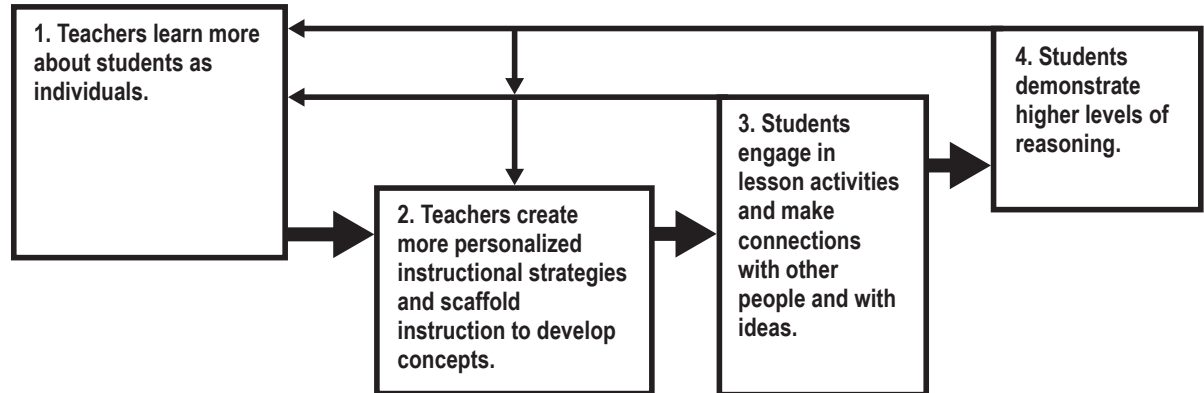
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┌─────────────────────┐                              ┌─────────────────┐
│ 1. Teachers learn   │◄───────────────────          │ 4. Students     │
│ more about students │◄──────────────┐              │ demonstrate     │
│ as individuals.     │               │              │ higher levels of│
│                     │               │              │ reasoning.      │
│                     │     ┌─────────────────┐  ┌─────────────────┐  └─────────────────┘
│                     │     │ 2. Teachers     │  │ 3. Students     │
│                     │────►│ create more     │─►│ engage in       │──►
│                     │     │ personalized    │  │ lesson activities│
│                     │     │ instructional   │  │ and make        │
└─────────────────────┘     │ strategies and  │  │ connections     │
                            │ scaffold        │  │ with other      │
                            │ instruction to  │  │ people and with │
                            │ develop         │  │ ideas.          │
                            │ concepts.       │  └─────────────────┘
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Figure 1: Logic Model for Differentiated Instruction (Strahan, Kronenberg, Burgner, Doherty, and Hedt, 2012, p. 6)

Scaffolding Language and Content

According to Bruner (1983), scaffolding can be defined as:

> "a process of 'setting up' the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it" (as cited by Walqui, 2006, p. 163).

Here, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development is centrally important. According to Vygotsky, instruction is most effective when it aims slightly above a student's current level; the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is Vygotsky's name for this level that is slightly more advanced than the student's current capability. As Walqui (2006) notes, "it is only within the ZPD that scaffolding can occur" (2006, p. 163).

Extending this architectural metaphor of scaffolding, Walqui postulates two "distinct but related elements," that involve both "the supportive structure (which is relatively stable, though easy to assemble and reassemble) and the collaborative construction work that is carried out" (p. 164).

Based on the What Works Clearinghouse standards, empirically effective scaffolding includes five strategies and supports:

1. **Vocabulary instruction and review.** Vocabulary instruction is crucial due to students' limited proficiency in the language of instruction. One approach involves identifying, explicitly teaching, reviewing, rephrasing, and recasting key vocabulary associated with a lesson (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002; Carlo et al., 2004; Lesaux and Kieffer, 2010). Better vocabulary comprehension helps ELs conceptualize the core content (Carlo et al., 2004; Lesaux et al., 2010).

2. **Partner reading.** Research on Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) has demonstrated the benefits of partner reading for language and literacy development (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000; Slavin, Cheung, Groff, and Lake, 2008). In addition, the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth found a positive impact from cooperative learning around literacy practices (August & Shanahan, 2006).

3. **Strategic use of video.** When students use materials beyond the content text and related curriculum, it can benefit their conceptualization of complex materials (Gersten et al., 2006). According to Mayer (2001), "well-designed multimedia instructional messages can promote active cognitive processing in students, even when learners seem behaviorally inactive" (p. 19). Videos are authentic by nature, and therefore may be more engaging to ELs with lower levels of English proficiency.

4. **Graphic organizers.** Graphic organizers have a long reputation in language minority schooling as a way to organize facts and concepts, restructure information, demonstrate relationships, illustrate cause and effect, and explain content with less reliance on language (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007; Hughes, Maccini, & Gagnon, 2003). Research suggests that graphic organizers have a significant effect on the comprehension of vocabulary and key concepts (Dexter, Park, & Hughes, 2011; Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004).

5. **Structured paired grouping.** Integrating cooperative and collaborative approaches to instruction with ELs is a widely accepted approach to meeting their language and content learning needs (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Gersten & Jimenez, 1994), and was another key finding from the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006). This is particularly valuable with ELs who may be able to interact with peers in the native language, literacy from which could likely transfer to English (Ellis, 2008).

Contingent Scaffolding

Scaffolded instruction should leverage students' linguistic and cultural capital, as well as knowledge of, and aptitude for, content learning. Integrating one or more of the five strategies identified by Vaughn, et al. (2009) in an isolated manner is insufficient—rather, scaffolding should be responsive to learners' needs, and integrated in a learner-centered model. Daniel, Martin-Beltrán, Peercy, and Silverman (2016) explored issues of 'over-scaffolding' with emergent bilingual learners. They cite research conducted by Bradley and Reinking (2011), who found that "over-scaffolding limited students' productive and substantive engagement and inadvertently led students to enact the prevalent initiate-respond-evaluate

discourse pattern" (p. 393). Instead, Daniel, Martin-Beltrán, Peercy, and Silverman (2016) suggest that educators employ "*contingent scaffolding* to push EBs [emergent bilinguals] to be active participants in their own literacy learning" (p. 413). In demonstrating what this might look like in practice, they elaborate as follows:

> For instance, if teachers helped students understand how identifying points of puzzlement, asking authentic questions, and employing strategies are three contingent scaffolds they can use during interactions, the teacher's role during interaction is to observe how students are implementing these moves and to provide feedback for students' interactions (Daniel, Martin-Beltrán, Peercy, and Silverman, 2016, p. 413).

Therefore, to prevent over-scaffolding, we recommend that educators approach curriculum and instruction by remaining focused on each learner's linguistic repertoire, cultural capital, and rich content-related expertise.

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