

## Fostering Academic Support for English Language Learners

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### Abstract

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English Language Learners (ELLs) enter the classroom with various language proficiencies and abilities. Pre-service teachers and teacher educators in the public school systems are responsible to teach address the needs of ELLs. In this article, the author provides practical ways of how to provide hands on activities and differentiate content and instruction for ELLs. How schools are integrating cultural experiences, background knowledge and home language skills are also mentioned.

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**Keywords:** English Language Learners, differentiated instruction, cultural experiences

### 1. Introduction

#### Facts about English Language Learners

America welcomes many immigrants from all over the world. They leave countries such as Iran, China, India or Russia due to religious, political or economic reasons. Some have remained for a few generations while others have recently arrived. English Language Learners (ELLs) fall into two categories. They are either foreign-born first generation Americans or native born (Capps et. al., 2005). California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois have the highest number of ELLs (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013). (Loeffler, 2005) reports that there are 460 different primary languages spoken by ELLs in America. The four most commonly spoken languages among ELLs are Vietnamese (2%), Hmong (1.6%), Cantonese (1%) and Korean (1%) (Kindler, 2002). However, Spanish is by far the most prevalent language spoken by about 80% of ELLs (Loeffler, 2005).

ELLs are likely to enroll in the K-12 public school systems. Depending on the state and school district that they live in, ELLs will be given a series of language tests to determine appropriate placement. In the state of California, ELLs whose native language is not English are required by law to be assessed. The California English Language Development Test (CELDT) determines placement in all academic classes depending on their English Language Proficiency (ELP) scores. ELLs are tested for four domains. They are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Based on their performance, ELLs are designated as either beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced or advanced (California Department of Education, 2014). Providing hands on activities along with differentiated opportunities are two ways to meet the needs of ELLs in the classroom who are in the first three levels.

#### Hands-On Activities that Transcend Language Barriers

ELLs benefit from hands on activities that are engaging, meaningful and purposeful. Here are three instructional Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies that have helped ELLs learn English in various subject areas like Math, Science, Social Studies and Science. Cooperative Graphing is a hands-on math activity that involves graphing information based on a survey. A group of four students will take a survey of how many cities each person has visited in their lifetime. The teacher can provide other topics such as countries or continents besides cities. Based on the results of the group, a bar graph is created. Each person is held accountable to create one aspect of the bar graph. Students sign their names somewhere visible on the graph along with writing out their responsibility.

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One will survey group members and record results. The other will write names and numbers on the graph. Another will create a large bar graph on chart paper for all to see. The last person will write the working title and aid the person creating the bar graph. The last part of this activity requires each group member to describe his/her role to the entire class. Cooperative Graphing promotes speaking, writing and listening in English for ELLs. This cooperative group activity is engaging and designed to increase the level of vocabulary for ELLs.

Another SDAIE strategy can be implemented in which ELLs generate a guest list of important people to invite for dinner. It is centered on a specific topic such as famous mathematicians or 21<sup>st</sup> century writers. Students are given choices as to who will be invited to the Dinner Party. They pick and decide in what order the guests will be seated and why. Once they decide on who will attend the Dinner Party, students will play an important role in this activity. They will first research from the Internet and learn more about their famous person. As they gather information they will write in their journals about their person and his or her contributions to society. The knowledge learned about each famous person will become a discussion piece during the Dinner Party. Food and drink is optional but highly recommended as it provides a realistic setting. This role-playing activity is interactive as it enables ELLs to read, listen, write and speak about a famous person in society.

ELLs can benefit from Idea Starts as it calls for the use of a prompt to encourage the writing process. Presenting an unusual object such as a yellow tagine from Morocco or a model of the Eiffel Tower can stimulate ELLs to visualize and begin writing their thoughts on paper. Showing them the opening lines of Shakespeare's play or having a guest speaker come and demonstrate the effects of smoking will give ELLs a head start on writing. Educators should also consider implementing Total Physical Response (TPR). It is an approach to language teaching that pairs actions with words to convey meaning (Asher, 2000). The teacher begins the lesson using action words such as "walk," "open the door," and "shake hands." The teacher models and demonstrates these words to ELLs using their hands and body parts. After direct instruction takes place, ELLs take a turn by practicing these action words repeatedly until mastery. Students will learn words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and function words with TPR (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013).

### **Differentiated Opportunities for ELLs to Demonstrate Learning**

Lessons that accommodate the different learning needs of students in various stages of learning Academic English is known as differentiated instruction. It is a way of teaching that recognizes diverse learners such as ELLs. Providing adequate opportunities such as group work, problem solving and a menu of learning choices are a part of differentiated instruction.

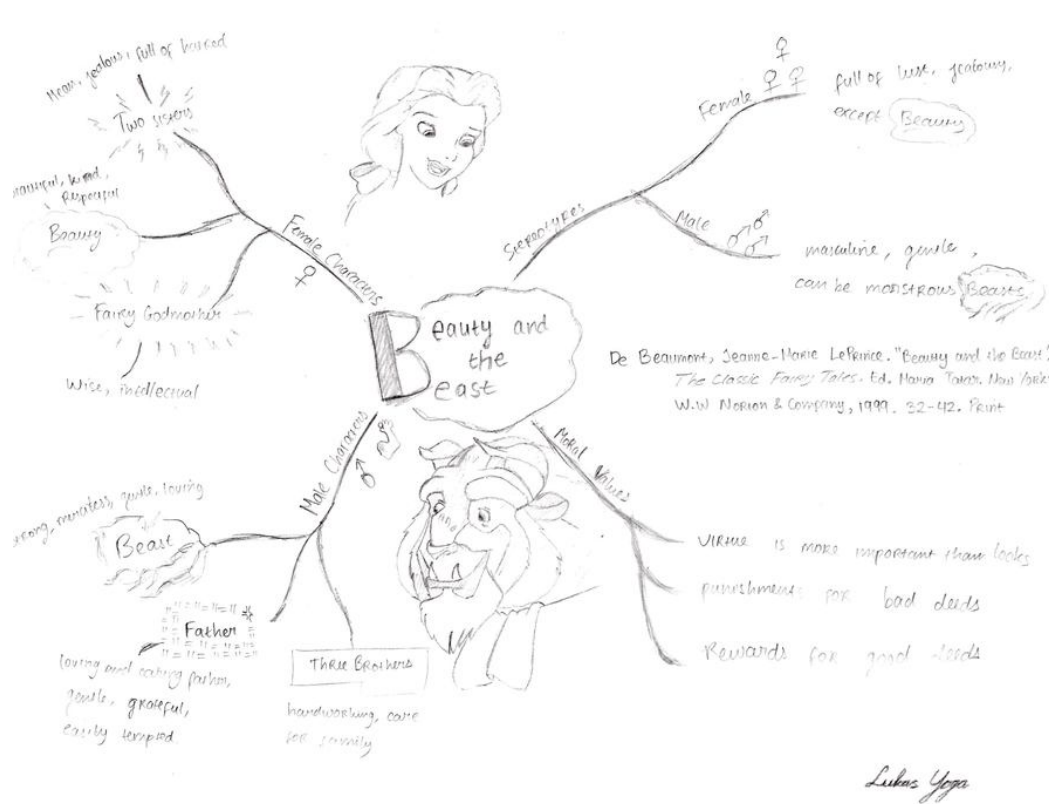
How can K-12 educators differentiate a lesson for ELLs? For ELLs who recently arrived and are learning English, it is essential to provide books with plenty of illustrations. This will benefit ELLs as they are able to visually see the main points of the book as the text is being read. From this vantage point, they can grasp vocabulary words or phrases when visual images are presented. Many Big Books come with illustrations with text. Big Books also provide an interesting, nonthreatening introduction to reading as they present predictable stories in patterns that students memorize easily after two or three readings (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013). Big Books help ELLs become familiar with directional reading from left to right and top to bottom. We must bear in mind that ELLs who are from Iran read from right to left and top to bottom. This is quite the opposite from what they are used to. It is the goal of Big Books to help ELLs become acquainted to reading on point and with purpose.

Teachers need to be aware that not all ELLs can complete assignments in a timely manner as expected. Teachers need to provide extended time in order to write assignments, projects and tasks. The point is to have ELLs not feel rushed, challenged or frustrated when completing their assignments. Maintaining a low affective filter is critical as it allows error correction and for learning to take place in a safe environment. According to Stephen Krashen, "People acquire second languages when they obtain comprehensible input in the form of SDAIE and when their affective filters are low enough to allow the input in [to the language acquisition device] (1981a, p.62) Not forcing a speedy production, but rather allowing time to think, process and complete assignments allows ELLs to acquire language knowledge (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013).

Another differentiated opportunity for ELLs is to utilize graphic organizers when writing. A type of graphic organizer that assists ELLs with comprehension and remembering what was read is called a cognitive map. The purpose of a cognitive map is to have ELLs summarize what they have read by drawing. Topics such as characters, settings and plots are a few ways to assist intermediate-level readers as they illustrate.

They can use this graphic organizer as a prewriting strategy to generate a plan for their writing compositions (Peregoy and Boyle, 2013). Cognitive maps appeal to ELLs because it is not only visual and spatial but second language teachers and their students find it a particularly useful strategy (Northcutt and Watson, 1986.) When teachers differentiate instruction, they are providing accommodations in the form of adaptations. Utilizing Big Books, extended time and graphic organizers create a flexible environment for ELLs to learn and grow.

**Figure 1 Map Student Created After Reading Beauty and the Beast.**



**How Schools are Integrating Cultural Experiences, Background Knowledge, and Home Language Skills in the Learning Environment**

ELLs are highly successful when there are solid connections between home, school and community. In the school system, educators should possess knowledge and a genuine interest in learning about different cultures, home languages, places of origin, and interactional styles of the communities they serve (Coady et. al., 2008). Providing brochures written in the ELL's native language such as Spanish, Farsi and Russian is an excellent way to communicate openly about school programs and students' progress. It is an effective form of school-to-home communication as translations are made in the ELLs native language. Information for families on community, health, cultural, recreational and/or social support programs or services can also be included in the brochure. Collaborating with the community is important as services from the community can strengthen school programs such as Parent Night, workshops, family practices, and student learning and development.

Having an International Day once a year embraces ELL's culture, language and background. At Ramona Elementary School in Moreno Valley California where 76% of students are of Hispanic origin, this school wide event extends to all grade levels from K-6<sup>th</sup> grade. During International Day, students will bring in things to showcase their culture like food and attire. Parents will come and present about their history and culture too. Educators know that holding school-based events such as International Day can present potential linguistic, cultural, economic obstacles for ELL families. For this reason teachers must try to address these obstacles energetically, creatively, and in culturally sensitive ways (Coady et.al., 2008).

Schools like Ramona Elementary School provide Spanish bilingual interpreters and community liaisons. They serve as valuable resources because they are able to translate and build a bridge of understanding the home life of ELLs.

Culturally, schools should understand that in some families providing food, shelter, protection, and moral guidance consumes all of the parents' time and resources (Coady et. al., 2008). For this reason they might not be in attendance during important school events like parent conferences or International Day. Coady et. al., (2008) suggests that schools should provide childcare services and transportation. Community outreach is the key to get parents of ELLs involved. This can ease the challenge of coming to school wide functions. It is the goal of many schools like Ramona Elementary School to embrace ELL's culture, language and background knowledge by providing feasible services and resources. Everyone from parents, teachers and schools becomes important stakeholders in the success of ELLs when this occurs.

### Conclusion

Meeting the needs of ELLs is foundational for academic learning success. Implementing purposeful SDAIE strategies along with differentiated instruction allows for optimal language acquisition. Educators who place this emphasis in their lessons will see direct results in ELL's reading, speaking and writing in all subject areas. All educators play a pivotal role in the lives of ELLs. Everyone including schools and parents together can contribute to ELL's learning growth and potential. Ultimately ELLs who receive the support from schools will be prepared for college and beyond.

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