Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners[1]

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Who are English language learners?

English language learners (ELLs) are students in English-language schools whose first language is other than English, or is a variety of English, such as Jamaican Creole, that is significantly different from the variety used in Ontario's schools. They may be Canadian-born or newly arrived from other countries. They come from diverse backgrounds and school experiences, and have a variety of needs. They all share these goals in language learning:

- to catch up to their English-speaking age peers in understanding and communicating in spoken English, as well as in reading and writing in English;
- to demonstrate levels of academic achievement tests that are similar to those of their peers;
- to use English effectively as a language for learning in all areas of the curriculum.

What do they need?

Learning a second or additional language for and at school is a long-term process that cannot be left to chance. For their first four or five years in an Ontario school, most ELLs require focussed support in order to develop proficiency in English. During the first few years, most ELLs need direct support from an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher or another designated staff member with appropriate knowledge of language acquisition and of the structure of English, as well as skills in second-language teaching. All ELLs, whether they receive direct instruction from an ESL teacher or not, need continued support from their classroom teachers so that they can keep moving towards their goals and catch up to English-speaking peers over time.

What can teachers do?

ESL teachers and classroom teachers can incorporate into daily lessons some of the strategies outlined below. The chart shows how the strategies should be adapted for students at different levels of proficiency in English. Most of these strategies can help to make instruction more comprehensible, and tasks more attainable, for many English speakers as well.

The Quadrants referred to in this chart are derived from Jim Cummins' model for second language instruction.[2] Quadrant A reflects the instructional environment required by ELLs new to English. Quadrant B reflects the instructional needs of students who communicate well in everyday situations and who are able to participate successfully in many areas of the curriculum. However, they still need ESL support and require extra scaffolding in most subjects in order to continue learning academic English. They continue to need some curriculum modification in subjects that are culturally and linguistically demanding, such as History and Geography. In Quadrant C, most students do not need direct support from an ESL teacher but they continue to need additional scaffolding, as described below, in order to continue moving towards age-appropriate proficiency in English.

STRATEGY	Quadrant A	Quadrant B	Quadrant C[3]
Comprehensible Instruction	• Draw on prior knowledge. • Adjust language, oral and written, so that learners can understand (e.g., simplify word choice, adjust rate of speaking, use repetition/rephrasing)	Continue, introducing and explaining increasingly sophisticated academic, figurative, and colloquial language.	

Supportive Feedback	• Be a sympathetic listener. Accept errors as a normal and necessary part of language learning, and focus on meaning: what is the student trying to say?
	• Rephrase to model correct form in oral language: e.g.,
	    ELL: Ontario have many lake
	    T: Yes, Ontario has many lakes
	• In written work, focus on only one or two specific recurring errors. Explain, then encourage students to correct their own errors.
	• Be aware that as students attempt to produce more language, and as they experiment with more complex vocabulary and sentence patterns, the number of errors will increase.
		Continue to provide feedback on recurring errors or on use of newly-learned structures or vocabulary	Continue to provide feedback on the occasional errors that students may make when under pressure or when using sophisticated sentence structure and vocabulary

Strategic Use of Students' Languages	• Make sure that the student's first language (L1) is sufficiently well developed for a specific task. • Encourage students to confer with L1 partners to clarify instructions or key terms and concepts. • Encourage students to write notes and drafts in L1. • Encourage parents to continue to use L1 at home and to provide opportunities for L1 experiences in a variety of formal and informal settings.	Continue, encouraging students to find opportunities inside and outside school to use and develop proficiency in L1.	Continue, but be aware that some students have stronger language skills in English than in their first language by this point.
Co-operative Learning	• Organize structured group work with a focus on oral language and the sociolinguistic skills required for group work (e.g., how to take or offer a turn; how to disagree politely) • Begin with simple activities such as think-pair-share and group brainstorming or group problem-solving. • Use flexible groupings: e.g., assign ELLs to work together when they need to work on an alternative task, but also make sure they have opportunities to work with English speakers.	Continue, using more complex activities and differentiated tasks (e.g., Jigsaw activities).	Continue, providing opportunities for more student-directed activities such as group projects.
Functional Language	• Focus initially on greetings, polite expressions, and classroom routines. • Rehearse key words and phrases for use in structured "contact assignments" outside class: e.g., requesting help in the library.	Encourage students to participate in school activities where they can interact with English speakers, and to use English beyond the school through contact assignments or community research projects.	

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[3] In earlier versions of this chart, I labelled this quadrant "D" in accordance with Cummins' original model. However, I now use A,B,C to indicate a progression that is consistent with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Games and Puzzles	• Use simple language games to practice learned vocabulary, the names of objects and simple actions. • Use and/or make board games and information gap activities that require students to request or give information, using language from recent lessons: e.g., a simple crossword puzzle for partners; Partner A has only the "Across" clues, while Partner B has only the "Down" clues.	Increase the academic content. Encourage students to begin creating games and puzzles for each other or for younger students.
Visual Support	• Use pictures, models, and manipulatives to support comprehension. • Provide a picture dictionary that is organized thematically.	Provide graphic organizes showing how key ideas are organized in a lesson or chapter.
Multiple Forms of Input and Response	• Use gesture and physical actions to demonstrate new words or concepts. • Organize activities in which students have opportunities to respond and demonstrate their learning using a multiple intelligences approach.	Continue
Vocabulary Building	• Introduce basic vocabulary and some key content vocabulary such as *numerator* as necessary, using examples of the word in use in the classroom. • Create a word wall displaying lists of words and phrases related to specific concepts. Include examples of the words in context. • Encourage students to keep a vocabulary notebook, organized thematically according to specific activities, lessons, or units of work.	Focus on academic vocabulary and introduce various forms of a word (e.g., biology, biologist, biological) as well as word roots and affixes using related words as examples (e.g., suppose, oppose, expose).
Integrated Grammar Instruction	• Incorporate explicit grammar instruction into daily lessons, as specific patterns or problems occur in class: e.g., forms and uses of various verb tenses in a history or social studies lesson. • Provide context-based examples of English syntax in statements, questions, and negative constructions.	Continue, introducing more complex grammatical structures such as passive verbs and subordination.
Choral Work, Songs, Role Play, and Presentations	• Encourage choral repetition of new words and phrases. • Use songs and chants to help students develop the rhythm and intonation patterns of English. • Make a cloze of song lyrics so that students can listen for the missing words.	Encourage students to create raps, chants, and role plays, and short presentations related to curriculum content
Concepts about English Print: for early readers of all ages and for students who are unfamiliar with the Latin alphabet	• Introduce the Latin alphabet in simple print form: names, sounds, and formation of letters. • Use picture books and other simple text to introduce concepts about English print, making comparisons with the writing systems that students may be familiar with (e.g., direction of print, front and back of a book, use of capital letters and punctuation, etc.). • Use learned vocabulary, familiar pattern books, and picture books to build a basic sight vocabulary (e.g., point out and then have students identify, repeat, and write words that are repeated in a story). • Use known words to focus on common sound-symbol patterns.	No longer required
Experience Based Activities	• Provide hands-on experiences inside and outside the classroom. • Use the Language Experience Approach to introduce new vocabulary and sentence structures.	Continue as a appropriate for grade level, using modelled and shared writing.

A Rich Print Environment	• Surround students with print, in English and in their own languages. • Have dual language books available in the classroom or school library. • Use picture books with content and images appropriate for the age group.	Continue, with examples of student work as well as word charts and other reference material.	
Peer Tutoring	• Train students from higher grades to help English language learners in the classroom; bilingual tutors who speak English and the student's own language can be especially helpful. • Set up homework clubs and after-school tutoring programs.	Continue. In Quadrant D, encourage students to use English and their own languages as tutors to younger students or beginning level ELLs.	
Extensive Reading	• Encourage students to select material that they can read and are interested in. Suitable material includes picture books, graphic novels, and graded readers designed specifically for ELLs. • Use or create audiotapes to accompany some of the material. • Focus on volume and on reading for enjoyment and personal interest. • Organize literature circles for students to share responses and discuss key themes or concepts.	Continue, encouraging students to increase the amount they read, and to choose material of increasing complexity.	Continue, encouraging students to select fiction and non-fiction designed for English-speaking students of the same age.
Scaffolds for Reading and Viewing	• Choose text, video, or online material slightly above the students' independent reading level or oral comprehension level. This will be at a level significantly lower than that of material selected for English-speaking age peers. • Prepare students for reading/viewing: e.g., make connections to prior knowledge, pre-teach some key words, or provide a KWL chart for students to complete in small groups. . • Read printed text aloud to students, encouraging them to follow along in print. • Stop to debrief chunks of text or segments of the video, focussing on effective reading/listening strategies as well as the content. Students may complete a graphic organizer as they proceed through the text or video. • Encourage students to re-read the text or to a video segment to find key ideas, words, or details.	Continue, introducing a variety of non-fiction material of increasing complexity, but still within the students' reach.	Continue this process with grade-level material.
Scaffolds for Writing	• Have students label pictures, diagrams, or real objects such as classroom furniture and equipment, choosing from a list of newly learned words. • Provide a graphic organizer summarizing the lesson or a newly learned concept, and a list of key words and phrases for students to organize. • Provide content-based cloze activities with a list of new words. • Provide models or prompts for short journal responses (e.g., to practice *used to: When I was a baby, my mother used to… When I was younger…*).	Continue to use models, prompts, writing frames, and modelled and shared writing to expand the forms of writing, and the length and complexity of writing (e.g., report, explanation, procedure, exposition) as appropriate to grade level.	
Strategy Instruction	• Model and discuss effective strategies for language acquisition: e.g., using a learner dictionary, keeping a vocabulary notebook, using various cues to infer word meaning, recitation of new words, phrases, and sentence patterns, and seeking opportunities to interact with English speakers. • Encourage students to talk about their experiences as learners of English.	Continue, using think-aloud to demonstrate effective strategies.	Continue; encourage students to become mentors to ELLs in Quadrants A and B.