

Diversity and Differentiated Instruction



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Diversity can become a benefit for learning and teaching rather than a hindrance. It requires a change in our awareness, a change in our attitude, and a change in the way we teach and test. We need to realize that each student brings a unique set of assets and experiences and that there are differences among second language learners. We need to believe that diversity enhances the learning environment. And we need to differentiate instruction and assessment so that all students are able to contribute, learn, and show us and themselves what they know.

My First Day of School

On the first day of Kindergarten—or so the story goes—my mother pulled the teacher aside and asked if she could attach me to another child. My mother explained to the somewhat alarmed teacher that I didn't speak or understand a word of "the language of school." She worried that it would be too traumatic for me to have no idea what was going on, while the rest of the children clearly did.

So they chose a girl (who was *not* screaming for her mother) and asked her to take me by the hand. My mother told me not to let go of that hand and to do everything the hand did until she came back to pick me up later that afternoon. Or, so the story goes.

This is how I started my academic career as a diverse learner. It is an experience I have carried over to my teaching of diverse learners, and most recently to helping other teachers meet the challenge of working with students who come from

varied backgrounds. In the next few pages, I would like to share what I have learned from being a diverse learner myself and what I have learned from both failure and success in teaching diverse learners.

Diversity as an Asset

I realized early in my career in education that diversity enhances our world in such a way that I cannot help but think of homogeneous classrooms and schools as impoverished environments! We learn from seeing different ways of approaching everyday life and from catching a glimpse of different values and norms. We learn to understand, appreciate, and perhaps even assume other peoples' perspectives. We learn that people interact with their environs differently, and our lives are enriched by that realization.

A Change in Awareness

How can we as educators transform student diversity into a benefit? Three things need to happen for diversity to become a benefit for learning and teaching rather than a hindrance. The first thing we need to do is to recognize that students are unique and that learning happens in all sorts of ways. Most of us in the field of education think primarily of two characteristics when we think of the word *diversity* as it applies to the classroom:

- different rates and styles of learning
- linguistic and cultural diversity.

But it is essential to understand that each one of us is unique. We learn and we interact with our surroundings differently due to our gender, the socioeconomic status of our family, the education of our parents, our occupation (yes, teachers see things differently than engineers or carpenters), and many other factors. As teachers, it is important for us to remember this because at any moment in the classroom, we must be aware of the fact that some students are approaching the learning task differently than the rest of the class.

“Even among second language learners, there are many differences.”

The need to recognize that each student is unique is especially relevant to a classroom of English language learners (ELLs). They arrive at our doorstep with linguistic and cultural diversity and they are learning to function in a second language. Even among second language learners, there are many differences. Invariably and at any given grade level, some English language learners will be at a beginning level of proficiency in English as a second language; others will be

at an intermediate level; and yet others will have more advanced proficiency.

Second language learners also differ in the level of proficiency in their home, or first language. Some students will have received years of schooling in their primary language, whereas others may not have even the most basic literacy skills in that language.

We must plan our teaching so that students at every level of proficiency are able to advance in their language development. If an activity is too hard for students who are at the beginning proficiency level, or if it is too easy for students who are at intermediate or advanced levels, then those students are not likely to be learning at their optimal level.

As for cultural differences, ELLs come from varied backgrounds. Some students may have gone through traumatic experiences in their home country, and as a result of political situations may have experienced interrupted schooling. Others may come from a community that is vastly different from the one they have settled in here in the United States.

A Change in Attitude

The second thing that needs to happen in teaching successfully for diversity is probably the most difficult one to accomplish because it has to do with our attitudes: we need to believe that diversity enhances the learning environment in fundamental ways, and that it provides enrichment for all. But as hard as it might be to change others' attitudes, we must understand that without peers, teachers, and administrators who genuinely value diversity, it will be difficult for ELLs to feel at home and to take the risks that are part of second language learning.

A Change in Instruction and Assessment

The third thing that needs to happen is for educators to differentiate instruction so that it allows all students to learn as closely to their optimal level as possible. At the same time, we need to differentiate assessment so that all students are being given the opportunity to show what they have learned even as they move through the various stages of language acquisition. Providing differentiated instruction and assessment requires skill, but it is certainly something that teachers can learn to do by:

- recognizing and integrating students' assets into the classroom
- becoming familiar with their values, norms, and family traditions
- learning about their prior experiences and current interests
- aligning assessment with instruction.

All students bring important resources to the classroom, including their primary language skills, concepts of print and literacy experiences, and developing English language skills. We can learn about their backgrounds and interests by seeking out what makes each student unique, by noticing commonalities across groups of students, and by becoming familiar with our students' home lives.

To get to know our students better we can also take advantage of teaching strategies such as:

- Interactive discussions that tap prior knowledge
- Daily journal writing
- Assigning activities that involve family members

In *Avenues* you will find daily opportunities for students to express themselves orally and in writing, allowing you to learn about their likes and dislikes, about their home life, and about their beliefs and values.

Two Important Tasks

Once we recognize the assets that each student brings with him or her to the classroom, we have two important tasks ahead of us:

We must find ways to integrate these assets into the everyday workings of the classroom.

One way to integrate student diversity into the curriculum is to incorporate different cultural perspectives into lessons on a regular basis. The *Avenues Teacher's Edition* includes Cultural Perspectives activities to help you bring students' home cultures as well as other cultures into the lesson. For example, before students read Gary Soto's story "If the Shoe Fits," they interview their family members about the importance of extended families, then share and compare their findings in class. Teachers can also give students' primary languages a prominent place in the classroom by including books in different languages in class libraries and labeling various classroom objects in both English and students' home languages.

We must differentiate instruction and assessment to optimize learning and performance.

The second task is a bit harder. To differentiate instruction and assessment for diverse groups of learners teachers must plan their teaching so that students at all levels of language proficiency are able to participate and learn. Teachers must also plan their assessment so that even students who have very little oral proficiency in English can show what they have learned.

I have noticed that oftentimes teachers plan their lessons for a middle range of learners and then, almost as an afterthought, modify the activities so that they become more appropriate for students who are at lower or higher

proficiency levels. Instead, I believe that it would be much more effective to plan in such a way that instructional strategies and assessment activities are differentiated from the very beginning. In other words, it is more effective to create differentiated lesson plans from the start.

In *Avenues*, this differentiation is built right into each lesson in the **Teacher's Edition** with Multi-Level Strategies. When, for example, you model how to record key events in sequence on a time line, you will see questions for Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced proficiency levels. This allows all students to contribute to the activity, to show what they have learned, and to learn from their more proficient peers. The Multi-Level Strategies in *Avenues* enable you to differentiate instruction and allow each student to participate within his or her ability. In this way, every student has opportunities for success and is motivated to participate.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I must admit that it is challenging to teach second language learners. It is even more challenging when students in a given classroom are at different levels of English proficiency. However, the difficulty of teaching these children does not excuse our failure to do so. We must bring out the richness that comes from having students of different languages, different cultures, and different learning potentials, so that all the students in our classrooms may take the roads and avenues to a successful future. ■

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