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Differentiating Instruction for Differently-Able English Language Learners in a Remote Classroom

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Abstract

The traditional teaching methods of delivering instruction by lecture, giving students practice work and reviewing the correct answers during assessment do not work for all students. Gregory & Chapman (2013), stated that educators can no longer teach "the lesson" and hope that everyone gets it. Even though this method is "uniform" and consistent, all learners are different in terms of how they grasp a concept. As if this is not challenging enough, now educators have to instruct virtually, adding another challenge for the Differently-Able English Language Learners. It is crucial for school leaders and educators to address these challenges, because the transition to a virtual classroom can put already-struggling students even further behind.

1   Introduction

Angelica Infante-Green, former Deputy Commissioner, Office of Instructional Support P-12 in New York State Education Department was the first person to introduce the term "differently able" in an interview with blogger Tracy Novick (2018). As the parent of an English Language Learner with autism, she understood that although her son had to go through life slightly differently than the rest, he was able to do this with the proper supports in place. Ms. Infante-Green stated:

"You will never ever, hear me say 'disabled children'. What does the prefix 'dis' mean? Can't! I'll be damned if someone tells me my kid can't do something." (Novick, 2018, para. 6)

This term was her preferred way in describing English Language learners with disabilities.   Some differently able English Language Learners are auditory or visual learners, while others may need hands-on experience or prefer working and learning from peers. Differentiated instruction is necesssary for many differently-able English Language Learners, and most school districts want educators to be trained in how to do this effectively in their schools. Differentiation enables educators to plan strategically in order to meet the needs of the diverse learner in today's classroom (Gregory & Chapman 2013).

2   How to differentiate Instruction

Tomlinson (2000) makes a significant contribution to this field of education by sharing the art of differentiating instruction. She emphasized that teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on the readiness, interest, or learning profile of the differently-able English Language Learners:

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2.1   Content

Content is what the student needs to learn. Samples of differentiating content are:
- Providing reading materials at multiple reading levels;
- Recording written materials on CD or Mp3;
- Using spelling or vocabulary lists with varied academic levels;
- Presenting ideas through both auditory and visual means; and
- Meeting with small groups to re-teach an idea or skill for struggling learners.

2.2   Process

Process refers to activities for student engagement to make sense of, or master, the content. Examples of differentiating process are:
- Using tiered activities through which all learners work with the same understandings and skills, but work with different levels of support, challenge, or complexity;

- Providing interest categories that encourage students to explore subsets of the main topic, pursuing an aspect of it that is particularly interesting to them;

- Offering kinaesthetic, manipulative, or other hands-on supports for students who need them; and

- Varying the length of time a student may take to complete a task.

2.3   Products

Culminating projects ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit. Examples of differentiating products are:
- Giving students options of how to express required learning (e.g., create a puppet show, write a letter, or develop a mural with labels);
- Using rubrics that match and extend students' varied skills levels;
- Allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their products.

2.4   Learning environment

The learning environment is the way the classroom works and feels. Examples of differentiating a learning environment are:
- Making sure there are places in the room to work quietly and without distraction, as well as places that invite student collaboration;
- Providing materials that reflect a variety of cultures and home settings;
- Setting out clear guidelines for independent work that matches individual needs;
- Developing routines that allow students to get help when teachers are busy with other students and cannot help them immediately; and
- Helping students understand that some learners need to move around to learn, while others do better sitting quietly.

3   How Can Ed Tech Tools Enable Remote Learning

Schools across the country have tried to bridge this gap with technology. Micah Castelo (2020), emphasized that with digital tools, educators can personalize learning for the differently-able English Language Learners and connect with them and their families, despite the language barrier. School districts have been working hard to distribute devices such as laptops, headsets and mobile Wi-Fi hotspots to help transition to remote learning. According to Castelo (2020), many districts have partnered with telecommunications companies such as Verizon and Sprint to bring online learning to students who lack internet access at home. In California, Google has even provided Chromebooks to students without access to computers at home.

4   Differentiating in a Remote Classroom

Castelo (2020) suggested that educators tailor digital tools such as breakout collaboration suites and online learning platforms to the needs of the differently-able English language learner. She suggested the use of Google Classroom slides and docs, which offer translation features that can help the differently-able English language learner (ELL) with comprehension, and allow them to express themselves in English. The student can use the Google Classroom translation extension to translate content as needed.

Microsoft has a similar feature called Microsoft Translator, which teachers can use to transcribe and translate PowerPoint lessons into over 60 languages. This tool is integrated into communication platforms like Skype and Microsoft Teams' instant messaging feature, which makes communicating with multilingual families easier for teachers. There is also the Immersive Reader tool, which ELLs can use to not only translate text, but also have it read out loud to them or explained with a picture dictionary (Castelo, 2020).

Some educators have noted that their ELLs are struggling to keep up with "live" instruction and would benefit from videos they can review multiple times. The use of videos in a remote learning classroom can help the differently-able ELL with content learning and making connections to prior knowledge. Any visual and auditory use to enhance the learning of content will benefit this population.

Another way to differentiate instruction for the differently-able English Language learner is minimizing the number of instructional tasks at one time, and pacing the work or introduction of new content.

5   How to Manage ELLs during Remote Learning

More than five million English language learners (ESL/ELL students) find themselves in a precarious position as learning continues to be done remotely. Federal guidance emphasizes that schools must continue to provide language support for differently-able English learners even at a distance, but notes there is no standard amount of time that must be devoted to instruction. Sascha Zuger (2020) stated that for this unique population, the obstacles in this "new normal" can be daunting (Zuger, 2020, p.1). Zuger (2020) shared instructional tips from two educators from the school district of Palm Beach County, Florida, who have transitioned to remote teaching and continue to differentiate instruction for the differently-able English language learners.

Pro Tips from educator Lazor:

1. Upload all my teaching material on YouTube; that way students can turn on captions for the video and even use the caption translation function.
2. Create an online Vocabulary Word Wall on my Google Classroom through Google Docs—having this visual helped.
3. Encourage students to use FlipGrid! I am still able to see the speaking and listening components of language acquisition, and the kids loved it.
4. Use the Talking Points App to communicate with families in their first languages. It allows me to send a message in English and they can respond in whichever language they prefer to avoid any miscommunications and make sure students have everything they need to succeed.
5. Every week, send a "Tips for online learning" bitmoji classroom slide in which I link different ELL-focused ways for students to interact with material online.

Pro Tips form educator Nolf:
1. Keep it interesting. I've had guest speakers from various parts of the country 'visit' the kids.
2. Focus on connecting (both personally and digitally) with entire families.
3. Forge partnerships in the community; it truly takes a village. Partnerships have helped with free school supplies, clothing, field trips, and incentives.
4. Leave your school and go into the families' communities, even if it's virtually.

6   Final Thoughts

As we face the challenges of this new "norm" of remote teaching and learning, let us not forget that we are all lifelong learners. School leaders, educators and students alike need to wake up every morning with the idea that today is yet another opportunity to learn something new, and in that process of teaching and learning is where innovative ideas are born. The idea of viewing English language learners with disabilities as "differently-able" learners was an innovative idea born in the mind of Ms. Angelica Infante-Green as the result of many years of being an educator (teaching), and being a mother (learning), while raising a child during these unprecedented times in education.

Going through the process of transitioning education to a remote classroom will provide an opportunity for educators to discover innovative ways to not only differentiate instruction to meet the needs of the differently-able English language learners, but to expand their own knowledge and expertise as well.

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