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Using Tiered Lesson Design to Differentiate Instruction for
English Language Learners in Content Classes

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Abstract

Differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It requires teachers to use a variety of instructional strategies to address diverse student learning needs. One goal of a differentiated classroom is to provide equal access for all students to the curriculum. This paper discusses the differentiated strategy of tiered lesson planning as a way of reaching all learners within the classroom, with an emphasis on English Language Learners (ELLs). By providing real life examples from elementary and middle school classrooms, the authors will demonstrate how to apply the strategy of tiered lesson design in a practical manner.

Introduction

There are many challenges facing English Language Learners (ELLs), and educators struggle to help these learners be successful in academic content area classes. ELLs have the challenge of learning not only academic content but also the language in which the content is being taught. The teacher’s task is to make the material comprehensible, while maintaining the objectives of the lessons, including addressing the content area benchmarks and standards. One way teachers can make content accessible to ELLs, while maintaining grade level expectations, is by using the strategy of tiered lesson design. Tiered lesson design is a differentiated instructional method using academic standards and/or key concepts with a focus on allowing students to meet the standards through increasingly difficult levels.

Background

Research indicates student achievement is a direct result of effective teaching (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2004, p. 3). There is a need for teachers to provide different pathways for all students to meet standardized academic benchmarks. Hall (2002) suggests that the intent of differentiated instruction is to maximize student growth and success by meeting individual student learning needs. The California Department of Education (2001) released findings which concluded that the “three principles of cognitive research (the need for emotional safety, for appropriate challenges, and for self-constructed meaning) suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to classroom teaching is ineffective for most students and even harmful for some” (p. 140). With the increased focus on standardized test performance, teachers are under intense pressure to teach to the test. While differentiated instruction is a broad term encompassing many strategies that teachers can use to teach to a diverse population of students, tiered lesson design is a comprehensive strategy allowing teachers to use just one model to plan
specifically for students of varying abilities across the areas of instruction, delivery, and assessment. Gardner, one of the original researchers of the theory of multiple intelligences, has contributed greatly to the awareness that students vary in intelligence, preferences, and strengths. His research supports the need to attend to these differences (Hatch & Gardner, 1989, p. 5). Tomlinson (2004) posits that teachers use tiered activities so all students focus on essential understandings and skills but at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. By keeping the focus of the activity the same, but providing routes of access at varying degrees of difficulty, the teacher maximizes the likelihood that (1) each student comes away with pivotal skills and understandings and (2) each student is appropriately challenged. (p. 83)

While research provides a theoretical justification for differentiated instruction, federal education law mandates it. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, the federal special education act, requires that all special education students be instructed in their least restrictive environment (LRE). By educating in the least restrictive environment, many special education students are taking mainstream classes, but are not able to access the curriculum in the same way as their peers, thus requiring differentiation of the content (United States Department of Education, 2004). In other words, the LRE may not actually be best practice in all situations. Furthermore, even though English-as-a-second-language learners do not fall under special education, Lau v. Nichols, a United States Supreme Court ruling, also requires school districts to provide equal access to the curriculum for these learners. In providing equal access to English Language Learners, teachers must differentiate in order to make curriculum comprehensible (Lau v. Nichols, 1974).

A tiered lesson should include differentiation in content, process, and product. Tiering lessons in the content areas can be challenging because it requires locating materials related to the topic at various reading levels without losing the content and concepts of the lesson. To accomplish this goal, teachers can simplify or enhance the text using the grade-level content student book or by finding published trade books on the subject.

In order to tier a lesson for process, the teacher plans for students to interact with the instructional materials. Questions often arise during this phase, for example: Will the students be expected to read and comprehend the information on their own, participate in small group instruction, or perhaps listen to the material through the use of technology? For example, in a tiered science experiment which has been differentiated for the area of process, the teacher would provide opportunities for students to interact with a variety of appropriately leveled content materials. Such a lesson plan might contain the following variations: the requirement that students demonstrate understanding through the use of concrete materials and simplified language or picture match or, alternatively, use hands-on materials as well as graphs and scientific language. Further, a tiered assignment would include completion of an experiment with result analysis along with an experiment comparison and class discussion or demonstration. Teachers traditionally focus on delivery of the content when planning lessons. However, backward lesson design emphasizes the assessment,
or product, as the starting point for planning lessons (Diaz-Rico, 2007). Based on their research, McTighe and Tomlinson (2006) have also concluded that the “deliberate use of backward design for planning courses, units, and individual lessons results in more clearly defined goals, more appropriate assessment, and more purposeful teaching” (p.78). When teachers use tiered lesson design, they should focus on the product as the point at which to begin designing lessons. For this reason, the “essential knowledge,” or benchmark, is listed first in the tiered lesson template. This focus is important because teachers are leading students through content in order to meet grade-level expectations or benchmarks. When teachers reference the grade-level expectations before tiering individual lessons, students experience a deeper understanding of the content. Once the desired end result is known, the teacher can then work backwards to determine how students will demonstrate mastery of the content. For example, if the end goal was to focus on developing vocabulary and writing skills within a social studies lesson, the three tiers of a poster presentation assignment might look like the following: the Tier 1 assignments might include artwork with limited content vocabulary. Students working at the Tier 2 level could include artwork, charts, and a written summary. Tier 3 assignments could include the previous assignments; however, the student would use an advanced writing template to complete an in-depth summary of the material. When teachers tier the delivery of the content, all students have equal access to the curriculum and should be adequately prepared to meet the benchmarks or grade-level expectations.

Implementation

When using tiered planning strategies, students need to have an understanding that their assignments may look different than their peers’ assignments; however, all assignments are thoughtfully designed and are evaluated for comprehension of the content. The lesson designer or teacher must keep the goal of meeting or exceeding grade-level benchmark expectations in mind when implementing the lesson. In addition to the content objectives, Michigan teachers also incorporate English Language Proficiency Standards into their tiered lesson plans. The English Language Proficiency Standards cover four domains of language: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. These standards are used by general education and ESL K-12 teachers throughout the State of Michigan to ensure that English Language Learners are being appropriately instructed and assessed by content area and English language benchmarks. In this section, examples of tiered lesson plans for three grade levels are presented.

Third-Grade Social Studies

The first example of a tiered planning strategy is from a third-grade social studies lesson, tiered by content and product for Level I and II ELLs, and by product for Level III-V ELLs. In order to identify English Language Learners by level, the State of Michigan has determined five levels of language proficiency. Level V indicates advanced proficiency; Level IV indicates proficient; Level III describes high intermediate fluency; Level II describes intermediate fluency; Level I A describes students who demonstrate minimal English proficiency and
interrupted schooling; finally, Level IB indicates students demonstrating minimal English skills (Michigan Department of Education, 2004, p.8). The standard this lesson addresses is “2.1.1 People, Places, and Cultures,” which involves comparing the similarities and differences between men’s and women’s roles in the Native American culture (Michigan Department of Education, 2007, pg. 6). The Our Michigan Adventure (McConnel, 2002) textbook states the lesson goal as: students will understand the different roles Native Americans had in their daily lives.

In this scenario, teachers would provide a modified version of the text for their Level I and Level II students. The teacher would make the decision as to whether or not the students should read the text in small groups or on their own. The modified version would have simplified language and the support of visuals to help illustrate the vocabulary and make the content more comprehensible. After reading the text, students would draw the different jobs Native American men and women had and label them with the help of supplied vocabulary words.

A tiered assignment for ELLs at Levels III or IV would include students reading the text individually or with a partner and then writing a paragraph describing the different roles men and women had in the Native American tribes. Finally, a tiered assignment which might be appropriate for Levels IV and V ELLs would require students to read the text on their own and write a brief essay in first person describing their daily lives as a Native American man or woman (see Appendix A).

**Sixth-Grade Science**

The following example of a sixth-grade science lesson demonstrates how the process and product of a lesson could be tiered with three levels of students: Levels I & II, Level III, and Levels IV & V (Horton, Werwa, & Zike, 2002). The title of the unit is “Elements and Atoms,” and the lesson title is “Classification of Elements”. This lesson spans several 45-minute class periods. The benchmark matched to this lesson is to “classify substances as elements, compounds, or mixtures and justify classifications in terms of atoms and molecules” (Michigan Department of Education, 2000, p. 68).

When teaching this lesson in a traditional manner, the teacher provides the students with the class text and several fill-in-the-blank and short essay question worksheets. However, the worksheets and the cloze passage assessment, provided without scaffolding, are inappropriate for English Language Learners. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for process include: Level I & II, have students read and interpret a graphic organizer containing information about classification of elements and complete a vocabulary chart for unfamiliar vocabulary, in which students use a bilingual dictionary and partner with native speaker who has the text version. For Level III, have students read a glossed version of the text and complete a cloze graphic organizer, working with a partner. Finally, for Levels IV & V, have students read the text, highlighting main ideas and underlining supporting details, while working with a partner.

Likewise, the traditional assessment for the end of the lesson series on classifying substances is a cloze passage, completed by the students, without use of a word bank, notes, or textbooks. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for product
include: Level I & II, completing a cloze graphic organizer, using notes; Level III, completing the traditional cloze passage with the assistance of a word bank and use of a graphic organizer; and Levels IV & V, completing the traditional cloze passage with the assistance of class notes and graphic organizer, but without a word bank (Appendix B).

**Fifth-Grade Social Studies**

A third example of tiering an elementary school unit could be illustrated by designing a fifth-grade Social Studies unit on “The Thirteen Colonies.” As previously illustrated, this unit could be tiered in three levels: Levels I & II, Level III, and Levels IV & V (Duran, Gusman, & Shefelbine, 2005). The title of the unit is “America’s Beginnings” and the lesson title is “The Thirteen Colonies.” The lesson spans several 45-minute class periods. According to the Michigan Department of Education (2007), the benchmark matched to this lesson is “USHG 2.1 European Struggle for Control of North America” (p. 16).

During the traditional instruction of this unit, the teacher provides the students with the class text and several fill in the blank and short essay question worksheets. However, the worksheets and the cloze passage assessment, provided without scaffolding, are inappropriate for English Language Learners. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for process include: Levels I & II, have students read a graphic version of the text with vocabulary support and complete a vocabulary chart for unfamiliar vocabulary using a bilingual dictionary and partnering with a native speaker who has the text version; Level III, read a glossed version of the text and complete a cloze outline of the reading while working with a partner; Levels IV & V, read the traditional text, highlighting main ideas and underlining supporting details, while working with a partner.

The traditional assessment for the end of the lesson on “The Thirteen Colonies” is a matching test, completed by the students without a word bank or use of notes or textbooks. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for product include: Levels I & II, drawing a picture of a colonist; Level III, making a diorama of a colony; Levels IV & V, writing a letter to the King explaining why the colonists want and deserve their freedom. As a culminating activity, students of all levels could participate in a Colonist vs. King role-play activity (see Appendix C). This activity would activate speaking and listening skills and allow all students to learn from one another. The teacher then would have the opportunity to observe students’ comprehension of the unit and correct any common misunderstandings or misconceptions. While all the examples mentioned above cover Social Studies and Science content, the strategy is useful when planning for all grades and all content areas. The use of the tiered lesson template is helpful as a manner of organizing content, process, and product of any unit.

**Assessment**

In a differentiated environment, assessment is ongoing and diagnostic, and teachers use a pre-test before the study of each unit (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 10). Pre-tests are often referred to as “diagnostic assessments ... used to check students’
prior knowledge and skill levels and identify misconceptions, interests, or learning style preferences” (McThighe & Tomlinson, 2006, p. 71). Pre-assessing students helps the teacher to plan appropriately differentiated content and assessments because each student’s level of readiness has been identified. Furthermore, each student will demonstrate weaknesses and strengths in the pre-tests, which will be addressed by using a tiered lesson design. When planning a unit using tiered lessons, teachers can use the results of the pre-test to group students into ability or interest groups. Teachers can then use a tiered lesson template to plan for instruction and assessment across three or more sub-groups of students.

Tiered lesson design is a meaningful tool when planning for assessments, both summative and formative. A summative assessment is generally used to summarize what has been learned over the course of a unit (McThighe & Tomlinson, 2006, p. 71). Examples of summative assessments include final exams containing multiple-choice items, fill-in-the-blank and short essay questions, performance assessments, culminating projects, and student portfolios (Horton, Werwa, & Zike, 2002). When tiering for a summative assessment, the teacher could design several versions of the final exam, provide different performance assessments or culminating projects, or have differing requirements for portfolio submission. For example, in a summative assessment for a sixth-grade science unit about matter, the teacher could reduce the number of questions, provide a word bank for the fill-in-the-blank questions, allow students to use notes, provide an alternative test, or allow students to do a performance assessment (e.g., a science lab or experiment) or another differentiated assessment task.

While a summative assessment is quite formal, a formative assessment tends to “occur concurrently with instruction” (McThighe & Tomlinson, 2006, p. 71). Formative assessments are used to gauge students’ progression throughout a unit of study. Examples of formative assessments include observing, questioning, student-teacher conferencing, cooperative grouping, informal quizzing, and reviewing work in student portfolios. Teachers may use results of formative assessments to alter the method of content delivery or for re-teaching key concepts. Formative assessments lend themselves to tiering naturally, as they are used to assess students’ performance on an ongoing basis. An example of a formative assessment in a sixth-grade science unit on matter, taken from The Nature of Matter (Horton, Werma, & Zike, 2002), is to build a model of a cell using a variety of materials to represent the different parts. This assessment could be tiered by having Level I & II. Students simply create the model of a cell. Level III students could create the cell model and label all the parts. Meanwhile, Level IV and V students could make the cell model, label all parts, and write a short essay about the structure of a cell.

**Benefits of Using Tiered Lessons**

There are many benefits of tiered lesson design for both students and teachers. First, as a teacher designs tiered lessons, he or she guarantees “all students focus on essential understandings and skills” (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 83). A focus on essential understandings, or essential knowledge, provides the teacher a
basis from which to differentiate levels. On the tiered lesson template (see Appendix A), there is a place for writing the “Big Idea,” which is the essential knowledge. The “Big Idea” is generally garnered from wording in the content area benchmark. For example, if the benchmark reads “classify substances as elements, compounds, or mixtures and justify classifications in terms of atoms and molecules” (Michigan Department of Education, 2000, p. 68), the “Big Idea” may be written “Elements are classified according to their properties.” With a focus on essential understandings, teachers are differentiating in order to suitably challenge students with language-appropriate expectations.

Additionally, teachers who use a tiered lesson design ensure that they are adjusting their curriculum, instruction, and assessment to meet the needs of their diverse student population. To illustrate, Tomlinson (2004) offers this example: a student who struggles with reading or has a difficult time with abstract thinking needs to make sense of the pivotal concepts and principles in a given chapter or story, while an advanced student in that same subject needs to find challenge when working with the same concepts and principles (p. 83). When using a tiered lesson design, teachers are able to differentiate content for students from the low end to the high end, as well as for all those in the middle. Students benefit most by being appropriately challenged when facing new content and when working on assessment tasks that match their ability level.

Another benefit of tiered instruction is that it frees up time for teachers. If students are actively engaged in learning an appropriate task, then they will be able to successfully work independently without constant, direct monitoring by the teacher. Actively engaging students in small group instruction allows the teacher to spend time working with other groups of students or with students individually. By working with students individually or in small groups, the teacher can continue to tailor instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Working in small groups or one-on-one with the teacher is a great benefit of tiered lessons for the student as well. Research shows that structured cooperative learning has positive effects on student performance. Selection of students for small group differentiated instruction is based on specific learning needs. The Florida Center for Reading Research (2008), based on work by Hall (2002), asserts that “based on the content, project, and on-going evaluations, grouping and regrouping must be a dynamic process as one of the foundations of differentiated instruction”. During small group instruction, positive changes in students’ performance may be attributed to “the power that children have to make decisions which affect their own work, and to the way in which teachers facilitate the … learning by offering guidance and assistance rather than by directing learning” (Gillies, 1996, p. 4).

**Limitations**

The differentiated strategy of tiered lesson planning is not simply a teaching strategy. A teaching strategy is generally considered a tool for delivery of instruction. While tiered lesson planning is a tool for delivery of instruction, it is also a method for planning a comprehensive differentiated unit. Consideration must be given to lesson delivery as well as student assignments and assessments.
If the explanation of the content material is not comprehensible, then students will continue to struggle with the content. To use tiered lesson planning successfully, the teacher must understand grade-level expectations and have a strong foundation in the content areas. As Pierce and Adams (2005) note, “a common mistake for those just beginning to tier is to develop three great activities and then try to force fit them into a lesson” (p. 89).

In order for teachers to move beyond this limitation, they must fully engage in study of the content material and grade-level expectations. While this is time consuming, it has great benefits for teachers in the long run. Teachers may consider using successful activities that they have previously developed for general education students and tier these activities to meet the needs of their students.

Tiered lesson planning also becomes easier as one practices it. Once a teacher has developed a tiered design model, it can be used as a guide to tier additional lessons in a variety of content areas. By using the tiered lesson design template, the teacher will save time when planning. Likewise, many tiered activities can be repeated across themes and content areas.

Teachers may be concerned that students will have adverse reactions when they discover that different students have different assignments and assessments. However, the master teacher can explain that this process benefits all students. In time, students adjust to this type of teaching model, as they do whenever teachers change content delivery.

Although there are many limitations to using tiered lesson design, the authors strongly encourage this model to be used by teachers interested in differentiating their curriculum. Research supports tiered lesson design as a solid teaching model with numerous benefits McTighe and Tomlinson (2006), Gusman (2005), and Hatch and Gardner (1989) are just a few of the prominent educational researchers in the United States who support the use of differentiated instruction as a way to meet the needs of all students in the classroom, including English Language Learners.

Conclusion

When used in conjunction with effective teaching strategies, tiered lesson planning provides opportunities for student success at all academic levels within the classroom. Reading levels can span six years or more within a content area classroom, and it is necessary to look beyond the textbook in order for students to have equal access to the subject matter. Tiered lesson planning addresses both content and English language skills, which is a challenge for teachers in the classroom. Using this planning strategy allows extra time for the teacher to spend with small groups or individuals once class time is given for written assignments. Thus, tiered planning is one way to reach all students at their current academic level while maintaining the integrity of the content material.

Author Note

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References


Appendix A

PLANNING A TIERED ACTIVITY
GRADE _______ UNIT __________ LESSON ____
STANDARD/BENCHMARK: __________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BIG IDEA: WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEVELS 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B

LESSON: Classification of Elements

STANDARD/BENCHMARK: Classify substances as elements, compounds, or mixtures and justify classifications in terms of atoms and molecules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BIG IDEA: WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE? Elements are classified according to their properties.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEVELS 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read and interpret a graphic organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete vocabulary chart for unfamiliar vocabulary:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use bilingual dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partner with native speaker who has text version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read glossed text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete a cloze graphic organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work with a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Highlight the main ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Underline supporting details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work with a partner (optional)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C
GRADE 3 UNIT: Native Americans
Standard/Benchmark: Locate and describe cultures and compare the similarities and differences among the roles of women, men, and families.

THE BIG IDEA:
WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE?
People had different roles in the tribe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS 1-2</th>
<th>LEVEL 3</th>
<th>LEVELS 4/5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Read and interpret a graphic organizer</td>
<td>• Read text either as a class or with a partner</td>
<td>• Read the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partner with native speaker who has text version</td>
<td>• Complete a paragraph frame</td>
<td>• Work with a partner (optional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete a drawing of the jobs they had</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Write a paragraph describing the jobs they would be responsible for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix D
GRADE 5 UNIT: America’s Beginnings
Lesson: The Thirteen Colonies
Standard/Benchmark: USHG 2.1 European Struggle for Control of North America

THE BIG IDEA:
WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE?
English people came to the colonies for wealth, religious freedom, and a better life. Many parts of American life today began in the 13 colonies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS 1-2</th>
<th>LEVEL 3</th>
<th>LEVELS 4/5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students will read the graphic organizer version of the text (context)</td>
<td>• Student will read the glossed version of the text. (content)</td>
<td>• Students will read the standard textbook version of the reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The teacher will “read” the graphic organizer with a small group of students. (process)</td>
<td>• They will partner with a native English speaker or read in small group with teacher group with teacher support (process)</td>
<td>• Students will partner with a native English speaker. (process)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete vocabulary chart. Draw a picture of a colonist. (product) Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
<td>• Complete a cloze passage outline of the chapter and make a diorama of a colony (product)</td>
<td>• Make a poster illustrating why freedom is important to the Colonists. OR write a letter to the King stating why they want freedom. (product)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
<td>• Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>