Universal Access: When All Means A-L-L and not S-O-M-E

With a Closer Look at English Language Learners, Special Education, and Advanced Learners

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All schools and all educators intend to meet the needs of all their students. Indeed, educating all students is the promise of a democracy. Nonetheless, in many American schools, this promise is largely unfulfilled. Teachers struggle to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse classrooms. It is not uncommon to find a single classroom in which ten different languages are spoken and where the teacher must manage three to four varying skill levels and address the disparate needs of children who live in poverty and children who live relatively comfortable lives. How then is the goal of "all" students to be realized? How does the teacher "leave no child behind"?

With the virtually universal expectation that students must meet challenging state standards, students must have access to high-quality curriculum and instruction. This access has been referred to as "universal access" and has also been linked to the term "universal design." *Universal access* refers to the teacher's scaffolding of instruction so all students have the tools they need to be able to access information. *Universal design* typically refers to those design principles and elements that make materials more accessible to more children—larger fonts, headings, and graphic organizers, for example. Just as designing entrance ramps into buildings makes access to individuals in wheelchairs easier, curriculum may also be designed to be easier to use. When principles of universal design are applied to curriculum materials, universal access is more likely.

But design alone will not ensure universal access; effective, intentional teaching is essential. In order to properly scaffold instruction, we have to match instruction to identified needs. It is this delicate and artful matching of need to instruction that ensures "universal access." To enable access to occur, teachers need well-designed instructional materials, a thorough understanding of the role of assessment in instructional planning, and practical knowledge of effective ways to differentiate instruction.

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Assessment and Diagnostic Teaching

Assessment is a critical component of universal access. In fact, appropriate assessments at strategic junctures serve as road maps to design instruction that maximizes access to the core curriculum. Because assessment should be a valid measure of what students know, it must be aligned with classroom instruction. To do this requires screening students to determine their needs and then continuously assessing their progress to monitor and make adjustments to their instruction. Regular formative assessments signal whether the curriculum and instruction as a whole are working. It is not uncommon to have a handful of students in a given classroom who are struggling. However, if the majority of students in some classrooms are not achieving well, this may indicate that those teachers need assistance in instructional strategies and/or management. If many students school-wide are struggling, then it may mean the instructional tools or curriculum used and/or instructional practices are not working well. A combination of effective instructional tools, such as well-designed curriculum programs and diagnostic teaching that includes differentiation, will be required. Diagnostic teaching combines repetition of instruction, increased practice, and focus on key skills. Differentiation means that some students will require modification of the curriculum and/or instruction. The severity of needs will help determine the adjustments needed for instructional planning. It is helpful to think of differentiation in terms of three groups of students.

Three Targeted Groupings

Based on assessments, it will be evident which students need assistance and the severity of their need and, therefore, the intensity of assistance. The authors of the *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools* (1999) identified three groupings of students based on assessed data. These three groupings represent progressive levels of intervention: benchmark, strategic, and intensive. *Benchmark learners* (or even advanced learners) make adequate progress. They may have temporary or minor difficulties that are not critical, but must be addressed to prevent frustration. This short-term, nonintrusive intervention can be accomplished by a quick reteaching session or a small-group work session focusing on the particular need. The teacher may also provide added time and practice. Parents can assist with this group, as can peers during specially structured peer or companion teaching time. For these students assessment every 6–8 weeks is usually sufficient.

Strategic learners may be one to two standard deviations below the mean on standardized testing (e.g., approximately one to two grade levels below). With careful planning, the regular teacher can assist them within the classroom, often during regular, small-group instruction. A student study team might provide added suggestions. In addition to regular reteaching and some preteaching, these students may require specific, long-term supports coupled with regular work with peers or tutors. These students may need extended study and work time before or after school or during intersessions. Others may require specific, curricular modifications as identified in their IEPs, inclusion plans, or 504s. To keep strategic learners on target, more frequent assessment is essential, every 3-6 weeks at least.

Intensive learners are the most at risk and therefore require the greatest intensity of support. These learners demonstrate consistently low performance on multiple diagnostic measures. They perform significantly below the mean. Additional outside assistance will be needed to meet their needs. Even referral for special education services may be advisable. These students may have so many skill gaps that a special intensive two- to three-hour course will be essential to lift them to adequate levels. A student study team can plan special accommodations. These accommodations may include a classroom assistant, the use of special devices, adaptations for assessment, or modified curriculum and instruction. Learners identified as needing intensive support also need frequent assessment, every 1–3 weeks, to monitor growth and adjust instruction. These students cannot afford to work for prolonged periods with little gain.

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Table 1 shows frequency of assessment, the level of intrusiveness and intensity of intervention based on the student need. For both strategic and intensive groups, specialized, small group instruction will be essential within the classroom, but the intensive students will need support beyond that provided by the classroom teacher.

Table 1: Assessment Frequency, Intensity, and Intrusiveness of Intervention by Group

	Benchmark	Strategic	Intensive
Short-term support within class	X		
Regular and sustained support within class, within small groups		X	X
Tutoring or peer support within or outside class		X	X
Targeted instruction by specialists outside of class and placement in intensive intervention program			X
Assessment every 6–8 weeks or 3 times a year	X		
Assessment every 3–6 weeks		X	
Assessment every 1–3 weeks			X

Grouping to Meet Needs

Once a teacher has assessed students and determined needs, grouping may be used to help meet the needs of these different learners. The groupings should be dictated by the instructional objectives. Different groupings serve different purposes:

- *Whole-class* instruction is appropriate when the skill or concept being taught is appropriate for the majority of students. This is generally true when introducing a new learning strategy, for example, teaching all students a process for summarizing a story or using prefixes to figure out the meanings of unknown vocabulary. In first grade, teaching all students phonemic awareness and explicit phonics at the same time might be an example of such instruction. Whole-class instruction is also good for sharing a work of literature and fostering a common understanding.
- *Identified need and skill-based groups* will be organized based on the common needs of a group of students. For example, a group of students may benefit from further word attack skills instruction as an intervention, or a group may be struggling to apply a strategy the class has been taught, e.g., using context clues to figure out word meanings for unfamiliar vocabulary.
- *Cooperative groups* are typically structured by the teacher, represent a mix of students, and focus both on the group and on individual achievement of a specific learning goal. They also focus on social skills such as active listening. A writing workshop setting can include cooperative groups for peer revision and editing.

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- *Groups based on interests or topics* provide choice and control. These groups are formed often around a project, a particular book that relates to the topic of interest, or a writing task that is interesting.
- *Groups based on subject knowledge* are similar to interest groups. Students who know a great deal about cars, for example, may elect to work together on a project or read a book about the subject.

It is desirable and appropriate to group students by need to reteach a skill or concept, or, for that matter, to allow for advanced learning for students who have already mastered a standard. This means that while students will often be grouped heterogeneously, opportunities for targeted teaching must also be provided to ensure universal access.

Research by Mosteller, Light, and Sachs (1996) show that *what students are taught* has a greater effect on their achievement than *how they are grouped.* In addition to grouping, differentiation of instruction during both whole-class and small-group work is important to achieve universal access. Differentiation is accomplished during groupings as well as during whole-class instruction. Differentiation is done through adjustments in pacing and in complexity of task.

Differentiation of Instruction
The most common ways to differentiate instruction involve adjustments to either the *pace* of instruction or the *complexity* of the task. Altering the pace of a lesson or series of lessons is often all that is needed to maintain access to the curriculum. In practice, this means that the teacher slows down or speeds up. For advanced learners, if assessment indicates mastery, the pace of instruction can be accelerated and students can move on to other content standards, even those targeted for the next grade. For students who demonstrate assessed needs and who are falling behind, instruction can be extended to provide time for added reinforcement and practice. For some students, short, frequent instructional sessions are preferable to longer, slower units. Maintaining a brisk pace with sufficient repetition may unlock a new skill for a student who would otherwise have been left behind.

Changing the pace of instruction may not be enough, however. Altering the complexity of the task may also be required. Adjusting task *complexity* is more challenging and is best supported by instructional materials that contain built-in adjustments and variations. For advanced learners, this can mean enriched curriculum that encourages connections across topics and in-depth study. For students falling behind, adjusting complexity means focusing on the big ideas and critical topics and eliminating confusing or redundant activities. Lessons must be focused and must break larger tasks down into their component parts. Instruction must be carefully sequenced to build upon each successive skill. Going slow to go fast is an important principle in adjusting task complexity. Differentiation of instruction and the use of various groupings can especially be the keys to access for three populations: English learners, special education learners, and advanced learners.

English Learners
These students come to school with a great diversity of language proficiency, both in their own language and in English. English learners have a dual goal of developing proficiency in English and meeting the standards of the state. This means that instruction must be directed both to language acquisition and literacy development.

In a structured immersion or sheltered approach, children begin receiving instruction in reading and writing right at the start along with English language development. This means English learners will need added supports. In particular, they will need simultaneous and direct instruction in the acquisition of the phonological, morphological, syntactical structures, and semantic base of English as well as development

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of academic language. Other necessary supports include preteaching a vocabulary concept and reteaching after the lesson to reinforce and practice the concepts.

Three groups of English learners need to be considered: students in K–2; students in 3–12 who are literate in their primary language; and students in 3–12 with limited prior academic experience or literacy in their primary language. Generally, students in K–2 can participate fully in the regular English classroom if they are given appropriate reading and writing supports and instruction in oral language. Instruction in standard American English, its syntax and vocabulary, must proceed simultaneously with explicit instruction in written language for use in reading and writing. Waiting until a certain level of oral proficiency is achieved may, in fact, be unwise, since most vocabulary growth occurs through reading. Therefore, addressing both oral proficiency and basic literacy together can produce increased learning. However, learning the code of English cannot become a rote experience without simultaneously learning the meaning of words. Full comprehension of even the easiest of decodable texts will be hampered by students' English proficiency. To promote access, English learners with demonstrated need should receive additional study of vocabulary and language patterns, including preteaching of vocabulary and background information and expressions and patterns that occur in the texts read and the topics studied. In bilingual settings, the most promising practices to accelerate access include explicit instruction in English language and English literacy skills during targeted English literacy instruction—and paralleling that instruction to instruction in the primary language. The best approach in teaching reading skills to English learners includes the use of contrastive analysis. In this strategy, teachers actually plan time for students to practice the sounds of English during carefully structured phonemic awareness activities and contrast these sounds with those in, or not in, the native language (for example "ch" and "sh" for Spanish speakers since "sh" does not exist in Spanish). Part of this instruction should include identification and review of cognates. Cognates are words that look and sound alike and have a similar meaning. This is particularly useful in classrooms with native Spanish speakers because so many English and Spanish words share the same Greek or Latin origin. By focusing on the morphological pattern of language, English learners gain assistance with word attack skills and spelling.

English learners who bring to school strong primary language skills in grades 3–12 can transfer many of these skills, and, with support, progress well. These students can focus on acquiring and learning English. However, because of the advanced cognitive demands of the upper grade content, they will benefit from targeted instruction in more specialized English vocabulary, advanced morphological analysis skills, and advanced and complex language structures. Teachers can assist these students by also explicitly pointing out those skills that are transferable as well as directly contrasting those that are not transferable. Again a focus on cognates may be especially beneficial.

Students in grades 3–12 without prior experience in their primary language will need intensive support in beginning literacy and learning English. Since these students enter with limited reading and writing experience in their own language, they need intensive, focused instruction in both learning English and learning to read and write. Basic grammar instruction, including common usage patterns and idiomatic expressions, will become the building blocks of access. Specialized age-appropriate materials are crucial along with ample time and individualized as well as targeted group instruction.

English learners will need instruction in formal and informal language. This includes basic social conventions, classroom talk, and safety-related language. A variety of activities and settings are important—small and large groups and partners. Students will need to see and hear models and have lots of time to produce and practice their language with peers and adults. Teachers must help students hear the sound similarities and differences between their primary language and Standard English. Thoughtful use of constructive feedback is important. English learners will also need targeted instruction to develop

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an understanding of *academic language.* This refers to the language of school, tests, books, and formal writing. Declines in vocabulary understanding after grade 3 and comprehension in grades 6 and 7 are attributed to the increasingly challenging texts with more difficult, abstract, and technical language. Shefelbine (1998) views academic language as different from conversational speech. This is because of text structure, syntactic complexity, background knowledge, and abstract thinking. Generally, academic language is learned through repetition and use during subject matter instruction. Reception is not sufficient; students need time to produce academic language as well.

There are four strategies for developing academic language: reading aloud, instructional discussions, wide reading, and extensive writing. *Reading aloud* is a wonderful way to build vocabulary and background knowledge. The language may be linguistically and conceptually challenging, but the content should be engaging. Analytical talk, predictions, and vocabulary-related talk are associated with higher gains in vocabulary and comprehension (Dickinson and Smith, 1994). Teachers should call attention to the meanings of selected words during the reading and pose questions that encourage language. Frequent opportunities for instructional discussions are important. Open-ended questions requiring interpretation will encourage richer talk than simple teacher-student recitation. Furthermore, students need to both *read a lot* and *write a lot.* Reading and writing have a reciprocal relationship: one is the skill of decoding to unlock meaning from text, the other utilizes sound/spellings in the context of words and sentences to encode meaning to the reader. Each skill reinforces the other.

Special Education Learners

A second important population is special education—and for the regular education teacher in particular, students with learning disabilities. Specific disabilities that manifest in language and reading achievement can be hard to diagnose and to remediate. Given this fact, the best special education program is prevention. However, even with the best first teaching, some students will need extra attention. For these students, the area of phonology and/or memory will often be the area of need. For 80 percent of the children with learning disabilities, language is the primary issue. Dyslexia, often the umbrella term for language-based problems, may manifest in many ways: cramped handwriting, problems saying the right word when speaking, struggling to put information in order, and, of course, problems reading. In fact, when the reading process is understood, it is a wonder so many can read effortlessly. First the eye notices the line of print, then specific letters pop into focus, and the reader must connect them to their stored sounds, blend the sounds from left to right to produce a word, connect that word to its meaning by retrieving the stored vocabulary, and then proceed in this left to right and top to bottom fashion until all the words are read. When reading works well, this happens effortlessly and unconsciously. Given the task complexity, it is not surprising that so many children have difficulty learning to read.

Every able reader, no matter how taught, goes through a phonemic recognition process. “Although spoken language is seamless, the beginning reader must detect the seams in speech, unglue the sounds from one another, and learn which sounds (phonemes) go with which letters” (Lyon, 1998). This decoding process is where children with reading disabilities get stuck.

Using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) a great deal has been learned about the brain activation patterns in good and poor readers. Important wiring differences are discernible. Good readers activate a large neural circuit at the back of their brains; poor readers under-activate this same circuit and over-activate an area in the front of the brain. It is believed that this may be the neural signature for dyslexia.

Prevention and early intervention are the key. If intervention is delayed until age nine (when many special education children are finally identified), about 75 percent will continue to have reading difficulties through their adult lives. If caught and worked with early, 85–90 percent will reach average reading levels.

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The general education teacher should start with good instruction for all children. Such instruction is systematic and explicit, and includes direct instruction in phonemic awareness and letter-sound relationships along with fluency development, comprehension strategies instruction, and vocabulary development. For students with intensive direct teaching of phonemic awareness, sound-symbol relationships, blending skills, and reading fluency is crucial. For students with *adequately advanced decoding skills,* systematic and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, expository text conventions, story grammar, and study strategies is crucial.

Early identification and swift intervention are important. Even in well-designed curriculum programs in kindergarten and first grade, some students will demonstrate continuous difficulty. For these children extra reteaching and preteaching assistance is needed. By adding phonemic awareness interventions, additional practice blending words, and repeated oral reading of easy books and decodables to build fluency, these struggling children can be brought up to grade level. Good assessment and careful analysis of the data are also critical. To achieve the standards, students need universal access. But that does not mean one size fits all. Children with reading disabilities will need extra attention, added support, and added time, not just with the core curriculum, but also with materials that may be specially designed to address a need. Furthermore, small-group or even partner-assisted learning (PALS) can be beneficial. Sometimes adjustments by the regular teacher can be small, but mean a lot; for example, special seating, organizational strategies (schedules, partner study notes), or even a special pencil grip.

Advanced Learners

Challenging standards offer one way to motivate advanced learners. However, this suggests that once students have mastered standards, they should be able to move on to others. A research study conducted in 1991 (Shore et al., 1991) found a combination of *acceleration* (in which children move to material above grade level) and *enrichment* (in which students study material in more *depth* or *complexity,* or related to, but not part of, the regular course of study) to be the most productive combination. Much controversy has surrounded how to group advanced learners. In a longitudinal study (Delcourt et al., 1994) of grouping arrangements of 1,000 elementary students, gifted students receiving an enriched and accelerated program in special pullouts, special schools, or special classes made significant gains; enrichment offered in the regular classroom did not result in similar gains. The reason for the latter result was generally lack of time. This means that if gifted students and advanced learners are to excel, they too need specialized attention within the heterogeneously grouped classroom or within homogeneous groups for small amounts of time.

Below are four different dimensions for differentiation of content that can be applied to a lesson or unit of study for an advanced learner.

1. **Acceleration** refers to moving students through the curriculum at a faster pace and not expecting them to continue to work on what they already know how to do.
2. **Depth** refers to students becoming experts in a given area and having opportunities to study that area in great detail.
3. **Complexity** refers to studying the connections and relationships between things. Students use the skills of comparing and contrasting.
4. **Novelty** refers to allowing students to have choices in the creation of original projects that will demonstrate their creativity. Novelty allows advanced learners to challenge their thinking in novel and extraordinary ways.

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Conclusion

Access to the curriculum begins when students can interact with it in order to learn. For special populations, this access may in fact be beyond their reach without special accommodations or a relatively new concept in education, universal design. This refers to the design of materials and instruction such that the learning goals are achievable by individuals with wide differences. This term comes from architecture and refers to adaptations that not only allow access to those who have disabilities but make access easier for everyone. When adaptations are made to ensure access to diverse learners, everyone benefits. Paula Stanovich, the wife of noted reading researcher Keith Stanovich and herself a special education teacher, summed up the issue of access well when she described the so-called reading wars:

> Sometimes when I put my special education hat on, I see this controversy as simply another issue of accessibility. Installing ramps at building entrances doesn't keep me (a temporarily able-bodied person) out, but it does allow others in, those, for example, who happen to use assistive devices for mobility. Providing a sign-language interpreter for a public meeting doesn't keep me from listening to the speakers, but it does allow our deaf citizens to participate in the democratic process. Teaching decoding and phonemic awareness doesn't hinder those lucky children who would become readers almost effortlessly, but it does allow those children who need the explicit instruction to become readers too. It allows them access to the world of literacy. If you think about it, opening up the world in this way also has benefits for the rest of us. In the first example, those of us who may be pushing a child in a pram or push chair can use the ramps that were originally installed for users of wheelchairs. In the second example, as I'm listening to the speaker at the public meeting, I can perhaps benefit from the interpreter's use of body language and other nonverbal expression to enrich my understanding of the speaker's intentions. Surely, there is such an enrichment for the able reader who is exposed to the wonderful songs, word play, and word games that we use for teaching decoding and phonemic awareness? (Stanovich, 2000, p. 416)

Teaching to ensure universal access is not optional. Given the increasingly diverse populations and needs in America's classrooms, it is essential that teachers find ways to assist all students to access the core curriculum and meet rigorous state standards. Perhaps armed with scientific research and equipped with well-designed materials, the promise of quality education for all students is actually nearer than it has ever been.

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