Differentiating Curriculum and Instruction for English-Language Learners With Special Needs

JOHN J. HOOVER AND JAMES R. PATTON

Inclusion efforts to meet diverse needs have challenged both special and inclusive educators to modify curriculum and differentiate classroom instruction. This includes inclusive education students and special education students, as well as English Language Learners (ELLs) who have learning or behavior problems. This article discusses the topic of curriculum and its differentiation for ELLs with special needs. Specifically, this article addresses teaching and curricular principles, as well as practices necessary to effectively meet diverse needs in the classroom. This article also includes several checklists or guides to assist educators to become more competent in implementing and differentiating instruction. The ideas and practices presented will assist educators of ELLs to provide culturally relevant implementation and differentiation of mandated educational curriculum.

Identifying appropriate ways to address persistent educational underachievement of English Language Learners (ELLs) continues to challenge educators nationwide. The pervasive and inappropriate uses of standardized assessment with ELLs is well documented, along with the fact that these assessments often underestimate students’ academic progress and potential (Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Cummins & Sayers, 1995). Not surprisingly, the National Research Council reported that ELLs continue to be at risk for special education placement (Donovan & Cross, 2002). In addition, Zehler, Hopstock, and Fleischman (2003) pointed out that the instructional programs for the approximately 350,000 special education second-language learners in grades K to 12 must be better aligned to state standards to ensure that all students have equal access to the implementation and assessment of mandated curricula. Against this background, there is an urgent need to use more authentic assessment and to differentiate curriculum to address cultural and linguistic diversity in education for all students. The learning and behavior problems of ELL students may encompass several factors, such as different sociolinguistic and cultural background, adjustment to a new sociocultural milieu, the presence of a disability, or a combination of these factors (Hoover, 2000). This often results in over identification, under identification, or misidentification of ELLs for special education (Gonzalez, Brusca-Vega, & Yawkey, 1997). Although specific terminology has varied over the past few decades (e.g., adaptation, differentiation, modification), the underlying issue for ELLs with special needs is that curriculum must meet their diverse needs in the classroom. This includes curriculum differentiation or adaptation on a regular basis in a variety of educational settings. Gartin, Murdick, Imbeau, and
Perner (2002) described differentiated instruction as “using strategies that address student strengths, interests, skills, and readiness in flexible learning environments” (p. 8). In addition, Tomlinson (2000) stressed the importance of having a clear understanding of curriculum and its components to best implement differentiated instruction.

**Adapting Curriculum**

This article discusses several issues related to differentiating or adapting curriculum for ELLs with learning or behavior problems, including teaching and curricular principles, culture and curriculum differentiation, and developing competence in differentiating curriculum and instruction for ELLs with special needs.

**Teaching Principles**

August and Hakuta (1998) recommended that educators focus on several key teaching principles rather than looking for the one program model that works for all ELLs. Adhering to several teaching principles as a guide for curriculum implementation provides a framework for differentiating instruction. This includes program components that work for ELLs in their community such as reflecting community goals, demographics, and resources (Miremontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997).

Five guiding teaching principles, generated from a comprehensive review of the literature and from the consensus of multiple groups of educators and researchers (Tharp, 1998), in conjunction with the Center for Research on Education Diversity and Excellence (CREDE), have been developed. Effective teaching of ELLs with special needs emphasizes the following:

1. learning and development that facilitates joint productive activities among students,
2. learners’ prior knowledge and learning,
3. educational activities within the context of students’ prior experiences and skills,
4. complex solutions and higher-level thinking, and
5. ongoing verbal dialogue.

Each of these teaching principles must be addressed in the overall education of ELLs and specifically in the curriculum implementation and differentiation to best meet their educational needs.

**Curriculum Principles**

The principles for effective implementation of curriculum apply to all learners, including students with mild disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A value-added component is an appreciation of the diversity students bring to the educational setting (Hoover & Patton, in press). The following curricular principles discussed by Garcia 2001; Hoover, 2001; O’Malley & Pierce, 1996; and Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003 complement the basic teaching principles and are important in implementing and differentiating of curriculum for ELLs with learning and behavior problems. Effective curriculum implementation for ELLs with special needs emphasizes:

1. academic content relative to students’ culture, background, environment, and prior experiences;
2. multiple content knowledge and skills that are reinforced over time and across subject areas;
3. cognitive and academic goals in integrated ways;
4. high expectations while valuing diversity; and
5. active learning and inquiry-based tasks.

Expanding upon these important teaching and curricular principles, Hoover and Patton (in press) outlined six curricular elements necessary to effectively select and differentiate curriculum and instruction for ELLs. As shown in Table 1, six curricular factors provide a foundation for effective instruction and have specific relevance to curriculum and its adaptation for ELLs with special needs. Hoover and Patton explained: “Addressing these six factors will help the practitioner ascertain the best adaptations to curriculum, while simultaneously valuing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the learner.”

Figure 1 provides a checklist for determining the extent to which teaching, curriculum, and learning factors have been addressed in the differentiation of curriculum for ELLs. By ensuring that the items in Figure 1 are addressed, educators are best able to provide meaningful, relevant, and differentiated curriculum and instruction to all students with mild disabilities.

**Culture and Differentiating Curriculum for ELLs**

Peregoy and Boyle (2001) said, “Culture comprises... what people know and believe, what people do, and what
people make and use” (p. 9). It is essential that educators understand students’ cultural values prior to selecting adaptations to curriculum. The information discussed in the previous section provides a framework for developing cultural understanding or cultural competence. Peregoy and Boyle also identified several other complementary areas to consider when differentiating instruction for ELLs with special needs.

**FAMILY STRUCTURE.** This includes the heritage associated with the student’s family, such as number of siblings and relatives, others who may live with the family, and decision-making procedures used. Curriculum differentiation decisions should respect and complement the student’s family structure to ensure cultural relevancy.

**INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND GENDER RESPONSIBILITIES.** This refers to different gender roles and responsibilities within the family and culture. It is important to take into consideration the impact of these roles on curriculum implementation and differentiation, as expectations may vary based on cultural roles and responsibilities. In addition, the dynamics associated with interpersonal relationships must be compatible with curriculum adaptation decisions for ELLs.

**DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES AND VALUES.** An understanding of the cultural context of “discipline” is impor-
**TIME, SPACE, RELIGION, AND HEALTH.** Various factors, such as perceptions of punctuality, time necessary to complete tasks, and personal space required to feel comfortable, must also be understood when modifying curriculum for ELLs. Further, religious and health customs must be respected to avoid conflicts between the values of school staff and the cultural values of the student’s family. Specifically, educators must be aware of the student’s beliefs in terms of religious holidays, certain foods and fasting, and the physician’s role in medical treatments for illnesses. An understanding of these and similar issues is necessary for educators to best meet students’ learning and behavioral needs as curriculum is adapted and instructional content, strategies, and settings are differentiated for ELLs (Hoover & Patton, in press).

**TRADITIONS AND SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS.** Overlapping with the previous considerations, curricular modifications must respect specific holidays, events, and other related cultural celebrations and be consistent with the student’s family and culture. The guide presented in Figure 2 provides educators an opportunity to consider specific language and cultural factors in potential curriculum modifications for ELLs with special needs.

Information to adequately respond to the items listed in Figures 1 and 2 may be gathered through observations or interviews with students and parents, and should be considered prior to differentiating curriculum for ELLs with learning and behavior problems.

**Competence in Curriculum Differentiation**

As emphasized in this article, educators must differentiate curriculum and instruction to successfully meet the diverse educational needs of ELLs. In addition to the factors previously discussed, curriculum modification requires knowledge and understanding of its process and potential benefits to ELLs with special needs. The sidebar lists various skills necessary to achieve curriculum differentiation competence.

Acquiring and developing effective curriculum differentiation skills is a continuous process. Teacher competence in differentiating instruction increases the educational success of ELLs with special needs by providing opportunities to meet the current demands of mandated curricula within a culturally relevant context.

**Summary**

Whether students are educated in inclusive and/or special educational classrooms, curriculum and instruction must be differentiated and adaptation must occur. This article has discussed various aspects associated with curriculum and its differentiation for ELLs with special needs. Competencies for teachers to become proficient

---

**Figure 2.** Guide: Checklist for evaluating curriculum and differentiating instruction for cultural appropriateness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Is the curriculum culturally appropriate?  
   a. Are the skills necessary for success with this curriculum directly related to the objectives?  
   b. Considering what you know about this student and related culture, do any items or illustrations in this curriculum represent unfamiliar or misleading content?  
   c. Does the curriculum reflect student’s cultural values/heritage?  
|    |    |
| 2. Is the language appropriate?  
   a. Does this curriculum employ vocabulary familiar to the learner?  
   b. In assessing abilities other than language, does this curriculum rely heavily on receptive and/or expressive English language ability?  
|    |    |
| 3. Is the content appropriate?  
   a. Does the student meet the curricular demands in terms of prerequisite skills?  
   - appropriate reading level of questions/directions?  
   - ability to work rapidly?  
   - understanding tasks and concepts?  
   - other (Identify):  
   b. Does this child possess the prerequisite life experiences?  
   c. Does this child possess the prerequisite language skills?  
|    |    |

Summary (Summarize the cultural appropriateness of the curriculum):

---

Skills to Achieve Competence in Differentiating Curriculum and Instruction for English Language Learners

Competencies (Development; Implementation) comprising curriculum differentiation competence:

Development Competencies—Knowledge of:
- Process for curriculum development
- Curricular issues and their implications for students with disabilities
- Appropriate curriculum by age, grade, and learning strengths
- Topics taught, how they are taught, and the class settings used
- Least intrusive modifications
- Inter-relatedness of the content, materials, instructional strategies, and instructional settings
- Value of culture and language diversity in teaching and learning
- Impact of language development on academic and social development

Implementation Competencies—Application of:
- Curricular strategies to match the student’s learning styles
- Various classroom-based assessments to monitor progress with adaptations
- Instructional materials most relevant to the learner
- Strategies for differentiating the learning environment to reflect implementation of adaptations, strategies, learning styles, and curricular needs
- Modifications to facilitate maintenance and generalization of knowledge and skills
- Cognitive learning strategies and study skills and their uses in curriculum to maximize learning
- Collaboration skills to facilitate adaptations in the inclusive education setting
- Professional advocacy for all students to differentiate curriculum and instruction


with curriculum differentiation for ELLs with mild disabilities were presented, including several checklists or guides. Successful implementation and differentiation of curriculum and instruction for ELLs requires understanding and application of various cultural and linguistic factors such as those presented in this article.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John J. Hoover, PhD, is an associate director of the BUENO Center, where he directs the Special Education Leadership and Quality Teacher Initiative, and is adjunct faculty in special education at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His research interests include curriculum differentiation/adaptation and study skills education to meet diverse needs in the classroom. James R. Patton, EdD, is an independent consultant and adjunct associate professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Texas at Austin. He has written books, chapters, articles, and tests in the area of special education. His current areas of professional interest are the assessment of the transition strengths and needs of students, the infusion of real-life content into existing curricula, study skills instruction, behavioral intervention planning, and the accommodation of students with special needs in inclusive settings. He is also working as a mental retardation forensic specialist in regard to death penalty cases in Texas. Address: John J. Hoover, Special Education Leadership and Quality Teacher Initiative, BUENO Center, School of Education, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309; e-mail: john.hoover@colorado.edu

REFERENCES


VOL. 40, NO. 4, MARCH 2005 235