

Providing Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners Using Questions

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Introduction

Well organized differentiated instruction can effectively meet the needs of English language learners. One of the key challenges English language learners (ELLs) experience in U.S. schools is that they have to develop both oral and written language skills in English while developing thinking skills at the same time. In addition, they have to catch up with their English-speaking peers in developing content knowledge. This challenge is directly related to teachers as they need to provide instruction that accommodates each individual ELL's language skills at each phase of their language development while pushing them to think more deeply about how they could improve their language and thinking skills so that they can make good progress and experience school success. Some, including the authors of this chapter, believe teacher questions are central to effective differentiated instruction.

There are two essential elements in differentiated instruction. Firstly, it needs to be provided in pro-social classroom learning environment. Many scholars within the sociocultural tradition have

shown that students are more likely to succeed in learning English as a second language (ESL) when they have teachers, peers, and community members who affirm their cognitive and linguistic capacities and provide support. ESL students need a support structure that provides them with opportunities to learn English and use their emerging English skills in meaningful, pro-social learning contexts. Teachers can use questions to create a pro-social learning environment for ELLs.

Another essential element of differentiated instruction is the “gradual release of responsibility” (Pearson, 1985, p. 732). Research studies of successful ELL teachers revealed that they help ESL students gain independence in their language learning (August & Hakuta, 1997; Kim, Pearson, Roehler, 2009; Turner & Kim, 2003). They set instructional goals, design instructional activities accordingly, and engage ESL students meaningfully in each phase of the learning process. Guided by their instructional goals, effective teachers use classroom discourse strategies in daily interactions with ESL students to help them learn the content and develop dispositions for language learning (Roehler, personal communications, 1998). As ESL students develop proficiency in English, capable teachers change discourse strategies in a manner that reflects their understanding of student progress and furthers ESL students’ language and cognitive development. Teachers can use questions to release their responsibility gradually and encourage ELLs to take responsibility of participating in their own language learning process.

Teacher questions are known to be beneficial instructional strategies for promoting reading comprehension for mainstream students and students who struggle with reading (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Pallincsar, 1982). More importantly, teacher questions can

be an especially powerful tool for guiding the linguistic and cognitive development of ELLs (Gerstein, 1996; Gibbons, 2003). Because developing useful strategies for asking good questions is a challenging task even for experienced teachers, educators need to understand how successful ESL teachers use questions productively to provide structured differentiated instruction and support the growth of ESL students' thinking and language skills across a school year. Such knowledge will help prepare thoughtful preservice teachers in an era of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. With that in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to explain two successful ESL teachers' instructional practice, with a focus on their questions. Specifically, (1) the types of questions teachers asked and their functions, and (2) teacher reflection that led to changes in questioning strategy and gradual release of responsibility for language learning and use will be explored.

Background information: Two ELL teachers and their students

This study is drawn from three years of classroom observation (1997-2000) that were part of an ESL portfolio assessment project within the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). The data presented in this paper are from one particular year (1997-1998) when two ESL teachers observed to be successful, Meredith and Nina, were co-teaching. All students and teachers' names are pseudonyms except Meredith who gave us her permission to use her real name.

School context

Meredith and Nina taught at Spring Valley Elementary School, which was located in a Midwestern university town. The school provided rich learning opportunities for preservice teachers, such as the Professional Development School (PDS) of a neighboring university, until the school closing in 2003 due to the district's restructuring efforts to adjust to the district-wide low student enrollment. Because the school attracted students from other schools in the district, it became the target of restructuring. When the research took place, the school housed approximately 200 students ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade. The students were mostly children of university graduate students from around the world, and they represented approximately 35 countries and 30 languages. Because a substantial number of new students arrived with a native language other than English, there was a high proportion of ESL students in the school. Luckily, there was a vibrant ESL program in the school, and Meredith and Nina, the focus teachers, were two of three teachers in the ESL pullout program.

In a general sense, Spring Valley Elementary had a school culture that fostered an "additive" perspective of learning English. When new students with limited English proficiency arrived at the school, it was common to find teachers who tried to match the newcomers with proficient English speakers from the same native language background. Staff members encouraged proficient English speakers to translate English into their native languages for their new friends until their English language skills were better developed. Teachers also utilized parental support in helping ESL students learn. They invited parents of ESL students to come in

their classrooms and to share their cultural heritage. In so doing, teachers worked to help ESL students feel proud of their cultures and languages.

Staff members' attitudes toward student cultures and languages were also appreciative. In the hallway, the school had a year-round display of flags from countries around the world. Teachers often mentioned that the flags reminded them of the school's diverse student body, and they cherished the special opportunity to teach students from diverse cultures. It was known that most teachers made a voluntary choice to stay in the school. In addition to valuing student cultures on a daily and weekly basis, the school also held an annual celebration organized by a team of teachers and parents. The event usually included dance and music performances, as well as food tasting. Parents and students shared their cultural expertise with the teachers and among themselves, and teachers learned about the meanings of dance and music from students' various cultures. Thus, the annual celebration raised teachers' awareness of and encouraged them to appreciate diverse world cultures.

ESL teachers and learners

Meredith and Nina were veteran teachers. Although they had both been teaching for over twenty-five years, they enjoyed being in the role of the learner, and their interests in learning and expanding their working knowledge led them to participate in various professional development activities with teacher colleagues and university researchers. One such activity was a portfolio assessment project, from which I collected data for this research report. For the project, the teachers participated in monthly research conversations with university researchers. During that

time, they planned their ESL curriculum for a group of focus students and reflected on their own teaching in light of research literature that the university researchers read with them. They also stayed after each class to respond to my questions regarding their teaching and students, which offered them opportunities to reflect on their own teaching throughout the year.

The focus group of students Meredith and Nina chose to study were nine students ranging from fourth to sixth grade. The students came from six different countries—Botswana, China, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia, and Pakistan—and were readers and writers in their native language schools before they came to the United States. At the beginning of the school year, most of the students' English proficiency was low. When we began the study in the fall, six students had resided in the U.S. for less than 6 months, and the remaining three between two and four years. The students received a pullout ESL instruction for 40 minutes per day, four days a week, and spent the rest of the day in the regular classroom.

Evidence of teacher effectiveness

Evidence of the successful ESL teaching practice implemented by Meredith and Nina was based on student performance on the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) (Leslie & Caldwell, 1995). The reading assessment included both expository and narrative reading passages per each grade level and an examiner's data entry form. The assessment format involved an examinee reading a passage and answering follow-up reading comprehension questions about the text. Due to the test format, the QRI required knowledge on phonetic rules, vocabulary, and syntax as well as reading comprehension. Meredith and Nina administered the QRI at the beginning and end of the academic year of 1997-1998.

Table 1. *ESL students' QRI performance*

Name	Beginning QRI (1997)	End QRI (1998)
Chul	1 st grade	6 th grade
Eno	pre-primer	6 th grade
Jandi	3 rd grade	4 th grade
Jian	3 rd grade	4 th grade
Khaled	3 rd	4 th grade
Manis	1 st grade	4 th grade
Unisha	2 nd grade	4 th grade
Yeum	primer	2 nd grade
Yoon	primer	5 th grade

QRI results demonstrated that students made progress in their reading level, as shown in Table 1. Out of the nine students, one gained seven reading levels in a year by moving from pre-primer to the sixth-grade level. Two students gained five grade levels, another student three levels, two students moved up two levels, and three students advanced one grade reading level within a year. Interestingly, the three students who gained one year growth in QRI had lived in the U.S. longer than the students who made greater reading gains.

Instructional context

The teachers chose to incorporate a writer's workshop into the ESL curriculum because the workshop format provided opportunities to create student learning portfolios and observe students' language and literacy development (Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1983). They began instructional planning by reading research articles about the writer's workshop.

The writing activities in Meredith's and Nina's class involved various genres of writing from cinquain to fiction writing. During writing activities, students were given large blocks of time which usually spanned more than one class period. After completing each writing activity, students shared their written work with their peers and ESL teachers. During the second semester, all of the students chose written work that they wanted to include in their individual portfolios. They revised their written work by themselves, with their peers, and with their teachers. Initial and final drafts were clipped together for entry into the portfolio.

Organizing differentiated instruction through questions

Types of teacher question

The two ESL teachers used a wide variety of questions with the students ranging from giving commands to sharing their own personal experiences. Based upon instructional functions implied in the questions and the degree of teacher responsibility that emerged while analyzing classroom observations, teacher questions were divided into three types: coaching, facilitating, and collaborating questions. Table 2 lists functions of coaching questions and examples for each function.

Coaching questions represented the highest teacher responsibility among the three types of questions. As noted in Table 2, teachers used these kinds of questions—mostly between the beginning of the school year and just before the Christmas break—to help students monitor their own thinking and utterances, give commands, add more information, remind students of what they need to do in class, help them think about the focus of a class activity, summarize, and model a class activity. For example, while

Table 2. *Coaching questions*

Function	Example
To help students monitor their own thinking and utterances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is that what you wanted to ask?
To add information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jandi, can I add something more to your sentence?
To give commands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jandi, can you read author's should-do-list?
To remind students what they need to do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you tell your audience that you are talking about a second interviewee?
To assess students' knowledge or understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you guess what tidy means? • Does everyone have an idea of what a raccoon looks like?
To clarify student or teacher utterances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this a way of telling your friends that you thank them for what they did?
To help students think about the focus of a class activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you think about what a topical sentence is?
To support text comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened in the story? Why?

students and teachers were developing should-do lists for authors during the presentation of student-conducted interviews, Jandi, one of the female students in the class, shared her idea in a whole group. One of the teachers then asked, "Jandi, can I add something

to your idea?” In this example, the teacher listened to the student’s idea, and upon identifying a need for expansion of the idea, asked for permission to do so. In other words, teachers seemed to use coaching questions to guide students toward the instructional and behavioral objectives they have set for them. The role of coaching questions was similar to telling, but it allowed students to exert a small degree of ownership through their responses. One aspect of asking coaching questions was to assess students’ understanding of what they learned; this specific type of coaching question was observed throughout the year.

Table 3. *Facilitating questions*

Function	Example
To invite students’ input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a question you would like to ask your friends? • Is there anything else you want to add?
To help students deepen their understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you guess what the author wanted to tell us by having the title of the story as “Neat Raccoon and Untidy Owl”?
To help students articulate and elaborate on their ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do the leaves look like? How can you find out about the names of the leaves?
To encourage student interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any comments for Khalid?
To find out students’ opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything else we should look at when we make our choices?
To validate students’ creative language use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you say “rest”?

As noted in Table 3, facilitating questions were used to invite student input, to help students deepen their understanding of vocabulary or text comprehension, help them articulate or elaborate on what they said, to encourage student interaction, seek students' opinions, or to validate students' creative language use. Classroom observations showed that teachers used facilitating questions more frequently after the Christmas break. Characteristics of facilitating questions suggested a median level of teacher responsibility among the three types of teacher questions. For example, teachers asked students if they wanted to add more to the should-do lists for the author and the audience. By inviting students' input to make the class lists more complete, the teachers encouraged active participation and thinking in the activity as well as greater ownership in the learning process. In this sense, the teachers acted as facilitators of students' successful learning. In another example, Meredith asked, "Did you say 'rest'?" after a student said, "winter rest is longer here" to describe a difference between his U.S. school and the school he attended in his home country. Following the student's utterance, Meredith recast the student's sentence by saying, "winter break is longer here." After she asked the coaching question, she added a compliment, "I like that." The student's word choice may be an example of overgeneralization because the student overextended the conventional English meaning of "rest," but Meredith seemed to highlight the student's creativity in his language use as a way to encourage and facilitate active participation in the learning process.

Table 4. *Collaborating questions*

Function	Example
Conversation starter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you? • Did you like the special presentation on rocks in Michigan yesterday? • Can you tell me what you did on the weekend? • Where are you going to go during the university spring break?
Sharing personal artifact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know why I have a cup from Minnesota?

Collaborating questions were used to have dialogues about personal experiences with students throughout the year. For example, while waiting for students to arrive at the beginning of a class hour, Meredith asked those present, "Did you like the special presentation on rocks in Michigan yesterday?" The question was open-ended and necessitated students' responses and participation in oral language activities in the classroom. If students did not respond to the teacher's question, the teacher had to find a new way to continue the conversation. Teachers and students needed to collaborate in order to continue the conversation initiated by such questions. Equally importantly, the question focused on students' experiences, which seemed to create opportunities for students to share their ideas, considering that they possessed background knowledge of the topic under discussion, practice their developing oral language skills, and exercise their ownership of learning. Thus, collaborating questions represented the least degree of

teacher responsibility among the three types of teacher questions while soliciting student ownership in their own learning process.

Teacher reflections and differentiated instruction

Analyses of teacher-initiated conversations during teaching reflection after each class revealed two key themes that Meredith and Nina seemed to focus on in their teaching: student participation and their high expectations for student achievement. Based on the fact that these two themes were constantly brought up by the teachers in conversation, these were key pedagogical principles that guided teacher questions.

Teachers seem to use questions to create a pro-social classroom community with a pattern of classroom discourse starting with the teacher, then to a more vocal student in the beginning and gradually extending invitations for participation to the shy students in the classroom. The pattern of discourse seems to form a centrifugal, horizontal circle, and the circle of classroom discourse seems to be spiraling toward helping students gain greater linguistic and literacy knowledge.

Teacher questions from an October class represent a typical pattern of teacher attempts to promote student participation and create a pro-social classroom environment at the beginning of the year. On that specific day, the class began an interview activity. After the students were seated, Nina explained that the purpose of the interview activity was to get to know each other. Then, she asked Meredith if she had any questions, which invited Meredith's participation in the discussion. Nina then turned to Eno and asked him to repeat his question because he had initiated a conversation with one of his classmates at the beginning of the class regarding the length of his residence in the U.S. The rest of the class then

offered their interview questions for the class list. Gradually, the teachers facilitated a sense of community responsibility for the students to respond to each other, as evidenced in a question to the whole class—"Do you have any comments for Khalid?"—when a student presented his findings about a classmate during the interview activity.

As the year progressed, the teachers focused on making certain that they included less vocal students in the circle of classroom discourse, and they frequently reflected on the issue of student participation. During teaching reflection in early November, for example, Meredith shared that she was very happy that Chul and Yeum, two shy students at that time, participated actively in class. She added that she shared her beliefs about the importance of class participation with the students' parents during the parent-teacher conferences. In mid-November, Meredith again mentioned that she was happy that Yeum participated actively in class, and Eno, a very outspoken student, did not interrupt Yeum that day. In class, the teachers invited less vocal students to share their ideas, as demonstrated in Nina's question in late January: "Jian and Manis, do you have anything to share?" The question was addressed to Jian and Manis because they did not offer any suggestions while the class developed a concept map on the difference between their home school and U.S. school.

Another pedagogical principle reflected in teacher questions was the two teachers' high expectations for student achievement. The theme emerged from Meredith's comments on the issue during the teaching reflection in early February. Meredith and Nina exchanged their observations of Eno's classroom behaviors regarding indenting and main idea, which they had been learning for some time. Eno appeared to have greater comprehension of the

concepts of indenting and highlighting the main idea within a paragraph after the discussion with the teachers.

Analyses of Meredith's and Nina's questions between October and April showed changes in their instructional foci and their attempts to promote the students' academic achievements. In the beginning, their questions focused on helping students develop metacognitive strategies (e.g., monitoring their own thinking and utterances) and understand classroom community rules for participation (e.g., developing should-do lists for authors and audience members). Then, the foci of their questions moved to helping students develop literacy and language skills, such as understanding key ideas in the text they read, the purpose of teacher modeling of an interview activity, and writing topic sentences. Beginning in January after students returned from the Christmas break, while their emphasis was still on developing literacy and language skills, the teachers cast questions that required more thinking and elaboration from the students. For example, Meredith asked "why" questions to Chul for the first time in late January, while the class was reviewing what happened in the story "Noisy Nora" (Wells, 1997):

Meredith: What happened in the story so far?

Chul: She make[s] lots of noisy.

Meredith: Why?

Chul: Because she think[s] they may hear her.

Meredith: Yes, you are right. Nora's family did not pay attention to her.

Meredith's why question in the above example pushed Chul to move beyond recalling and summarizing the story. He had to make an inference from the text and communicate his thoughts to the teacher.

The teachers' expectation for higher student achievement continued to shape their questions to be more detail-oriented and involve higher cognitive skills. Meredith's question after a St. Patrick's Day event in mid-March was a good example. At the beginning of class, Meredith initiated a conversation about a giant leprechaun who had appeared at school and encouraged the students to share what they had experienced. She asked for specific details:

Meredith: Did anybody do anything for St. Patrick's Day that was unusual?

(Students talk about pinching their siblings. Then, Khalid raises his hand.)

Meredith: Khalid?

Khalid: Yesterday, when school ended, this guy came to the computer room. Then, he started singing songs.

Jandi: A giant leprechaun.

Meredith: Right. I saw a giant leprechaun in the building yesterday.

Meredith: What did he do? I never got to see what he was doing. Jandi, what did he do?

Jandi: He was telling us about St. Patrick's Day.

Meredith: Good. What did he tell you? I would have really liked to have heard.

Meredith: Can anybody tell me what the leprechaun was sharing with you? Jian?

Jian: He said his country had lots of gold and those flowers.

Meredith: And those flowers?

Jian: Those three-leaf flowers.

Meredith: Those three-leaf clover flowers... they call shamrocks. Right?

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Jian: Uh-hmm.

Meredith: So in his country, what is his country?

Jandi: Irish.

Meredith: He is an Irishman. Where are Irish people from?

Eno: Ireland.

Meredith: Do you all know where Ireland is?

Students: Yes.

Yeum: Beside England.

Meredith: It is very close to England.

Meredith: Okay. So the leprechaun was telling you that he is from Ireland, and there is a lot of gold in his country and a lot of shamrocks. Can anybody add anything to that? Khalid?

Khalid: I've got something what he was telling us.

Meredith: Okay.

Khalid: He first called out [a girl in my class] and danced with her.

Meredith: Was he doing a special kind of dance?

Khalid: Ya.

Meredith: Do you remember what the dance was called?

Khalid: He read a poetry to us.

Meredith: Very nice. It sounds fun. I am sorry I didn't get to see what he was doing. Unisha, you had something you wanted to share?

Unisha: Ya... What he said. He said that there's gold and a rainbow inside us.

Meredith: How nice!

Unisha: And he said that is the meaning of love.

Meredith: Wow! Did you hear that? What does that mean to you? There's gold and a rainbow inside us, and that is the meaning of love.

Chul: Our heart.

Meredith: Our heart is inside of us. Good treasures are inside of us. Wonderful things, and a rainbow, which is also very positive. Right? Good luck... All these good things are inside of us, and that's the meaning of ...

Students: Love.

In this example, Meredith's questions led students to recall details of what they experienced during the St. Patrick's Day event at school, and infer the meaning of selected phrases such as "gold and a rainbow inside us." By April, the teachers' questions also focused on higher literacy skills. For example, the teachers asked students to think about what to look for while editing their written pieces, both by themselves and with peers.

Concluding thoughts

This study focused on questions that Meredith and Nina used to provide well-organized differentiated instruction for English language learners across a school year. The research project revealed how they gradually released responsibility to promote student participation and higher student achievement while accommodating changing needs of individual ELLs. Formative assessment conducted in each teacher's classroom shows that the two teachers appeared to have successfully achieved their instructional goals.

Considering the chronic shortage of teachers who have received training in ESL or bilingual education, another important educational issue is teacher capacity building through professional development. For example, "fewer than three percent of teachers with [ESL] students have earned a degree in ESL or bilingual

education” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Across the nation, teachers are compelled to teach ESL students without fully understanding the strengths and characteristics of the students or what instructional strategies might work for them. In such circumstances, school administrators are more likely to create an ESL track—in which ESL students are placed in one classroom until they develop proficient English—to cope with the national and local pressures of high-stakes testing and to manage limited human and physical resources in the school system. To avoid unintended negative consequences of the ESL track (Valdez, 1998) and promote ESL students’ school success, it is necessary to find creative ways to provide professional development opportunities for teachers with ESL students. One way to enhance opportunities for professional development is to create a national database on effective ESL instruction. Reading Classroom Explorer (<http://www.eliteracy.org/rce/>) is one such example that serves teachers of reading. National organizations could take a lead on this effort.

Increasing linguistic and cultural diversity creates unavoidable educational challenges to teachers, school districts, policy makers, and community members nationwide. Because challenges are a part of human existence and facilitate the understanding of life’s realities in a new way, it is prudent to encourage educators to solve these challenges together.

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