

**Putting It All Together: Bi-lingual and ESL Examples**

[1<sup>st</sup> Grade Bilingual](#)  
[6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Grade ESL](#)

**KATE WILLIAMS, NEW JERSEY '02**

First Grade Bilingual

**REALIZATIONS, REGRETS...AND REACHING HIGHER**

The first half of my first year of teaching, I didn't have my own classroom of students. Instead, I was more of an aide, pulled at random to assist with many different classes. Certainly, this was frustrating and disappointing. I desperately wanted my own group of students to work with. Still, because I didn't see just the wide range that can exist among 30 first graders, but the shockingly wide range that existed among students in *all* first grade classes, I really began to appreciate the fact that different children have very different needs and are at very different points academically and behaviorally.

*I knew it would be a waste of time – in fact, impossible – to teach all 30 of them the same exact thing in the same exact way every day and have them make progress. Easy enough to say, right?*

When I was given my own bilingual first grade class in January of my first year, it was still amazing to see the range of abilities. Some children knew no English at all and others were nearly fluent. I knew it would be a waste of time – in fact, impossible – to teach all 30 of them the same exact thing in the same exact way every day and have them make progress. Easy enough to say, right?

Honestly, I didn't do much differentiation with my own group of students that second semester of my first year. Surprised? I'm guessing you can relate. And at the end of my 5 ½ months with them, I was disappointed. (Hopefully what I share here will help you avoid that same disappointment). As I reflected on my students and their progress, I realized that so many of them could have gone so much further – and yet they were held back because I didn't push individuals to their fullest potential.

I was determined to change things for my second year; determined that my instruction would allow each of my first grade bilingual students to reach their highest level of academic achievement. Although I still feel like I am just beginning to understand about differentiation this year, I know that my efforts to differentiate thus far have helped students at all levels succeed more. This year, I individualize my approach to each student as much as possible. I strive to meet each student where he or she is, and then continually push them one small step higher. I believe my students, who would simply describe my instruction with, "different students get to do different assignments," see that there

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## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

is no limit to their learning and that everyone can be pushed to achieve more. Because of the relatively simple differentiation strategies that I implement on a daily basis, not only is everyone encouraged to do his or her best, but I see a spirit of helping among students and an increasingly positive classroom community.

### STARTING SMALL

For those of you who feel overwhelmed by the thought of differentiation, I suggest you start with one small step like I did. You can always add to what you are doing or scale back if you feel like you are trying to do too much too soon. The first “differentiation strategy” that I introduced into the classroom involved **strategic use of the one computer** and one Leap Pad we had in our classroom. That’s right, 30 students with two pieces of technology - but it really has been effective.

Using the Fast Foreword computer program (which helps with attention and reading) and the Leap Pad electronic book reader, I set up a schedule where most students got 30 minutes per week total on the computer and about 15 minutes per week on the Leap Pad (those who needed more help were scheduled to use the computer slightly more often). I taught students to look at the schedule and the clock to know when to “quietly tap the next person without disrupting the class.”

*The best thing about this computer schedule? Students saw – and didn’t question – that not everyone would be doing the same thing at the same time. Differentiation had begun...*

This worked really well - all of the students were able to learn at their own pace because the computer game kept track of how each student was doing and which concepts each child knew. I could set Fast Foreword to higher ability levels, and children could challenge themselves on the “super smart student” setting. The best thing about this computer schedule? Students saw – yet didn’t question – that not everyone would be doing the same thing at the same time. Differentiation had begun, and I could gradually add more and more strategies into my classroom.

When we played whole-class reading games or did morning meeting, I **differentiated question levels** depending on which student was answering (which, surprisingly, is not something the children notice). Another example of a time or place to do this would be the first two rounds of a spelling bee (after that, I give them whatever word comes up).

Next, I instituted a Sustained Silent Reading time in which the color of bookmark that a student received would correspond to a bin filled with the correct reading level of books (of course this changed as students progressed).

I also began to **differentiate journal time**. The students who can not write without assistance are given 5 minutes to work on their journals independently before I call them to me for help (or I let them work independently for the entire journal time, but call them back on a prep). For students who can use basic sight words and appropriate

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

capitalization/punctuation, I put a post-it note/sticker on the outside of their journals. Students know that means they might be expected to write more sentences, respond to an entirely different prompt, and/or use a simple writer's checklist to revise their work. I make the specific difference clear to them as journal time begins. At least once a week, I call each of my students to my desk individually so they can confer with me about how their writing can improve.

So you see, I was gradually getting students comfortable doing different things at the same time, and I continued to take steps to help students individualize their learning.

### OTHER ON-THE-SMALL-SIDE STRATEGIES

In addition to the small steps I outlined above, here are some other ways (still on the small, low-time-investment scale) that I am able to individualize my instruction and move each student forward as much as possible:

**I use centers.** During center time, students are grouped homogeneously into one advanced group, two middle groups, and two lower groups with one higher-level student who really likes to help classmates. The materials at centers encourage groups to work at the highest level they can; I'm constantly impressed that students tend to pick the activity that is at the appropriate level. I also have a "teacher center," which allows each group to receive individual help from me once a week.

**I collaborate with my colleagues.** I am sometimes fortunate enough to have a bilingual aide in the classroom, and at certain times she works individually with students, listening to a student read and coaching him or her through the appropriate leveled mini book. In February, we had a class goal of passing 100 books. Some students passed ten, others passed two, but everyone who passed at least one got to go the reading party at the end of the month. I stressed that everyone was part of the team even if they were reading on different levels, and I made it a huge deal to get a sticker on the class' goal chart. Also, another aid (due to my large class size) comes into my room for about an hour four times a week to teach a lower-level reading group. The aide and I use the same text from our Open Court reading program, but she will stress English vocabulary and review weekly spelling words. When her students seem ready for the challenge of the higher-level group, we move them up, where students are stretched to increase their vocabulary, read for fluency, and connect what they are reading to other subjects.

**I involve students in monitoring and being responsible for their own progress.** I taught students to determine whether a book was at their reading level (read a page, hold a finger up for every word you don't understand, if you have five fingers up, the book is too hard). I require students to use a writing checklist to see how they have done before I correct their writing. If students finish an in-class assignment early, they know to take out their monthly packet of relevant work that I have prepared for them ahead of time. About five students in my classroom have special notebooks where I give them personal assignments. Of the students who participate in this, three are advanced, one is in danger of being retained and

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

needs more writing practice, and one is a highly motivated student who came in speaking no English but always wants extra practice.

**I involve parents.** About once a month (usually right before a 3-day weekend), I send a computer-generated note home to parents that explains 6 or 8 different things we are working on (e.g., counting by 1s, 2s, 5s, and 10s to 100). Each concept has a check box in front of it. For each student, I mark 1-3 areas that he or she could work on to improve his or her skills that weekend. If the student is advanced, I write in a special assignment that he or she can do. I find that students and parents respond very well to this! For students who still cannot read fluently and can't access help for reading in English at home, I send them home with cassette tapes of the stories so they can listen and follow along in the book.

**I use any and all extra time in the day.** I use my preps to work individually with students or small groups in mini “workshops.” Sometimes this is to reinforce what we are currently doing, sometimes it is to catch students up if the majority of the class understands a concept and is ready to move on. Beginning in January, I split my class into four levels based on literacy ability and sent a note to parents informing them that their child had the option to stay after school with me for one hour once a week (three students who really needed help had the option of staying twice a week) to get more reading and writing practice. An amazing 28 out of 30 parents agreed to make arrangements for this (and the other two students are given extra work to in a notebook). On Mondays I push the high students, on Tuesdays I pre-teach what more struggling students will learn later in the week to build confidence, on Wednesdays and Thursdays I give enrichment work to middle ability students and also work with three students who need additional one-on-one help (two are pulled for special services during the day, one does not talk in front of other people). Before the end of the hour-long after school session each day, each child has read three new small books at his or her ability level and written something at his or her ability level. Each child takes home one of the new books to practice and read for me the next day.

### FOUNDATIONS

Of course, for all of this to happen smoothly, there were several systems that I had to *teach* to my students. You may have guessed these when reading about my strategies, but here they are:

- Students had to learn how to quietly tap the next person on the computer or Leap Pad list for the day without interrupting the lesson.
- Students had to learn what to do when they finished work early.
- Students had to learn how to do Sustained Silent Reading – both how to choose the appropriate book and what sort of behavior I expected during that time.
- Students had to learn that they must continue to write or do work independently when I was giving individual help to someone at my desk.
- Students had to learn how to get into and out of learning centers, and the designated “noise level monitor” in each center group had to know the appropriate level and ensure

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

the group stayed below it. Also in centers, students had to learn that only one person could come to me if the group had a question.

Note that I introduced all of these things gradually, otherwise students would surely have been overwhelmed! I didn't have centers for the first 3-4 months of school. In fact, after bringing them out for the first time, I put them away for a few days and then re-taught students how to use them appropriately.

I also had to have fairly reliable assessments of each student's abilities completed. I'll admit that my tracking progress system is fairly qualitative; after diagnosing students with a variety of letter/sound tests and basic reading, writing and math assessments to determine their starting level, I keep a blank file folder for each student and write notes about his or her level and new skills they are grasping.

### THE NEXT FRONTIER

I hope you have gathered that I started by taking small steps – and that I am *still* taking small steps to further differentiate my instruction. I constantly feel like I could be doing more, however. For example, I would like to have multiple centers on the same skill but at different levels, and then specifically assign students to a certain task (right now, students choose what activity they would like to do, and while they are typically accurate, we would save some time if I just assigned them). I also feel like I need to do more differentiation with math – my focus, because of my own interests, is on literacy.

As I still remind myself, I would encourage you not to be overwhelmed by how much differentiating you *could* do – and just start trying to do some. Consider setting up a computer schedule like I did, or one center that students rotate through, or slightly different journal prompts. As you start taking small steps toward a differentiated classroom, you'll gain confidence in your own ability to instruct in this way and – I'm sure – begin to see results with your students. Once you see those results, you'll want to do more and more to meet the needs of your students. Because that is what we're all here for, right?

[Back to Top](#)

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

**Kathleen Watt, Phoenix '99**6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Grade ESL**From Circus-like to In Control**

My first year of teaching, I taught 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Bilingual. My students' language skills ranged from an early emergent literacy level (meaning that they could just barely recognize letters in the alphabet) to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. You can probably imagine how difficult it was for me to conduct our two-hour Language Arts block – I had no idea what to do and I felt like I was running a circus! I would stand in front of the class reading to them, attempting to have them read to me, and running back and forth to each and every student that needed help. A similar situation ensued when we did writing, given that some students were still learning the basics of writing (such as left to right directionality) while others needed to learn how to write structured paragraphs. In addition, some of my students were just barely transitioning out of Spanish while others were monolingual English speakers. It was way too much with 30 students, and I definitely wasn't reaching any of them! As you would expect, I realized the need to differentiate almost immediately.

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So what did I do? I tapped into resources that were available to me, namely my two mentors. My formal mentor was a Teach For America alum, fortunately still working at her same placement site four years later. The other mentor was well-known for her excellent teaching. I sought out her advice early in the year and she quickly became my “adopted” mentor. Both women had worked together for several years and had created a system for implementing centers that was used by the majority of the primary and intermediate teachers at our school. They introduced me to their system, came to talk to my class, and modeled the rotation for the students. I took over the reigns, first just focusing on *teaching* the management aspect of centers (the movement during rotation time, dealing with materials, noise level, etc.) to my students while they did very simple work at each station. Once we all had that down, I slowly began to differentiate within each center.

I wanted each group to work on center activities that focused on specific skills we were working on, but using material that was on their reading level. However, I did this slowly, introducing one new level of differentiation at a time so I did not overwhelm myself. I began by focusing on varying the work in one center and one center only: at the listening center I wanted all of my students to be accountable for listening to a story and responding to it in a way that would challenge them. However, I also wanted all of the students to master the objective for the week (i.e. summarizing). Therefore, after listening to a story, the emerging writers drew a picture to represent the beginning, middle, and end of the story and write one

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

sentence underneath each picture. Students below or near grade level also drew a picture for each part of the story, but wrote slightly longer summaries. Finally, students at or above grade level drew pictures and wrote their summaries on a separate sheet of paper using separate paragraphs. Once I differentiated the listening center, I repeated the process the following week with another center. Eventually, all centers were differentiated and I became more skilled at planning and providing adequate and challenging work for all of my students.

**Centered on centers**

I started to differentiate my instruction with centers and that is still my primary strategy for differentiation, whether I am teaching in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade bilingual setting or as an ESL Resource

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teacher (which is what I do now). Even within a small class of only 8 to 12 English Language Learners, there is a wide range of literacy skills, a wide range of years in the United States, and a wide range of schooling in general. Some of my students have had a lot of education (either in the U.S. or Mexico) and others have not. It is critical that I meet them where they are in their education and differentiate, and centers allow me to differentiate my small group instruction effectively.

Let me give more specific details about *how* I differentiate each day (and I do differentiate every day). First, students are grouped homogeneously by reading level and/or oral English proficiency level. They rotate through five centers throughout the week, or one each day. If students are not at one of the five centers, they are reading with the teacher or completing a “think aloud,” which is done with the reading group. Here are the center details:

- (1) At the listening center, students listen to books on tape at their level. They keep track of the books they have listened to with a listening log. The extension activity always contains some form of writing because I believe that reading and writing are inseparable and should be natural. Sometimes they simply respond to a set of comprehension questions, while other times they are required to complete a more specific assignment. As an ESL teacher, I also enjoy using the listening center as a tool to further develop the native language of the students. Therefore, students often listen to Spanish cassettes of their Social Studies text. This helps them in their Social Studies class, where the material is provided solely in English.
- (2) At the writing center, I usually provide an interesting illustration, cartoon, or piece of artwork as inspiration and ask students to write about what they see happening in the picture. Level 1 students are able to write a few words and simple sentences in English, while Level 3 students write using more complex sentence structures and vocabulary. This provides excellent practice for a state-wide standardized test, IMAGE (Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English), which measures students’ annual growth in English.

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

- (3) At the computer center, students rotate between an interactive picture dictionary CD-ROM and a Total Physical Response CD-ROM. I post the directions as to which set of vocabulary words they should work on or which story sequence they will be interacting with. Students complete a *short* written response when finished, indicating that they completed the work.
- (4) At the vocabulary center, students complete activities from the Oxford Picture Dictionary, which is a great resource for ESL students. I choose a set of vocabulary words each week, but I do not like to spend much class time teaching these words. Because my students are older, I ask them to study the words and complete grammar exercises on their own at the center. This allows me more time to work with them on more meaningful comprehension and reading strategies.
- (5) At the test practice center, students complete test practice for both the IMAGE test and the Logramos test. I introduce different sections of each test early in the year so that students are familiar with them by testing time.

As mentioned above, when students are not at one of the centers, they either work with me directly or work with their reading group on a “think aloud.” When they are with me, I focus on different skills depending on their English level:

- My Level 1 ESL students are in the receptive phase of language acquisition. Therefore, I want them to be making meaning from what they are hearing in English. In addition, we are working on oral communication. When they see me during our reading time, we work on small stories, simple skits pertaining to daily activities, and important language for basic interpersonal communication. I use T.P.R. (Total Physical Response) and other books which are geared towards Level 1 students.
- My Level 2 students are reading in English, but we are working on comprehension strategies and English syntax. We are currently reading *James and the Giant Peach*.
- My Level 3 students are basically fluent English speakers. We are reading a chapter book called *The Road to Freedom*, a story about the reconstruction era that ties in to what they are learning in their Social Studies class. We also work on comprehension and do a lot of vocabulary development.

Students work on “think alouds” with their reading group and continue working with the book we use while reading with me. This is the third rotation. A “think aloud” consists of six components: interesting information, observations, questions, predictions, connections, and words I don’t know. Students keep track of this information in a spiral notebook and complete part of it with me. They continue to add to their notebooks during the “think aloud” time.

To hold students accountable to the objectives I want them to reinforce or master, I create a checklist of work to be completed for the week. Students use the checklist while at centers and I use it while I am grading their work. I also keep their weekly points posted in the room for reference. I often find students calculating their points in order to figure out their grades. I have found that since I post their points weekly, there are never any surprises. Students

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

always know how they are performing and what they need to do to improve – and they are motivated to do so because their work is on the appropriate level!

## DIFFERENTIATION = FAIRNESS

My desire to differentiate is based on the fact that if I don't, I'm not giving each student what he or she needs. This fact hit home again recently. Until late February, I had one section of only three students – all who were brand new to the country. With only three students, and given that these students were on the same level, I honestly didn't need to differentiate

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extensively. However, at the end of February, five 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Learners were sent to me because they were failing their regular classes. They joined the section with the three students who were brand new to the country. As you can imagine, there was an enormous range of English proficiency and basic skills. After a week of whole class instruction, some students were completely bored and others had no idea what was going on. I knew immediately that it would have to differentiate for this group of students as well, and I did so, using centers. This situation pointed out the underlying philosophy I have about teaching and why I

differentiate: fairness in the classroom means that every student receives what he or she needs. Fairness does not mean that every student receives the same thing. Differentiation is the only way to be truly fair.

## FOUNDATIONS

There are several things that need to be in place in order for all this to happen effectively in my classroom. First, I need to have a clear picture of where each student is in terms of reading level, writing skills, and oral proficiency. I determine students' reading level by using running records at the beginning of the year (and I use running records throughout the year as well as an ongoing assessment tool). To determine oral proficiency, I use a test that I created which. The test consists of ten questions. I evaluate the complexity of students' answers using a matrix, which gives me the approximate oral English level of the students. I also look at their cumulative folder to see where they were performing the previous year, educational history, etc.

Of course, strong management systems are necessary to have in place as well. As I explained earlier, I took time to *teach* my students how to rotate through centers. We still have a very organized center rotation that never changes (of course, what students are doing in each center changes as necessary). Students know not ask me for help if I'm working with a small group, but must instead ask another student or reread the directions posted at the center. The rule is that students can only interrupt me if it is an emergency. Students also know what to do when they have completed the assigned work: at the bottom of each center's directions, I write a "challenge" – or extension activity that connects to the center – that students are expected to complete. I also have clear consequences for not following

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

directions or completing work: 1<sup>st</sup> warning = verbal, 2<sup>nd</sup> warning = time out/reflection sheet and make up of work missed, 3<sup>rd</sup> warning = phone call home, 4<sup>th</sup> warning = meeting with principal/detention.

### FINAL ADVICE

Differentiating can be overwhelming. Without support, it can seem impossible to do. However, I believe you can start small and differentiate in steps. I did. Access mentors, veteran teachers, or your Program Director for help. Collaborate with your grade level colleagues or fellow corps members at your school. Use your existing resources and don't try to do this on your own. Also, don't be afraid to seek out additional resources – keep your eyes open for conferences and other professional development on differentiation and ask your principal to send you.

I would also encourage you to look at what you are already doing – you may get a boost of confidence when you realize you are already differentiating in some small ways. I've found that many teachers differentiate and do not realize it (probably because they have a misconception about what differentiation truly is...and they think it is much more involved than it has to be). Modifying an assignment for a Special Education student or providing extra support for an English language learner *is* differentiation. Have you perhaps already begun the process? Continue to take small steps forward and add more complex differentiation when you feel comfortable. Eventually, you will find that you cannot plan a lesson without differentiating!

[Back to Top](#)