

7

Universal Access to the Language Arts Curriculum

The ultimate goal of language arts programs in California is to ensure access to high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students in order to meet or exceed the state's English–language arts content standards.

The diversity of California’s students presents unique opportunities and significant challenges for instruction. Students come to school with a wide variety of skills, abilities, and interests as well as varying proficiency in English and other languages. The wider the variation of the student population in each classroom, the more complex becomes the teacher’s role in organizing high-quality curriculum and instruction in the language arts and ensuring that each student has access according to the student’s current level of achievement. The ultimate goal of language arts programs in California is to ensure access to high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students in order to meet or exceed the state’s English–language arts content standards. To reach that goal, teachers need assistance in assessing and using the results of that assessment for planning programs, differentiating curriculum and instruction, using grouping strategies effectively, and implementing other strategies for meeting the needs of students with reading difficulties, students with disabilities, advanced learners, English learners, and students with combinations of special instructional needs.

Procedures that may be useful in planning for universal access are to:

- Assess each student’s understanding at the start of instruction and continue to do so frequently as instruction advances, using the results of assessment for program placement and planning.
- Diagnose the nature and severity of the student’s difficulty and modify curriculum and instruction accordingly when students have trouble with the language arts.
- Engage in careful organization of resources and instruction and planning to adapt to individual needs. A variety of good teaching strategies that can be used according to the situation should be prepared.
- Differentiate when necessary as to depth, complexity, novelty, or pacing and focus on the language arts standards and the key concepts within the standards that students must master to move on to the next grade level.
- Employ flexible grouping strategies according to the students’ needs and achievement and the instructional tasks presented.
- Enlist help from others, such as reading specialists, special education specialists, parents, aides, other teachers, community members, administrators, counselors, and diagnosticians when necessary and explore technology or other instructional devices or instructional materials, such as braille text, as a way to respond to students’ individual needs.

What the student already knows in the language arts should form the basis for further learning and study.

Alignment of Assessment and Instruction

One of the first tasks required of a school district is to determine its students’ achievement levels in the language arts so that each student or group of students can be offered a structured language arts program leading to the attainment of all of the content standards. What the student already knows in the language arts should form the basis for further learning and study.

Assessment is the key to ensuring that all students are provided with language arts instruction designed to help the students progress at an appropriate pace

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from what they already know to higher levels of learning. Knowing which standards have been mastered, teachers can better plan the instructional program. For a variety of reasons, gaps often appear in what has been learned by students with special instructional needs. The gaps can be discovered through assessment, and instruction can be designed to remediate specific weaknesses without slowing down the students' entire language arts program.

Successful Diagnostic Teaching

Students who have trouble in reading and writing are at risk of failing to meet the standards, becoming discouraged, and eventually dropping out of school. The teacher should try to determine the cause of the learning difficulties. Contributing factors might include a lack of foundation skills; limited-English proficiency; uncorrected errors; confusing, inadequate, or inappropriate instructional resources or instruction; or an undiagnosed specific learning disability. A teacher can use the results of assessment and classroom observations to determine what interventions should be tried in the classroom and whether to refer the students to a student success team (student study team) or seek assistance from specialists. Most learning difficulties can be addressed with good diagnostic teaching that combines repetition of instruction, focus on key skills and understanding, and practice. For some students modification of the curriculum or instruction (or both) may be required to accommodate differences in communication modes, physical skills, or learning abilities.

To plan appropriate intervention strategies for helping students who are experiencing learning difficulties, teachers should consider the degree of severity according to the three following major groups (Kame'enui and Simmons 1998):

Benchmark Group

Students in the benchmark group are generally making good progress toward the standards but may be experiencing temporary or minor difficulties. Although the needs of these students are not critical, they must be addressed quickly to prevent the students from falling behind. Often, the teacher can reteach a concept in a different way to an individual or a group of students or schedule a study group to provide additional learning time. Occasionally, parents can be enlisted to reinforce learning at home. Ideally, instructional resources will be organized in ways that make it easy for parents to do so. Some students may need periodic individual assistance, the help of a reading specialist, or other types of support to ensure that they succeed in the regular classroom. Once the concept or procedure has been grasped correctly by the student, additional practice is usually helpful.

Strategic Group

Students in the strategic group may be one to two standard deviations below the mean according to the results of standardized testing. However, their learning difficulties, which must be examined with systematic and, occasionally, intensive and concentrated care, can often be addressed by the regular classroom

teacher with minimal assistance within the classroom environment. A student success team might be called on to discuss appropriate support for the student. In addition to reteaching a concept, the teacher may wish to provide specific assignments over a period of time for students to complete with a peer or tutor or by themselves at home. Regular study groups working before or after school, in the evenings, or on weekends can provide an effective extension of the learning time. Some students may need to schedule extended blocks of time for the study of language arts to master difficult content. Others may require specific accommodations and modifications to the classroom environment, curriculum, or instruction as identified in the students' 504 plan. Students with disabilities may need special modifications of curriculum or instruction, as specified in their individualized education program, to enable them to participate successfully in a mainstream classroom.

Intensive Group

Students in the intensive group are seriously at risk as indicated by their extremely and chronically low performance on one or more measures. The greater the number of measures and the lower the performance, the greater is their risk. These students perform well below the mean and should be referred to a student success team for a thorough discussion of options. A referral to special education may be advisable. If eligible for special education services, these students will be given an individualized education program, which will describe the most appropriate services for the student. Often, specialized assistance will be available through the special education referral, perhaps including intensive intervention by a qualified specialist, tutoring, services of a classroom assistant, specialized materials or equipment, changes in assessment procedures, or modification of the curriculum or instruction.

Planning for Students with Special Instructional Needs

Experienced teachers develop a repertoire of successful instructional strategies to be used in special situations or with specific groups of students. Many of the strategies can be explicitly taught or can be embedded in the instructional materials to help teachers plan differentiated instruction. To establish successful instructional strategies for all students, the teacher should:

1. Establish a safe and supportive environment in which the students are encouraged to talk and ask questions freely when they do not understand.
2. Use a wide variety of ways to explain a concept or assignment. When appropriate, the concept or assignment may be depicted in graphic or pictorial form, with manipulatives, or with real objects to accompany oral and written instructions.
3. Provide assistance in the specific and general vocabulary to be used for each lesson prior to the lesson, using reinforcement or additional practice

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Chapter 7

Universal Access
to the Language
Arts Curriculum

- afterward. Instructional resources and instruction should be monitored for ambiguities or language that would be confusing, such as idioms.
4. Set up tutoring situations that offer additional assistance. Tutoring by a qualified teacher is optimal. Peer or cross-age tutoring should be so designed not to detract from the instructional time of either the tutor or tutee and should be supervised.
 5. Extend the learning time by establishing a longer school day, weekend classes, and intersession or summer classes.
 6. Enlist the help of parents at home when possible.
 7. Establish special sessions to prepare students for unfamiliar testing situations.
 8. Ask each student frequently to communicate his or her understanding of the concept or assignment. Students should be asked to verbalize or write down what they know, thereby providing immediate insight into their thinking and level of understanding. In addition, students should be encouraged to confer about each other's understanding of the concept being taught and the class work or homework assignments, particularly if the students are not fully proficient in English.
 9. Check frequently for understanding in a variety of ways. When a student does not understand, analyze why.
 10. Allow students to demonstrate their understanding and abilities in a variety of ways while reinforcing modes of communication that will be used on standardized tests.

Differentiation Through Pacing and Complexity

Advanced students and those with learning difficulties in the language arts often require systematically planned differentiation to ensure that curriculum and instruction are appropriately challenging. The strategies for modification of curriculum and instruction for special education or at-risk students are similar to those used for advanced learners and can be considered variations along four dimensions: pacing, depth, complexity, and novelty. Two dimensions will be discussed here, pacing and complexity. For additional discussion see *The California Reading Initiative and Special Education in California: Critical Ideas Focusing on Meaningful Reform* (California Department of Education 1999).

Use of Pacing

Pacing is perhaps the most commonly used strategy for differentiation. That is, the teacher slows down or speeds up instruction. This strategy can be simple, effective, and inexpensive for many students with special instructional needs (Benbow and Stanley 1996; Geary 1994). The instructional pace of the advanced learner can be accelerated if the assessment indicates mastery of significant portions of the standards. Students can be helped to move on to the content standards for the next grade level.

For students experiencing difficulty in the language arts, the same content might be extended over twice as long a period of time for additional reinforcement in the more difficult concepts. Alternatively, some students with attention deficits respond better to shorter, more frequent episodes of instruction. A key element in slowing down instruction is to ensure that the content remains rigorous, that the students move ahead as quickly as they can, and that the instruction leads to mastery of the content standards within a reasonable amount of time.

Use of Complexity

Modifying instruction as to *complexity* requires more training and skill on the part of the teacher and the provision of instructional materials that lend themselves to such variations. For advanced students it means enriched instruction that encourages students to address topics, time periods, or connections across disciplines not normally expected at that grade level.

For students experiencing difficulty in the language arts, the teacher should focus on the key concepts within the standards and eliminate confusing activities or variables. The lessons should be even more organized and sequential and be focused on the most important concepts. Instruction is not thereby watered down. Instead, it is distilled to ensure that instructional time is used to help students understand the fundamental concepts or skills needed to master later standards.

Differentiation for students with disabilities is sometimes criticized by those who say that struggling students never progress to the more interesting or complex assignments. This argument is often used to move struggling students along or involve them in complex assignments, even though they have not mastered the basics they need to understand the assignments. This framework advocates a focus on the standards and frequent assessment to ensure that students are not just passed along without the skills they will need to be successful in subsequent grades. Struggling students are expected to learn the key concepts well so that they can develop a foundation on which further understanding can be built.

Grouping as an Aid to Instruction

Research shows that what students are taught has a far greater effect on their achievement than how they are grouped (Mosteller, Light, and Sachs 1996). The first focus of educators should always be on the quality of instruction; grouping is a secondary concern. This framework recommends that educators use common sense about grouping. Grouping is a tool and an aid to instruction, not an end in itself. As a tool it should be used flexibly to ensure that all students achieve the standards. Instructional objectives should always be based on the standards and should dictate grouping strategies. It is perfectly appropriate, even advisable, to group those students who do not understand a concept or skill and to find time to reteach the concept or skill in a different way and provide additional practice. At the same time those students might be participating with a more heterogeneous mix of students in other classroom activities.

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In another setting teachers may discover that they have a group of students in a grade who have mastered the standards for that grade and are ready to go on to the standards for the next grade. It is appropriate and advisable to group those students for as long as the grouping meets their needs and to provide the needed accelerated instruction. To promote maximum learning, the teacher should ensure that assessment is frequent, that high-quality instruction is always provided, and that the students are frequently moved into appropriate instructional groups according to their needs.

Special Modifications for Students with Disabilities

Educators who wish to help children with difficulties in a particular domain need to know about the course of typical development in that domain, about the specific cognitive abilities that are crucial at various points in development, about the cognitive abilities in which a particular child is weak, and about how to best develop these abilities. (Spear-Swerling and Sternberg 1998, 400)

Students eligible for special education services often have specific needs described in an individualized education program. Special resources may be available to the students to help them meet the standards, including personnel (e.g., reading specialists, speech and hearing therapists, psychologists, and classroom aides). Assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, walkers, tape recorders, sound-amplification devices, and regular or braille word processors, can accommodate a student's physical challenges so that the curriculum is accessible.

Specific learning disabilities that manifest themselves as deficits in language arts achievement can be difficult to diagnose and at times difficult to remedy. The approach recommended in this framework—which includes (1) frequent assessment; (2) systematic and explicit instruction in the building blocks of word recognition and reading comprehension; and (3) modifications of curriculum as needed—should result in many more students reading. It should significantly reduce the number of students identified as having learning problems or learning disabilities. No single approach is as effective in teaching students to read, particularly in teaching those who have difficulty in reading, as systematic, explicit instruction emphasizing phonemic awareness, decoding, and phonics.

Nevertheless, some students with learning disabilities affecting the processing of oral or written language, usually phonology, will be atypical in reading acquisition. For those students a thorough diagnosis of what they can and cannot do is helpful. The assessment should be conducted by a learning specialist who understands thoroughly the typical process students go through when learning to read. The specialist should also understand the specific areas of cognitive functioning in which learning-disabled students may have difficulty and ways in which instruction can be adapted. The specialist can then work with the regular classroom teacher to implement specific strategies, which might include changes in the sequence of instruction, the methods of instruction, the pacing of instruction, or

the materials used. The strategies might also include variations in assessment techniques (e.g., allowing more time for a student who processes or produces written language more slowly). Regardless of the modifications made, however, the focus should always be placed on helping students meet the language arts content standards to the best of their ability and frequently assessing their progress in attaining the standards.

Differentiated Instruction for Advanced Learners

Advanced learners are students who demonstrate or are capable of demonstrating performance in the language arts at a level significantly above the performance of their peers. They may include (1) students formally identified by a school district as gifted and talented pursuant to *Education Code* Section 52200; and (2) other students who have not been formally identified as gifted and talented but who demonstrate outstanding capacity or actual performance in the language arts. This situation is especially true in California, where each district sets its own criteria for identifying gifted and talented students, where the percentage of students so identified varies, and where each district may choose whether to identify on the basis of ability in language arts. The research studies cited in this framework use the term *gifted students*, which is defined in most areas outside California in a more standardized way in accordance with nationally normed tests of achievement or intelligence. In that context the term usually refers to the small number of students who score at the highest percentiles on the test.

Standards-based education offers opportunities for students who have the motivation, interest, or ability in the language arts to excel. Several research studies have demonstrated the importance of setting high standards for all students, including gifted students. The content standards in the language arts have provided students with goals worth reaching for and identify the point at which skills and knowledge should be mastered. The natural corollary is that when standards are mastered, students should either move on to standards at higher grade levels or focus on unlearned material not covered by the standards.

A research study (Shore et al. 1991) examined whether any evidence exists to support 101 common practices in gifted education and found that very few practices were supported by solid evidence. However, the study also found that a combination of acceleration (in which students move on to material above grade level) and enrichment (in which students study topics in more depth or complexity or study related topics not covered in the normal curriculum) is supported by the research and results in improved achievement for gifted students.

How to group advanced learners has been controversial. In a longitudinal study (Delcourt et al. 1994) of grouping arrangements for over 1,000 elementary-age students, it was found that gifted students receiving an enriched and accelerated curriculum delivered in special schools, special day classes, and pullout programs made statistically significant improvement in achievement in the language arts, mathematics, science, and history–social science in comparison with gifted students who did not receive such programming.

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Chapter 7

Universal Access
to the Language
Arts Curriculum

The only type of programming arrangement that did not result in statistically significant improvement in achievement was enrichment offered in the regular heterogeneously grouped classroom. The reason for the lack of success was that even with the best of intentions, teachers did not have enough time to deliver the advanced or enriched curriculum for the gifted students that had been planned. Because most gifted students in California are served in the regular heterogeneously grouped classroom, teachers must ensure that enrichment or acceleration occurs when advanced students are instructed in a heterogeneous group, as argued for persuasively in the study (Delcourt et al. 1994). A previous study (California Department of Education 1994) provides an outline on how to differentiate instruction for advanced students regardless of how they are grouped. In referencing that study, the Department does not mean to suggest that all gifted students be homogeneously grouped. Decisions on how to group students should be made locally. However, the Delcourt study underscores the importance of providing support for teachers so that they can effectively meet the individual needs of all students in their classrooms.

Instructional Programs for English Learners

California's diverse student population comes from many different ethnic groups, speaks a variety of languages and dialects, varies in English proficiency, and comes to school with a variety of experiences, academic and nonacademic. A 1997 report issued by the California Department of Education revealed that 1.4 million students enrolled in California public schools used a primary language other than English and were identified as limited-English proficient (LEP). More than 100 languages (other than English) were found to be represented. The top four languages and percentages of LEP students were Spanish (81 percent), Vietnamese (3 percent), Hmong (2 percent), and Cantonese (2 percent).

English learners have as their goal developing proficiency in English and in the concepts and skills contained in the *English–Language Arts Content Standards*. Because of recent changes in California law, instruction for most English learners must be presented “overwhelmingly in English.” To learn English and achieve mastery of the English–language arts content standards, students must participate in instructional programs that combine skill and concept development in both English literacy and the English language. For those students whose parents have chosen a program that teaches literacy in the primary language, students must work to achieve the same standards contained in the *English–Language Arts Content Standards*. Appropriate modifications should be made for the language of instruction.

In a structured English immersion program, instruction in reading and writing for English learners should not be delayed until the students have mastered oral English. Effective early instruction in English literacy, as described in Chapter 3, must be incorporated into a program of English-language development from the very beginning. Students must be provided significant support to be successful in the language arts. Such support includes the preteaching of essential elements of

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lesson vocabulary and language structure and additional assistance after the lesson during the school day and after school. Instruction in oral and written academic language for English learners is a critical element that must be specifically designed, planned, scheduled, and taught. It includes direct instruction and experiences for students in English phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics and supports students as they move toward English proficiency.

Instructional programs for English learners should be planned according to the students' assessed levels of literacy in English and their primary language as well as their proficiency in English. English-language proficiency progresses from the students' initial contact with formal instruction in English to the point at which their use of English compares with that of their native English-speaking peers. Because of differing academic backgrounds and ages, some students can be expected to progress more quickly and others to require more support in the English–language arts program. Instructional materials contain assessment tools to diagnose students' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English and to assist teachers in planning initial instruction, monitoring progress, and conducting summative evaluations.

Three groups of English learners must be considered in program planning: students in kindergarten through grade two; those in grades three through twelve who are literate in their primary language; and those in grades three through twelve who have limited prior academic experience or literacy in their primary language. Typically, primary students who are learning English can participate fully in classroom language arts instruction if provided appropriate reading and writing supports and instruction in oral language. Students in grades three through twelve who have strong literacy skills in their primary language can be expected to transfer many of those skills to English and to progress rapidly in learning English. And students in grades three through twelve with limited prior schooling will require intensive support in beginning literacy instruction as well as in learning English.

Instruction and Support in Reading and Writing

Students in kindergarten through grade two. Students who begin to learn reading and writing in English in the primary grades should participate fully in the classroom program and receive additional support to achieve the English–language arts content standards. Whereas most English-speaking kindergartners enter school with 6,000 to 15,000 words in their English vocabulary, most English learners do not. Instruction in English is a critical component of the program for English learners and proceeds simultaneously with direct, explicit, and systematic instruction in reading and writing. Abundant opportunities to participate in oral language and speaking activities help students hear and develop the English sound system and lexicon and support the concurrent development of reading and writing with comprehension. Beginning instruction in reading, particularly in phonemic awareness, concepts about print, and vocabulary development commences immediately upon entry into school and supports the acquisition of English phonology and initial language structures. In kindergarten and the first

Chapter 7

Universal Access
to the Language
Arts Curriculum

Additional instructional support must align with classroom instruction and assist students in learning the specific vocabulary, background knowledge, and language structures needed to succeed.

grade, English learners progress to sound-symbol correspondence and formation of letters as they build vocabulary and an understanding of the features of the English language.

Full comprehension of text will be limited by the students' level of English proficiency and should be supported by additional exposure to and study of vocabulary and language patterns presented in the text. Students should receive preteaching in essential vocabulary, background information, and language patterns. A review of key lesson elements and assessment of the students' level of understanding should follow the lessons in reading and writing. As described at the beginning of this chapter, additional instructional time, differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and smaller groups should provide students the support they need to succeed in the language arts. After-school programs, specialist teachers, and the judicious use of tutors and paraprofessionals are other sources of support. Additional instructional support must align with classroom instruction and assist students in learning the specific vocabulary, background knowledge, and language structures needed to succeed.

Students in grades three through twelve. English learners entering school in grades three through twelve with strong literacy skills in their primary language are advantaged in that they can concentrate on acquiring and learning English rather than on receiving initial instruction in reading and writing. However, the greater cognitive demands of the academic program in those grades require that the students move quickly to more advanced English vocabulary and language structures. English-language development should be intensive and should emphasize the language students will need to know so that they profit from instruction in the language arts and other content areas at their grade level. Again, students will need additional support to learn English and to understand the vocabulary and language of instruction. School districts and schools need to consider additional allocations of instructional time to maximize students' opportunities to acquire language and participate in the overall language arts program.

Students who enter school in grades three through twelve with little prior schooling and limited English must be quickly identified and assessed to determine their level of reading and writing skills in their primary language and in English. Learning to read and write while concurrently learning English is a challenge for these students. School districts and schools need to structure the instructional program so that the students receive the instruction they require in literacy and language. The students require intensive, systematic instruction in oral and written language, including, for example, instruction in the use of common nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. They also need to learn common phrases, language patterns, and idiomatic expressions. Materials that address those skills, individualized instruction, and additional assistance and instructional time will be needed to support English learners who have limited academic experience. The materials must describe age-appropriate activities to teach reading and English-language development.

English-Language Development

Stages of instruction. From the earliest stages of their academic careers and in concert with instruction in reading and writing, English learners participate in an instructional program that supports their acquisition of informal English and teaches them the patterns of formal academic English. The instruction is designed to provide for students' experiences with English that are understandable and meaningful and enable the students to communicate with peers and adults and thereby participate fully in the academic program. Students begin by learning basic social conventions, rudimentary classroom vocabulary, and ways to express personal and safety needs. They participate in language study in a variety of contexts ranging from informal classroom conversations to teacher-directed instruction in language forms and structures. Effective teachers use a variety of activities to introduce and reinforce language concepts (e.g., singing, presenting dramas, reading aloud, using visuals and props, and practicing simple phrases and vocabulary).

Teachers model and teach the language patterns and vocabulary needed to understand and participate in the study of the language arts and other content areas. They should not assume that students will use their newly acquired academic vocabulary in casual conversation. Instead, they should specifically plan student-to-student discussions in which the students are expected to practice their new vocabulary and understanding of language forms in substantive academic discussions. Students learn English phonology, morphology (including spelling and syllabication patterns), syntax, and semantics through teacher modeling, teacher-directed instruction, and classroom interaction. They build on classroom exposure and interaction with English sounds, word elements, sentence structure, and vocabulary through directed study and practice of the linguistic elements. Analysis of the elements of instruction and materials increases in sophistication as students progress through the grades and gain linguistic and academic competence. This purposeful study of the features of the English language, which involves instruction in oral and written language, is connected to the English–language arts content standards through the language arts and content-area instruction in which students participate daily.

Instructional opportunities and materials. Most important, teachers plan opportunities, supported by appropriate instructional materials, for students to produce language they have acquired, use language in academic interactions with peers and adults, and monitor and correct their oral and written language. Teachers create an environment in which students feel comfortable in risking the use of new and unfamiliar language. Instructional materials describe for teachers the linguistic features of the most commonly spoken languages as they differ from English (e.g., analysis of similar and dissimilar sounds). Teachers apply the understanding of similarities and differences among the languages in planning instruction and use questioning and other strategies to foster substantive student discussion and participation. Emphasis is placed on the students' producing language in a variety of contexts and the teachers' eliciting student participation and thought.

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Chapter 7

Universal Access
to the Language
Arts Curriculum

Students should receive specific, constructive feedback from their teachers regarding the accuracy of their oral and written work and their progress toward mastery of conventional English.

Students should receive specific, constructive feedback from their teachers regarding the accuracy of their oral and written work and their progress toward mastery of conventional English. Teachers should analyze students' errors to determine development in oral and written English and plan appropriate instruction to improve competence. Instructional materials contain assessment tools that assist teachers in the analysis and specifically address instruction in those areas as related to grade-level English–language arts standards.

Instruction for English learners in academic language helps bring the students to a level of English proficiency comparable with that of their native English-speaking peers. English-language development occurs daily; is specifically identified within the curriculum of the school district and the school; and is supported by high-quality instructional materials, a sufficient amount of instructional time, and professional development for teachers. Language development and literacy instruction are integrated with the basic instructional materials and should be specifically identified in the teacher's edition as differentiated instruction for students not fully proficient in English. For students in grades three through twelve who are just learning English, instructional materials should be specially designed to provide intensive and extensive English-language development. Included should be development in oral and written vocabulary, reading instruction (as described in this framework), and systematic instruction in the forms and features of English. Publishers are encouraged to develop materials for those districts that choose to have students spend most of their school day receiving such instruction. The purpose of differentiated instruction in English is to move English learners as quickly as possible through stages of language proficiency and to enable them to achieve mastery of the English–language arts content standards.