

UDL and Language Learners: Part 3

Elise Yerkey Hi, Soomin. I'm so glad we get to continue our conversation today about the overlap with Universal Design for Learning and English Language Development.

Soomin Chao It's always a pleasure to speak with you as well, Elise and I'm very excited about our conversation today, continuing with a focus on how to serve our students and how to support our teachers in this work.

Elise Yerkey Well, I see a very natural alignment between Universal Design for Learning when it comes to integrated English language development, and especially because content area teachers need a support language and literacy, so they need to provide a lot of options for students so that language is supported while they're learning content. So there's a section of the UDL guidelines under representation, which is one of the principles and it's about providing options for language and symbols. And so under that guideline are things like clarifying vocabulary, clarifying syntax and structure, and that you talked about that last time when you were talking about like the engine of a car and really getting into how language works and how English works and looking at things like structure and syntax.

Other options for supporting language under UDL include supporting decoding of text mathematical notation and symbols. So language is not just what we typically think of in an ELA classroom. There's language and science classes, language and math classes that also need to be supported. And then when you talked about assets based approaches last time we talked about drawing upon native language and promoting understanding across languages. So that's also a checkpoint under options for language and symbols. And then we also have the checkpoint, illustrating through multiple media. So I'd like to delve into those options and even talk about specific strategies for supporting English learners today.

Soomin Chao One of the key takeaways from our conversation that resonated with me in particular was the fact that we are all language learners, and that what's good for some is essentially good for all and that applies to an integrated ELD approach in a content area. And so you're absolutely right when we talk about, for instance, a science lesson, right? And we're talking about specific vocabulary and language or access points that would benefit language learners but also benefit students who are native to the English language and who are looking to gain access to content.

Elise Yerkey

Right. Well, that whole continuum, I'm glad you brought up the subject of science because I think it could be argued that when it comes to science that it might be a foreign language for most of us. There's such specialized terms in science and really the demands on reading and science are probably greater than in an English language arts classroom. So technical structures are different. So could we talk about maybe some strategies and I'd like to hear your ideas on some strategies that are newly added to Smarter Balance Tools for Teachers which is the formative assessment component of the Smarter Balance Assessment System. It's also a repository for instructional resources. So those resources all come embedded with accessibility supports and formative assessment strategies. And in the last year, they have added strategies for English learners that aren't necessarily available on assessments but are encouraged to be used during instruction.

Soomin Chao

Absolutely, and I think it's important to note that the power of these tools and the accessibility lies in students' ability to access them and their confidence in using these tools. And so all the more important for teachers to be integrating these supports into learning activities in the classroom throughout the year, so that when it comes to the use of assessment tools at the end of the year, right, in a summative way students are able to use the tools in a way that demonstrates their understanding and learning of a content area like science.

Elise Yerkey

Right. So we talked a lot about construct relevance. And so what we think of as standardized tests that definition is kind of broadened. So when we talk about construct relevance there are a lot of supports we can give students and learners that don't affect what's being measured but provide support for language. So for example, if a student's taking a math test, the reading is not being assessed. So they can use a designated support, such as text to speech and have texts read aloud so that the cognitive load and the demand on their cognitive resources is lessened so they can focus more on demonstrating their knowledge of math.

So some of the supports that are available on assessments include things like translated test directions, illustration glossaries, bilingual dictionaries, and of course, students would be using them on the assessment because they've been using those types of supports in the classroom all year long, but they look different. So what would something like an illustration, glossary or translated test directions look like during instruction?

Soomin Chao

It can look different in different classrooms but what comes to mind is something as simple and as easily accessible as a word wall, right? Which I've seen in

classrooms for language arts as well as other content areas such as history, social science, science, and math. What I really love is when I walk into a classroom and I see a word wall that incorporates native language supports, L1 supports for students who are acquiring a second language in English, right? But they also have an underlying proficiency in their first language. And so really in an assets oriented way, leveraging the language that's already been developed in their home language is a strategy that I found to be particularly successful.

Elise Yerkey

Yeah, I'm so glad you brought up word walls and I've seen teachers do really creative things with them. So instead of just a word and definition they include pictures or they include cognates. They even choose to include translations in students native language. I've seen teachers make them interactive so that kids can pull words off the wall so that they can spell them back at their desk.

So when we talk about word walls, these are the definitions that we wanna give to students because tier three vocabulary words or very content specific vocabulary has the narrowest applicability and are the least frequently occurring. So words like acceleration, igneous, sedimentary, physics words like force and motion and reaction, when we define them specifically within a content area they have very specific meanings. And so rather than having students do, for example a freer model where they have to write the definition, use the word in a sentence, provide a picture, provide non-examples, these words are best taught in context. So these are very specialized words. It's not very useful to have students try to use them in a sentence. It's better to have them be able to look up at a wall, see the definition, understand it, and use it in the moment.

There's some other strategies that are new in Tools for Teachers. So besides the ones that are present on assessments that are about a dozen strategies that are newly added to Tools for Teachers and these are things that should be used during instruction and I'm gonna just list a couple for you and see if you can talk about whether there's a place for them in an integrated classroom and how content area teachers might offer these as options to support understanding of discipline specific teaching.

So some of these new strategies include cognates, funds of knowledge, language objectives, previewing and predicting, sentence frame, structured dialogue, are those things that teachers can actively provide as options during their content instruction? And how would that work or what would that look like?

Soomin Chao

Absolutely. I think one that resonates with me off the bat is utilization of funds of knowledge and this is very much in alignment with the EL roadmap, leveraging the

assets oriented perspective of what students bring to a classroom. Funds of knowledge, it's a term that's used to describe the strategies that are used to activate and build students' background knowledge of a particular topic or a concept. And so, leveraging what students bring into a learning task what they come in with their understanding of a topic, if it's by experience, if it's by observing a phenomenon and being able to speak to it or if it's leveraging their understanding of a content based on a prior lesson or a prior direct learning experience this is something that a teacher could tap into as a jumping off point to a lesson. And so that definitely is something, it's a strategy that teachers are already using often times, but one that can be a focus especially at the onset of a lesson.

Elise Yerkey

There are two words that you just used that I think are really important when we talk about funds of knowledge or background knowledge and those words were tapped into and activate.

So sometimes I will hear teachers say that English learners just don't have background knowledge right? And with UDL, we always want to recognize that the barrier is in the design or the conditions of learning and not within the student. And so I've given a lot of thought to that statement that kids just don't have the background knowledge but you use the words tap into and activate. And so some of the ways that you can tap into or activate background knowledge is just by questioning, asking open ended questions because oftentimes we might assume that students don't have background knowledge but we don't know what they know. And so one way of getting to that place where they are able to use background knowledge is to think of it as opening up a treasure box so that we recognize that they're gonna come with certain perspectives. That they've had experiences that maybe we haven't had, and it's our job to activate or tap into that rather than assume that they just lack background knowledge. So I love that funds of knowledge as a strategy and one way to get at those funds of knowledge is through open ended questioning.

Soomin Chao

Thinking about the perspective of UDL and how that might work in early learning settings it would be great to acknowledge that funds of knowledge incorporate what the student brings into the classroom, right? And then also partnering with parents' educational partners, having that conversation, and that's all part of designing the learning space and the learning activity that incorporates funds of knowledge for students, because a lot of their prior knowledge is connected to their home life as well and so that is an asset to consider too.

Elise Yerkey

Can we talk about sentence frames?

Soomin Chao

So when teachers are working to design the learning experience for their students along proficiency levels something as simple as sentence frames can help students to articulate their thoughts and their ideas, to articulate questions, to pose to the group in either a small group setting, and I'm talking about groups of four to six or in a larger group setting. And so designing the conversation activity in that way using sentence frames could be particularly powerful for students and feeling confident about entering into a conversation on a content such as history, social science, or math, or science. And so, yes, I've seen sentence frames used effectively along proficiency levels of emerging, expanding, and bridging. And in particular, in the emerging if you have sentence frames that are in native language such as Spanish or Mandarin, I've seen that very effective so that students have a lesson cognitive load, they're not worrying about understanding the question they got the question, and now they're able to engage in the conversation and contribute to the discussion.

Elise Yerkey

I love that you tie different types of sentence frames and with differing types of proficiency levels because I feel like sentence frames are an option that we can offer but we can also tailor, we can offer differentiated options. And so let me give you an example. Most sentences or most sentence frames I've seen have been in a simple sentence structure, right? There's a noun, there's a verb or there's a subject, there's a predicate. But what if to support language, we offer sentence frames but we also use sentence frames to increase rigor? Because one of the things that Universal Design for Learning does is it maintains the fidelity to rigorous goals. And so it's not about making things easier, it's about making things accessible. And so sentence frames cannot just support language but they can support thinking.

So you mentioned history. So what if we gave a sentence frame such as X, Y and Z were exchanged along the silk road? And so if we gave that very simple sentence frames, a student might say, fur, spices, and other goods were exchanged on the Silk road. What if we changed the structure of that sentence frame to make it a complex sentence? So it has a dependent clause and then independent clause. So for example, we could say in addition to furs and spices the Silk Road encouraged the exchange of blank and blank. So we're pushing students a little bit. We already know that they're probably gonna say furs and spices, but what we really wanna get at is deeper thinking. So by offering this more complex sentence frame they might be pushed to say something like, in addition to furs and spices, the Silk Road encouraged the exchange of ideas, religions, and languages. And so when you talk about using sentence frames that are differentiated to proficiency levels,

I would really encourage teachers to think about using multiple sentence structures not just simple, not just compound, but looking at compound and even compound complex sentence structures. Because not only are you encouraging the use of language but you're supporting that cognitive thinking through a structure.

Soomin Chao

UDL is so important because it's a way to allow students the will and the skill to become the drivers of their own learning.