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## Book Review of "Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners: A Guide for K-12 Teachers"

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## Book Review

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### Text:

Fairbairn, S. & Jones-Vo, S. (2010). *Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners: A Guide for K-12 Teachers*. Philadelphia: Calson.

With the current trends of inclusion models within the K-12 public school systems around the nation, content-area teachers are serving more and more English language learners in the classroom. As a result, there is a great need to differentiate instruction, assignments, and assessments to allow ELLs access to the same grade-level content and skills as their proficient peers (Chamot & O'Malley, 1995; Echevarria, Short, and Powers, 2008; Fairbairn and Jones-Vo, 2010). The book *Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners: A Guide for K-12 Teachers* by Shelley Fairbairn and Stephaney Jones-Vo provides a comprehensive, user-friendly guide for all educators working with ELLs to make content and language comprehensible for students at varying levels of language proficiency.

Perhaps the most laudable feature of this book is its accessible, organized structure. The first two chapters set up a brief but thorough framework for understanding the unique needs of ELLs in the classroom by presenting an overview of issues in second language acquisition, cultural factors affecting students' success, and general tips for working with ELLs and their families. The strength of this overview lies in the concise language in which Fairbairn and Jones-Vo present highly specialized linguistic concepts such as contrastive analysis and comprehensible input and embed them within a practical list of instructional strategies and differentiation techniques that are adaptable for a multitude of subject areas.

Following the foundational chapters, the text then delves right into how to differentiate and scaffold instruction for different levels of English proficiency. The authors use a numerical scale of 1 to 5, with level 1 being the lowest proficiency level and 5 being the highest based on TESOL's national standards. For the purposes of this book, this scale seems more helpful than other scales such as SOLOM's of 1 to 4, as having the odd number allows for a definitive intermediate level. A chapter is dedicated to each of the levels and they are set up symmetrically which allows easy comparison of strategies. These chapters take the reader step-by-step through the differentiation process by first presenting special considerations for the particular proficiency level, and then detailing the corresponding student descriptors. Building on this background information, Fairbairn and Jones-Vo then provide sample assignments and strategies that contain examples of objectives written specifically and realistically for each level. This perhaps is one of the most beneficial tips gained from these chapters. The authors clearly suggest a backwards lesson design which is a simple and practical approach to objectives-based instruction (Wiggins

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& McTighe, 2008). The authors make this type instruction more concrete by providing student case study examples for easy reference.

The differentiations for proficiency level chapters culminate the process with activities, assignments, and resources for professional development. While the activities are well-planned and situated in real-life lesson planning scenarios, this limits the audience of the text somewhat to in-service teachers. The authors attempt to address this by asking readers to think of a hypothetical students; however, this is difficult for a pre-service teacher or undergraduate education students who may have had little to no experience working with ELLs to do. The concepts then remain at an abstract level. Therefore, these sections of this text are best for in-service workshops and district-based endorsement courses.

Concluding this book is an extensive chapter explaining how to differentiate simultaneously for the five levels and for the elementary, middle school, and high school curriculum. Filled with examples, this chapter provides teachers with a plethora of templates for planning lessons, units, and most importantly, assessments for different subject areas. These templates inspire teachers to think not only about the objectives of the lesson, unit, or assignment, but the language expectations for the tasks. The charts require teachers to detail these expectations and objectives for each level, including the English proficient student, followed by the standards-based content, and lastly, the techniques for instructional scaffolding and language skills support for the students to successfully master their respective objectives.

Overall, this text is a great resource for current teachers who work with ELLs. The authors' clear explanations, wealth of examples, and step-by-step approach make the process of differentiation accessible and manageable for mainstream and ESL teachers alike. Additionally, in an effort to help teachers on a day-to-day basis, the book includes a large poster that summarizes the book's content for daily reference in the classroom. The authors' explicit guidance in how to modify and differentiate the language expectations in particular is perhaps this book's greatest strength.

## References

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### **About the Author**

**Melanie C. González** is a doctoral student at the University of Central Florida. Prior to enrolling in the Ph.D of TESOL program, she taught ELLs at a middle school, adult learners at a university intensive English program, and tutored writing for academic purposes at a local community college.