

# Differentiated Questioning—Meeting Language Learners' Needs While Addressing the CCSS and State Content Standards

by Lisa Meyer, Dual Language Education of New Mexico

A number of years ago, our Project GLAD® trainer team was introduced to the article *Asking the Right Questions*, by Jane D. Hill and Kathleen Flynn, at the Project GLAD® National Training Center, and we began exploring how to differentiate questions for language learners in our classrooms. We have implemented this strategy in different ways at the schools we work at and support. Here is one approach that directly addresses the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (ELA CCSS) for students at all language proficiency levels.

## How do we differentiate instruction for language learners, holding high expectations while supporting language development?

Differentiated questioning is a powerful strategy that addresses this question. Teachers carefully plan questions that not only target the state content standards and CCSS ELA being taught but also align with the different language levels of the students in the classroom. These questions are the foundation for brief guided group sessions that specifically address the needs of our language learners.

Given the demands on classroom instructional time, guided language groups are time well spent when they lead to strong gains for students. Differentiated questioning allows us to:

- ◆ review important content with students to maximize retention and learning;
- ◆ provide students a safe, risk-taking space for practicing language skills with other students of a similar language level; and

- ◆ use this information for formative and/or summative assessments. As a formative assessment, we use the questions earlier in the unit after introducing and reviewing the chart, book, or other material with the whole class. With careful observation we identify teaching points to address during the lesson, as well as next steps for individuals or small groups. At the end of a unit, the questions can be used as an alternative assessment for students who cannot accurately communicate their understanding in a paper and pencil task or when this is not developmentally appropriate.

## So where do the questions come from?

The questions are generated in advance by the teacher based on a chart, book, or other shared class experience that is worth reviewing and discussing with a small group of language learners. These lessons target important information and essential concepts that are in the grade-level standards.

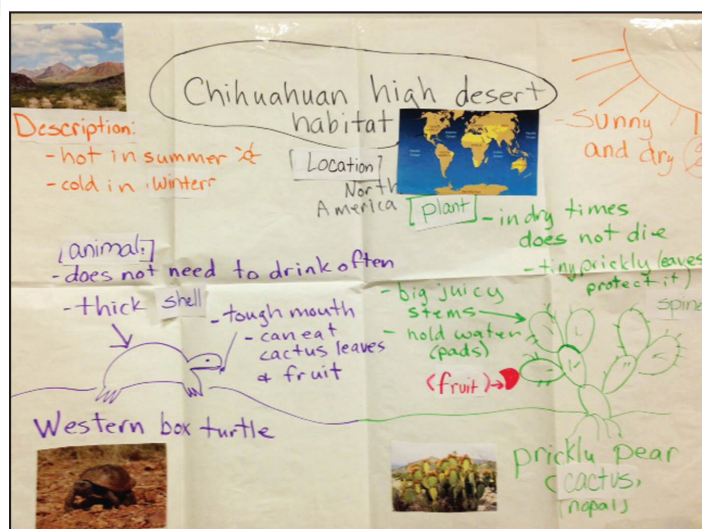
On page 12 is a differentiated question grid, developed for a GLAD pictorial input chart on the Chihuahuan High Desert (see this page) that includes a description of the habitat and characteristics of a plant and an animal typically found there. The chart is part of an integrated science unit on organisms and was first taught and then later reviewed with the entire class. Differentiated questions were written in advance for two small groups of language learners. Preplanned questions tailored specifically to students' different language levels maximize time spent in small groups and ensure that the work is tied directly to the standards.

The differentiated grid starts as a simple template with the language levels across the top. These levels align with the WIDA™ ACCESS assessment, WIDA™ Can Do Descriptors, and New Mexico English Language Development (ELD) Standards. Students' ACCESS levels and classroom work inform which levels to target with which students. Science standards and the CCSS ELA standards were identified during the planning of unit content and tasks.

After looking at the content standards, the CCSS ELA, and the Chihuahuan High Desert Chart, it was decided that the questions would require students to:

- ◆ identify and describe the habitat;

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- ◆ explain why the western box turtle and prickly pear cactus were able to survive there;
- ◆ compare the similarities and differences of the two organisms; and
- ◆ compare and contrast how other animals are similar and different to them.

If students were able to meet these targets, they would have a strong grasp of the grade-level content.

Ruth Kriteaman, a fellow *Project GLAD*® trainer, and I then wrote questions that targeted these expectations and were differentiated for the students' language levels. We arranged the language levels in three groups—1/2, 3, and 4/5—to make the question writing more manageable, recognizing that with some scaffolding, all of our students could engage in the conversation at one of the three levels. In each row, we started with the level 4/5 column, since this was the response all students would be working toward. We then adjusted the question for the entering/emerging and developing levels. Having examples from other grids, the WIDA™ Can Do Descriptors, state ELD standards, or *Asking the Right Questions* (J. Hill and K. Flynn, 2008) can help with writing the questions. This is a challenging task.

While writing the questions, we often returned to the standards to make sure we maintained the complexity of the standard and the thinking. As Eva Thaddeus stated in the article, *Differentiating Questions, Deepening Understanding* (Soleado, Summer 2012—[soleado.dlenm.org](http://soleado.dlenm.org)), “Just because a student is a beginning language learner, that does not mean we should consider her to be a beginning level thinker.”

While writing the fourth row of the grid, we decided to use pictures of other animals that live in the Chihuahuan High Desert to elevate students' thinking and apply their learning to other animals. This was key to making sure we were getting to the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The standard is not specific about which environments or organisms students need to know. This question allowed us to see if students had a strong conceptual understanding of what we were studying.

As we finished the first four rows, we had an “aha” moment that later seemed more like a “no-duh”—but it was a great idea. The CCSS ELA expects students to ask and answer questions. This was a perfect

opportunity for students to ask questions and for us to assess and support them with this skill. The fifth row was written carefully, considering how to scaffold students in successfully asking questions.

We also realized it was important during the guided language group for us to answer the questions students asked, so that there was an authentic discussion. The objective is not to check a box indicating that the students can ask a question, but that students use their questions to support authentic communication and comprehension.

It's important to note that in order to meet these CCSS ELA expectations, students need a variety of authentic opportunities to ask questions throughout a unit of study, throughout the instructional day. Differentiated questioning should not be the only time students are expected to ask questions. A consistent routine of asking the class a question and then having students ask the question of a partner and discuss the answer together builds this skill. Students can also ask other students a question that they are exploring. With time, students will be able to write discussion or test questions that show high-level understanding of the content.

### ***What should I keep in mind while working with students?***

When choosing students for a group, intentionally select two to four students of similar language levels. It is more effective to meet for a shorter time with two smaller groups than for a longer time with one larger group. Think of your purpose. Throughout the day we work with students in heterogeneous groups to maximize learning and provide a range of models for language, literacy, higher level thinking, etc. For this 10 minutes, intentionally target similar language levels to ensure that all voices are heard and that similar needs across the group can be targeted. Work with the group in a space apart from other students where you can see and manage the class as needed, but make it clear to students that you should not be interrupted during this key instruction. The expectation, as during guided reading, is that students who are not in the small group will use their classmates and other resources to work independently on individual or team assignments.

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Prepare questions ahead of time. This usually pushes the cognitive level higher and allows you to focus on adjusting as needed for the students in front of you.

State Content Standards

What type of input are you using (chart, video, book...)?

CCSS ELA

How will you document students' content and language understandings and next steps? This is an important formative assessment opportunity and could be an alternative summative assessment for some students.

WIDA ACCESS Levels

Bloom's Taxonomy Levels

Use additional pictures to support application of concepts to other situations. This can scaffold higher order thinking questions.

Give students time to think before you expect an answer. Wait time is important.

### Differentiated Questions: Chihuahuan High Desert, Grade 1

	Remember Understand Apply Analyze Evaluate Create	Level 1-2 Entering/Emerging	Level 3 Developing	Level 4-5 Expanding/Bridging	CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening: Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.
		<b>NM Science Standards:</b> Know that living organisms (e.g., plants, animals) inhabit various environments and have various external features to help them satisfy their needs (e.g., leaves, legs, claws). Describe the differences and similarities among living organisms (e.g., plants, animals).			
<b>Understand</b>	The Chihuahuan High Desert is very dry. Does the prickly pear cactus need a lot of water or just a little water? Does the western box turtle drink a lot of water or just a little water?	How can the western box turtle (or prickly pear cactus) live in a habitat that is very dry—that doesn't have a lot of water?	You said the Chihuahuan High Desert was very dry (or paraphrase what child said above). How can the western box turtle and prickly pear cactus survive there?		
<b>Two rows missing (Remember and Analyze):</b> Go to <a href="http://www.dlenm.org">www.dlenm.org</a> to see the complete question grid.					
<b>Evaluate</b>	Look at these pictures of a ____ and a _____. They both live in the Chihuahuan High Desert. Point to the one that is most similar or like the western box turtle. Point to the one that is the most different. (Teacher gives possible reasons based on where student points, for example "Do you think the turtle and the snake both have the same colored skin?" Student responds yes or no. If yes, the teacher gives the reason in a sentence and has the student repeat it.)	Look at these pictures of a ____ and a _____. They all live in the Chihuahuan High Desert. Which is most similar—or like—the western box turtle? Why? Which is the most different—or unlike—the western box turtle. Why?	Look at these pictures of a ____, a ____, and a _____. They all live in the Chihuahuan High Desert. Which is most similar to the western box turtle? Why? Which is the most different from the western box turtle. Why? (Prompt students to give detailed explanations.)		
<b>Ask questions</b>	Look at the chart. Where are the turtle's eyes? Where are the turtle's ____? Now you ask me a question saying "Where are the ____?" (Support as needed.) Teacher responds in full sentence.	Now you ask me questions about the chart, like "Where are the spines on the cactus?" or "Which is bigger: the turtle or the cactus?" (Support as needed.) Teacher responds in a full sentence.	Now you ask me questions about the chart. (Give examples as needed to prompt more challenging questions.) "What is the description of the Chihuahuan High Desert?" or "Which living thing has roots?" (Support as needed.) Teacher responds in a full sentence.		

Answer the questions students ask. This gives a purpose to the question and gives you an opportunity to engage in a real conversation while modeling language.

Write questions so the same standard(s) are being addressed across the row but adjusted for language levels.

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As you run the group, keep a conversational focus. Add questions and comments as appropriate. Do make sure to manage your time to discuss all of the key questions and to make sure all students have an opportunity to participate. Students should do the majority of the talking. Oral language is developed through many opportunities to talk.

Keep in mind that questions are chosen based on students' language levels and adjusted to make sure everyone is successful. Keep your expectations high, providing support as needed. Additional supports can include pointing, rephrasing a question, or repeating what another student said. Wait time is also key. Ask a question and make sure to give students time to think. The teacher having a "thinking expression" on her face or using a special gesture is a great way to remind students to pause and give everyone a chance to process.

Don't forget to record observations as students are talking. Knowing what you want to look for and record will help you to maximize this opportunity. Document the content of students' responses as well as observations of language used and next steps. Scripting students' responses provides an oral running record for assessing both content and language learning.


Taking this closer look at students' language—and more intentionally supporting it—allows us to scaffold next steps in usage, engage students more fully in the instructional life of the classroom, strengthen their content understanding, and celebrate their growth as learners and as language users.

Visit [www.dlenm.org](http://www.dlenm.org), Instruction and Assessment, for bundled resources on differentiated questioning (articles, videos, question grid template, and additional examples of question grids).

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The parent-to-parent model builds unique relationships among families. Parents who are engaged in *Abriendo Puertas* are not in some sort of therapy session with an early learning professional who has probably forgotten what it's like to parent a young child—or perhaps doesn't even have a child of their own. Parents are engaged with other parents who are going through very similar growing pains, parents from the same community who are facing very similar challenges and experiences.

The PCA is proud that Albuquerque is a pioneer in this family engagement model that has produced very real results. So real that, after three years of work, there is now a collective of 23 experienced, well-versed parents who continue to support others in the difficult task of helping our children achieve academic success. This small group is putting all of its heart and effort into reaching more and more families and helping impact the lives of their children—helping to motivate the children, but especially helping empower parents with the strength that comes from feeling confident that they are the key to their children's success.

For more information on *Abriendo Puertas*, please call 505.247.9222, visit [www.forcommunityaction.org](http://www.forcommunityaction.org), or like "Partnership for Community Action" on .


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