

Samaira: Putting UDL Into Practice for English Learners at Risk

Samaira is in sixth grade and was born in India. She came to the United States with her family 3 years ago and has been successful in sheltered English classes. She receives ESOL twice a week and is at a Level 3 proficiency (almost testing into Level 4) on the WIDA scale. Samaira has participated in some group sessions with the school counselor after sharing that she misses her home in India and her friends there, but has not attended those sessions in the past 4 or 5 months, by choice. She lives with her mother, grandmother, and two little sisters. Her father recently moved out after experiencing challenges in his relationship with her mother; however, the two have remained on good terms since. Samaira's grades have dropped in the past 3 months. She appears to be performing over a year below grade level in math class on curriculum-based measurements, and her reading teachers have noticed that she does not complete work or participate in class. Samaira's ESOL teacher has also commented that she has become quieter and the accuracy of her written work has suffered. This semester, the school has also implemented a new district curriculum for sixth grade in which some standards and skill areas are not well aligned to the prior curriculum. All sixth-grade reading and math scores have dropped to some degree, but the drop for Samaira is more precipitous and drastic.

At a meeting to discuss her performance, the team looks at data from all of the sixth grade and from Samaira's performance in particular. They find that, like the class as a whole, she has deficits in advanced reading comprehension and in math areas, including fractions and equation solutions, related to the new curriculum. For this reason, they determine that referring Samaira for Tier 2 intervention is not appropriate. However, they do identify some additional strategies and supports to implement for Samaira in the general education setting while they fine-tune instruction and reteach concepts for the entire class. Because her deficits are more pronounced and her scores are still lower than those of her peers, these supports will help her make up ground and get back on pace with the class.

The ESOL teacher identifies some ways to modify activities during the ESOL block to reinforce the advanced comprehension concepts being addressed in content classes. In particular, he will focus on the language of instruction and make sure that Samaira has effective strategies for approaching vocabulary and comprehending sentences with complex syntax (UDL Principle I: Multiple Means of Representation). The math teacher has noticed that Samaira seems to perform better on tests given at the end of the class, so he plans to tweak all his test and quiz schedules so they occur at the end of the period, after Samaira has had a chance to review the material (Principle II: Multiple Means of Action and Expression). To foster engagement on Samaira's part, he also modifies tests and quizzes so that students have a choice in selecting the first three problems they complete (Principle III: Multiple Means of Engagement). To allow for options for processing and for oral review, he also builds in a 5-minute study block for all students prior to the test (Principle I: Multiple Means of Representation).

The language arts teacher also incorporates support for vocabulary and sentence structure, setting a goal of one new vocabulary strategy per week. Both teachers attempt to incorporate extra time for oral language activities in each class as well, offering choices so students can choose different discussion and question-and-answer options to complete with partners (Principle II: Multiple Means of Action and Expression; Principle III: Multiple Means of Engagement). While this strategy is likely to benefit all students, they feel it will help Samaira in particular by increasing her engagement and interest. Last, the team asks the school counselor to meet with Samaira at least once in the next 2 weeks to make sure her prior concerns with adjustment and acclimation are addressed. The team decides to check in after 3 weeks to ensure their adjustments are helping Samaira and, if not, to select more targeted strategies to address her needs.

Samaira, who lives in a state that utilizes WIDA standards, is working at a Level 3 on the WIDA language proficiency scale (her ESOL teachers feel she is a few months away from moving up to Level 4). The curriculum demands for sixth graders state that she should be able to write 3-paragraph essays with prompting and to read and independently interpret grade-level fiction and nonfiction texts. Her ESOL teacher has worked with the classroom teacher to provide accommodations in the classroom. The ESOL teacher has also identified specific adaptations to deliverables and activities in the classroom that can support Samaira. For example, the WIDA Can-Do Descriptors, which describe what students at each level of language proficiency can be expected to do and understand, state that sixth-grade students can write sentences and short descriptions and details “such as column notes” (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2012b). Samaira’s teachers work together to modify the requirement for her sixth-grade end-of-unit essay so that she has the option of using a graphic organizer and outlines as she writes. In transferring her notes and outlines to written form, she works with the ESOL teacher to utilize sentence starters and paragraph frames. Her final product is evaluated separately on content and mechanics, with differentiation and adaptation for mechanical accuracy.