

# Comprehensible Input

## Learning Outcomes

After reading, discussing, and engaging in activities related to this chapter, you will be able to meet the following **content** and **language objectives**:

### Content Objectives

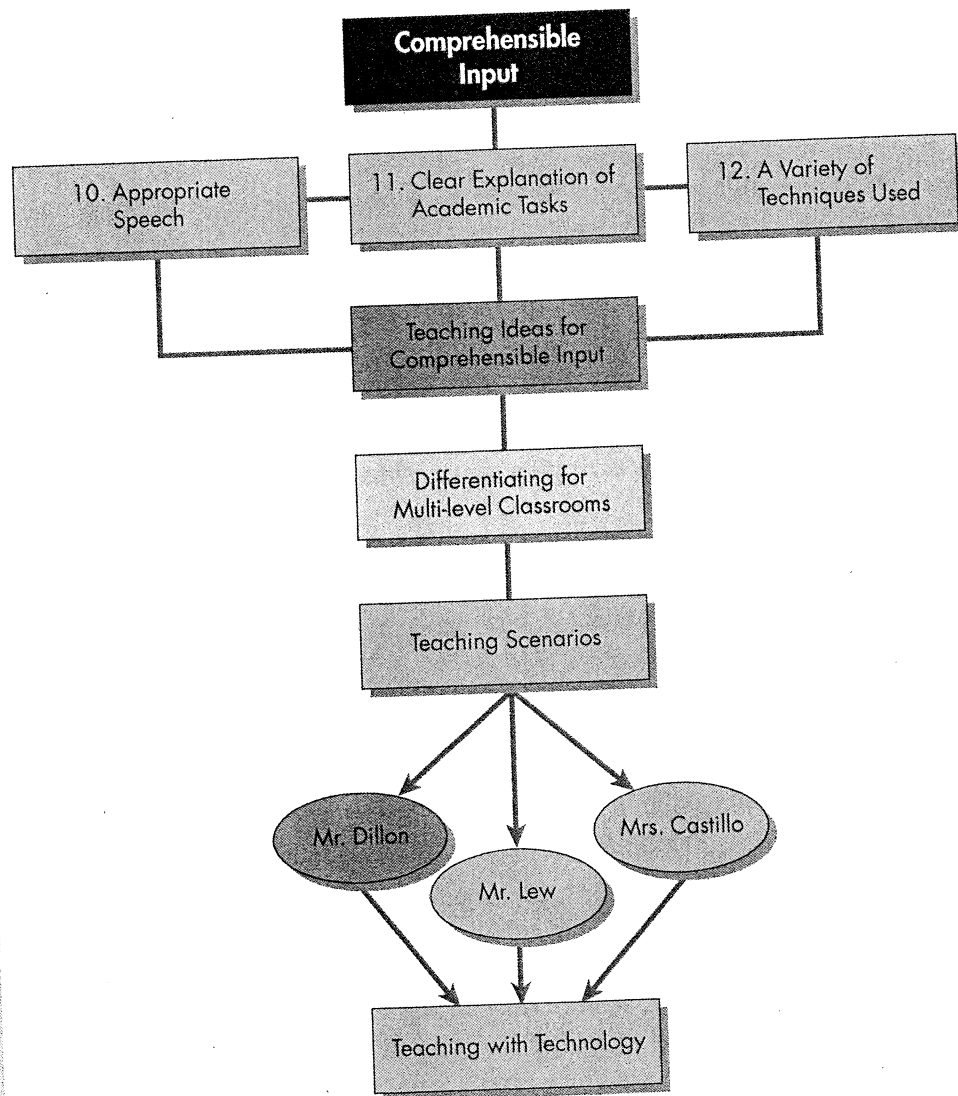
Identify techniques for presenting content information in ways that students comprehend.

Review various ways to provide directions for completing academic tasks.

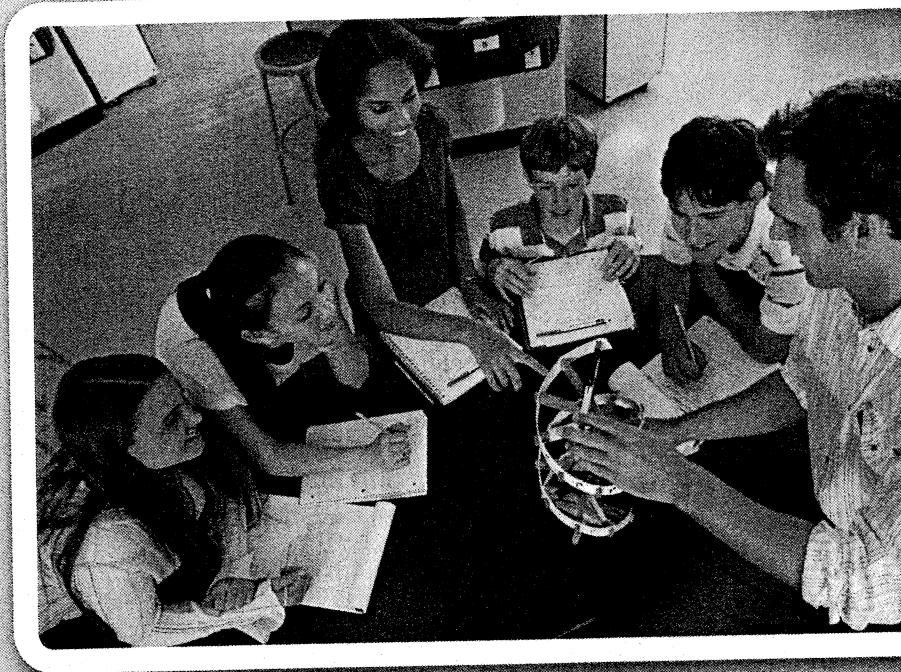
### Language Objectives

Discuss modifications to teacher speech that can increase student comprehension.

Write the steps needed for students to perform an academic task and have a partner perform each step.



As you look through the features of the SIOP, you will see that they reflect what we know about effective instruction for all students—English speakers and English learners alike. However, implementation of particular features is critical for making content understandable for English learners. The features of the Comprehensible Input component make SIOP instruction different from “just good teaching.” While English learners benefit from many of the teaching practices that are effective for all students, these students also require modifications to make instruction meaningful (August & Shanahan, 2006, 2010). Making a message understandable for students is referred to as *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1985). A **culturally responsive** SIOP teacher takes into account the unique linguistic needs of English learners and modifies teaching accordingly. Whether instruction is for a designated **English language development/ESL** lesson or for a content area lesson that makes subject matter accessible while also developing **English language proficiency**, comprehensible input techniques are essential. ●



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Have you ever tried to water ski without a boat? Impossible, right? No matter how badly you want to ski, it can't happen without a boat. A teacher using the features of Comprehensible Input functions as the boat because English learners, no matter how motivated, can't be successful academically if they don't understand what the teacher is saying, what they are expected to do, or how to accomplish a task. Humans don't “pick up” language solely from exposure. For example, many of us have been around speakers of Spanish, Vietnamese, or Farsi, but we understand little, if anything of what is being said. Comprehensible input techniques are necessary for students to understand the essence of what is being said or presented. A SIOP teacher makes verbal communication more understandable by consciously using supports that are matched to students' levels of English proficiency.

In this chapter, we present ways to support English learners' comprehension so that lessons are understandable for them.

## Background

Watch this video to see teachers demonstrate what comprehensible input is all about. Can you identify several techniques that are shown? How might you increase comprehensibility using some of the ideas mentioned by Dr. Vogt? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTnHoxao70>

Watch this video and notice how the teacher makes a multiple-meaning words lesson more comprehensible for English learners. Pay attention to her slower, well-articulated speech and the way she effectively uses gestures and pointing. What are some other ways she makes the lesson comprehensible?

Watch this video to see how the teacher enunciates in a natural but effective way for her students. Also pay attention to her rate of speech. Select one technique she uses that you might use with your students.

Specialized teaching techniques are needed when working with English learners who are expected to master rigorous content material to meet high academic standards in a language they do not speak or comprehend completely. Acquiring a new language takes time and is facilitated by many “clues”—by speech that is geared to individual proficiency levels and by techniques that are used consistently in daily teaching routines.

Comprehensible input entails much more than simply showing pictures as visual clues during a lesson. It involves a conscious effort to make the lesson accessible through a variety of means. Communication is made more understandable through speech that is appropriate to students’ proficiency levels. The teacher enunciates and speaks more slowly, but in a natural way, for students who are beginning English speakers. More repetition may be needed for beginners and, as students gain more proficiency in English, the teacher adjusts her speech to the students’ levels. Teachers will increase students’ understanding by using appropriate speech coupled with a variety of techniques that will make the content clear.

These techniques are particularly important as students aim to meet the **Common Core State Standards (CCSS)** and other state standards in each grade level. Across grade levels, the standards ask students to comprehend information presented orally and to express their understanding in a variety of ways, such as recounting key ideas and details, and paraphrasing or summarizing the information presented. The way information is presented orally will have a significant impact on the degree to which English learners will be able to achieve these standards.

We will discuss a number of ways to make teacher talk comprehensible to students in the next sections. In the scenarios that follow later in the chapter, you will see examples of teachers who use comprehensible input techniques with varying degrees of effectiveness.



### SIOP® FEATURE 10:

## Speech Appropriate for Students’ Proficiency Levels

For this feature, speech refers to (1) rate and enunciation and (2) complexity of language. The first aspect addresses *how* the teacher speaks and the second aspect refers to *what* is said, such as level of vocabulary used, complexity of sentence structure, and use of idioms.

Students who are at the beginning **levels of language proficiency** benefit from teachers who slow down their rate of speech, use pauses, and enunciate clearly while speaking. As students become more comfortable with the language and acquire higher levels of proficiency, a slower rate isn’t as necessary. In fact, for advanced and transitional students, teachers should use a rate of speech that is normal for a regular classroom. Effective SIOP teachers adjust their rate of speech and enunciation to their students’ levels of English proficiency.

Likewise, students will respond according to their proficiency level. The following example illustrates the variation in responses that may be expected when students at six different levels of English proficiency are asked to describe the setting in a story. The levels reflect the WIDA performance definitions (<http://www.wida.us/standards/elp.aspx>).

- Entering: “Cold day.”
- Beginning: “Day is cold and there snow.”
- Developing: “The day is cold and there is snow.”
- Expanding: “The day is very cold and heavy snow is falling.”
- Bridging: “It is a cold, winter day and it is snowing more heavily than usual.”
- Reaching: “The unusually heavy snow on the day the story takes place causes a number of problems for the characters.”

While still providing English learners with exposure to grade-level language, SIOP teachers carefully monitor the vocabulary and sentence structure they use with English learners in order to match the students’ proficiency levels, especially with students at beginning levels of English proficiency. The following are ways to monitor classroom speech:

- Enunciate clearly. Sometimes it is easy to rush through information or instructions because of the time pressure of teaching by the clock or because you want the pace to move along so that students don’t lose interest. For English learners, a brisk speaking pace is difficult to follow, especially if care isn’t taken to enunciate clearly. When each syllable of each word isn’t pronounced properly but naturally, the words get slurred together. Students have difficulty understanding, especially if there is other noise around the room.
- Ask students for elaboration. Especially with students at intermediate and advanced levels, teachers should frequently ask students to: explain their answers; provide evidence for their answers; say it another way; answer *why*, *how*, or *what if* questions; and show where they found something in the text. Teachers should also ask students to connect words, phrases, and short sentences into compound sentences that represent their ideas and thoughts. In this way, students not only use the language but also think about *how* to use it as well.
- Model what you want students to say before having them produce language. For example, in science the teacher might say, “We’ve been studying that there are many changes that occur in the earth’s crust. Some come quickly and others take millions of years. Ask your partner, ‘What is one change that comes quickly?’” In this way, students know what to say when they turn to their partners because they have heard correct sentence formation. Providing students with a model of what to say increases the likelihood that on-point discussion will occur.
- Avoid idioms, particularly with beginners. These common sayings that do not have exact translations create difficulty for students who are trying to make sense of a new language. Some common idioms include “below the belt” for unfair; “put one’s foot down” meaning to be firm; “see eye to eye” for being in agreement; “get the hang of” meaning to become familiar with; and “get a person’s back up” indicating to make someone annoyed. English learners are better served when teachers use language that is straightforward, clear, and accompanied by a visual representation.
- Employ paraphrasing and repetition to enhance understanding. English learners may require repeated exposures to a word in order to hear it accurately since they often lack the auditory acuity to decipher sounds of English words. Then they need

to see and hear the words used repeatedly, preferably in a variety of ways. Brain research tells us that repetition strengthens connections in the brain (Jensen, 2005).

- Point out cognates to promote comprehension for students whose **native language** has a Latin base. For example, using “calculate the mass/volume ratio” (*calcular* in Spanish) may be easier for some students to understand than “figure out the mass/volume ratio.” (See Vogt and Echevarría, 2008, for more examples of cognates.)
- Simplify sentence structures to reduce the complexity that some English learners find confusing. Use subject–verb–object with beginning students and reduce or eliminate embedded clauses. For example, in a history lesson, the teacher may use the following complex sentence structure that is difficult to understand: “English colonists brought free enterprise, the idea of owning and controlling their own businesses, from England but because England’s leaders wanted the colonies’ financial support, laws were passed to limit the free enterprise system in the colonies.” It might be better stated as, “English colonists brought the idea of owning and controlling their own businesses from England. This idea is called free enterprise. England’s leaders wanted the colonies’ financial support, so the laws were passed to limit the free enterprise system in the colonies.” Reducing the complexity of language is effective for beginners but should be used judiciously. Oversimplification of spoken or written language eliminates exposure to a variety of sentence constructions and language forms (Crossley et al., 2007), especially complex text called for in the Common Core State Standards. The best way for English learners to acquire the language of complex texts is through exposure to those texts and explicit instruction in ways to make sense of embedded clauses such as those seen above. However, a text that is one proficiency level up *is* complex; beginners and low intermediates need scaffolding/support to build up to the complex texts given to native English speaker. Too often English learners are regarded as incapable of interacting with more rigorous text and are not given the opportunity to learn the very language they need.

Using appropriate speech patterns and vocabulary for English learners contributes to comprehensible input and provides a basis for students to be successful. It is difficult for students to learn if a teacher’s way of delivering information is too fast, too complex, or inarticulate.



## SIOP® FEATURE 11:

### Clear Explanation of Academic Tasks

English learners at all levels (and **native English speakers**) perform better in academic situations when the teacher gives clear instructions for assignments and activities. In their discussion of working memory, which is central to learning, Baily & Pransky (2014) point out that when students are confused about the lesson’s topic or the activity’s purpose, they either disengage or frantically try to make connections with what they already know. In this process, they are wasting valuable working memory processing space. So, when the teacher isn’t clear, there is more at stake than just taking up time repeating unclear instructions. Effective teachers present instructions in a step-by-step manner, preferably using modeling or demonstrating the task for students. Ideally, a finished product such as a business letter, a research report, or a graphic organizer is shown

to students so that they know what the **task** entails. Oral directions should always be accompanied by written ones so English learners can refer back to them at a later point in time as they complete the assignment or task. Students with auditory processing difficulties also require clear, straightforward instructions written for them to see.

According to case study data collected from English learners in **sheltered instruction** classes (Echevarría, 1998), middle school students were asked what their teachers do that makes learning easier or more difficult. The following are some student comments:

- “She doesn’t explain it too good. I don’t understand the words she’s saying because I don’t even know what they mean.”
- “She talks too fast. I don’t understand the directions.”
- “He talks too fast. Not patient.”
- “It helps when he comes close to my desk and explains stuff in the order that I have to do it.”

These students’ comments illustrate the importance of providing a clear explanation of teachers’ expectations for lessons, including delineating the steps of academic tasks. This point cannot be overstated. In our observations of classes, many “behavior problems” are often the result of students not being sure about what they are supposed to do. A cursory oral explanation of an assignment can leave many students unsure about how to get started. The teacher, frustrated with all the chatter, scolds students, urging them to get to work. However, students do not know *how* to get to work and oftentimes do not know how to articulate that fact to the teacher. Bottom line: Making expectations clear to students contributes to an effective and efficient classroom.

SIOP teachers go over every aspect of the lesson, showing visuals with each step, if needed. For example, in a reading class, the teacher wants students to complete a graphic organizer with information about the characters, setting, problem, resolution of the problem, and theme of a piece of literature the class has been reading. Using this information, students will write a summary. Figure 4.1 contrasts clear directions and step-by-step instruction with unclear directions and unguided instruction. Think about the way you present directions to your students.

In the left column, the teacher uses a written agenda so that if students don’t understand, weren’t paying attention, or simply forgot, they have the written steps to guide them and keep them on task. Depending on the age and proficiency levels of the group, the teacher may need to model one or more of the steps. By the time students complete the graphic organizer, they have received feedback on the accuracy of the information they will use and have seen a model of a partially completed graphic organizer. Likewise, using information in the graphic organizer to write a summary is modeled for them. This type of teaching facilitates writing of an accurate, complete summary. In the right column, the teacher gives information and instructions orally, and only a handful of students participate in the discussion. When it is time to complete the graphic organizer, most likely many students are unsure about where to begin or what information is pertinent. Undoubtedly few students will be able to complete the homework assignment.

As a check of how clear your task explanations are, you might write out the directions you would give your students for completing an academic task and ask a colleague to follow them. It can be eye opening!

**FIGURE 4.1** Clear Explanation Contrasted with Unclear Explanation

Clear Explanation	Unclear Explanation
<p>The teacher writes on the board:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review your notes from yesterday.</li> <li>2. Use your notes to answer the 5 questions on the board.</li> <li>3. Write your answers on your white board.</li> <li>4. Complete the graphic organizer.</li> </ol> <p>After giving students a few minutes to review their notes with a partner (more fluent speaker paired with less-proficient; additional information is added as needed), the teacher gives them a set amount of time to answer the first of five questions. She gives them a 30-second signal and then asks the class to “show me” their white boards where they have written their answers. She can see from a glance at their boards who got it right and who needs assistance or clarification. This process continues until all five questions are answered. The teacher shows a copy of the graphic organizer on the document reader and completes the first part with the class. Then students take the information from the five questions and use it to complete the graphic organizer. Students are allowed to work with a partner on completing the graphic organizer, but the teacher circulates and observes to make sure that both partners have mastered the content. She asks questions and prompts to ensure understanding.</p>	<p>The teacher gives an oral review of what was discussed in the story the previous day. Then she asks a series of questions about the characters, the story’s problem, and how the problem in the story was resolved. Several students raised their hands to answer the questions. The teacher talks about the theme and the importance of recognizing a story’s theme.</p> <p>Then the teacher hands out a graphic organizer and tells the students that they have the remainder of the period to complete it using the story and the information they have talked about.</p>

In the area of writing, students need to be shown very specifically—and have opportunities to practice what has been clearly explained—the essential elements of good writing. Showing students what constitutes good writing, explaining it clearly, and providing opportunities to practice will result in improved writing (Echevarría & Vogt, 2011; Graham & Perin, 2007; Schmoker, 2001). For intermediate and advanced speakers, focused lessons on “voice” or “word choice” may be appropriate, while beginning speakers benefit from models of complete sentences using adjectives or forming a question.



### SIOP® FEATURE 12:

## A Variety of Techniques Used to Make Content Concepts Clear

Effective SIOP teachers make content concepts clear and understandable for English learners through the use of a variety of techniques. We have observed some teachers who teach the same way for English learners as they do for native English speakers,

except that they use pictures to illustrate ideas or words for English learners. English learners benefit from a wider range of supports to make the material understandable. The actual techniques a teacher uses should match the task. For example, when explicitly teaching academic vocabulary words in depth, the teacher might use examples and non-examples, video clips, and other concrete representations of the words (Baker et al., 2014). High-quality SIOP lessons offer students a variety of ways for making the content accessible to them. Some techniques include:

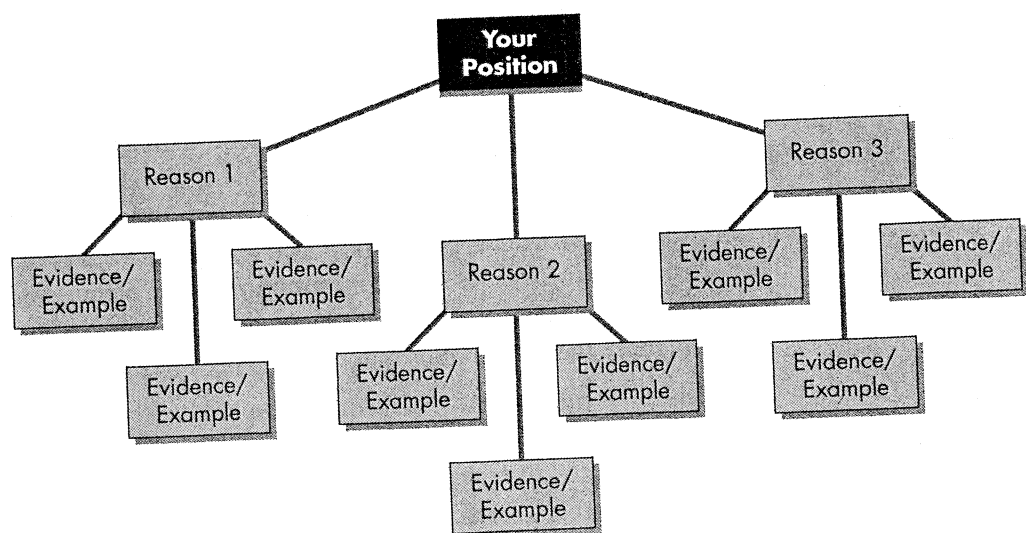
- Use gestures, body language, pictures, and objects to accompany speech. For example, in a lesson on informational text the teacher points to a poster that illustrates text features and says, “There are a number of features used in informational text that help the reader. One is (holds up 1 finger) headings (points to the heading). Headings tell us what the text will be about. What is the heading for this text? (Class reads together). Another feature is captions (points to the caption below an illustration). Captions give information about a photo or illustration. There are also bold words (points to bold words). These words are important for understanding the text.” Gestures and visual aids assist students in organizing and making sense of information that is presented verbally.
- Provide a model of a process, task, or assignment. For example, as the teacher discusses the process of water taking on the form of ice, she shows or draws a model of the process as it is being described. When students are later instructed to record conditions under which the change in ice from a solid to a liquid is accelerated or slowed, the teacher shows an observation sheet that is divided into three columns on the overhead projector (or document reader or interactive whiteboard). The teacher has a number of pictures (e.g., lamp, sun, and refrigerator) that depict various conditions such as heat and cold. She demonstrates the first condition, heat, with a picture of the sun. She models how students will describe the condition in the first column (e.g., heats). Then she asks students what effect the sun, or heat, has on ice. They answer and in the second column she records how the ice changed (e.g., melted), and in the third column she indicates if the process was accelerated or slowed by the condition (e.g., accelerated). Providing a model as the students are taken through the task verbally eliminates ambiguity and gives the message in more than one way. Students are then able to complete the rest of the worksheet.
- Preview material for optimal learning. When students’ attention is focused on the specific material they will be responsible for learning in the lesson, they are able to prepare themselves for the information that is coming, making it more comprehensible for them. Further, they have an opportunity to access prior knowledge and make the connections that they will need to understand the lesson.
- Allow students alternative forms for expressing their understanding of information and concepts. Often English learners have learned the lesson’s information but have difficulty expressing their understanding in English, either orally or in writing. Hands-on activities can be used to reinforce the concepts and information presented, with a reduced linguistic demand on these students.
- Use multimedia and other technologies in lessons. Teachers may use PowerPoint slides, interactive whiteboards, a document projector, or relevant Web sites and



apps as supplements to a presentation. In so doing, they not only provide more visual support but also model the use of the technology.


- Provide repeated exposures to words, concepts, and skills. English learners are learning through a new language, and in order for the input to be comprehensible, they need repetition. However, excessive practice of a single word or skill can become monotonous and defeat the purpose. Jensen (2005) discusses a process for introducing material repeatedly in a variety of ways. He suggests introducing terms and skills well in advance of learning the material (pre-exposure); explicitly previewing the topic at the start of the lesson; exposing students to the target information (priming); reviewing the material minutes after students have learned it; and allowing students to revise or reconstruct information hours, days, or weeks after the lesson to revisit the learning. Research indicates that teachers ought to provide students with the specifics of what they need to learn—the key details of the unit—and then find ways to expose students to the details multiple times (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).
- Use graphic organizers effectively. New ideas and concepts presented in a new language can be overwhelming for English learners. Graphic organizers take the information, vocabulary, or concept and make it more understandable by showing the key points graphically. To paraphrase the saying “a picture is worth a thousand words,” a graphic organizer can capture and simplify a teacher’s many potentially confusing words. While graphic organizers are used commonly in school, they are most effective when they match the task and lead to attaining the lesson’s objectives.

Some graphic organizers may be simple, such as a problem/solution chart or a web with vocabulary definitions. For older students, graphic organizers may be more elaborate. For example, the CCSS and other state standards call for students to have an understanding of the argumentation process. Prior to giving a presentation that requires argumentation or an argumentative writing assignment, a **scaffold** might be to have students complete the following Argumentation Map:



See Vogt and Echevarría (2008) *99 Ideas and Activities for Teaching English Learners with the SIOP® Model* for many SIOP-appropriate graphic organizers.

- Audiotope texts for greater comprehension. There are a variety of commercially available resources that provide an audio version of a story or book. Publishers often include access to audio versions of a text. Also, software exists for creating MP3 files by scanning text and reading it aloud. Students can listen to the file on a smartphone or tablet. An audio version of the text not only allows for multiple opportunities to hear the text, but also enables adjustments for different proficiency levels. When the teacher (or someone else) records the text himself or herself, the same passage may be read more slowly with clear enunciation for beginning speakers, or synonyms may be substituted for difficult words.

 Watch this video of a teacher who exemplifies all three features of the Comprehensible Input component in this SIOP lesson. Do you think the students will learn the vocabulary terms well? What are some of his techniques that you might employ?

The Comprehensible Input techniques we present in this chapter assist English learners in understanding the lesson's information, especially when it is presented orally. Whether the teacher is giving directions, conveying content information, or teaching a skill or concept—any time a message is delivered verbally—it must be made understandable for all students. Many English learners adapt to the classroom environment by pretending they understand, when, in fact, they may not. SIOP teachers use frequent checks to gauge how well students comprehend material and to discern how speech may need to be differentiated based on proficiency.



## Teaching Ideas for Comprehensible Input

In the section that follows, you will find some teaching ideas to help you with preparing SIOP lessons.

- Record step-by-step instructions for completing a task or project, using an electronic tablet application. English learners, individually or in pairs, listen to the instructions as many times as needed, using the speech speed feature to slow the output to their level of understanding. You may also generate questions for partners to ask each other, such as “Which pages do we read before completing the graphic organizer?” or “Are the words we use in the graphic organizer found in the reading passage or somewhere else?” In this way, students listen to the instructions again with a focus on specific questions whose answers will help them complete the task. English learners may be unaware that the headings or bolded words in a text are those used to complete a graphic organizer.
- Use sentence strips. This common technique can be used in a variety of ways at all grade levels. In reading/language arts, students can review events in a story by writing each event on a sentence strip, then sequencing the strips to retell the story. This technique can be applied in science to sequence steps in an experiment. For optimal engagement, students in math might work in groups to sequence the steps for problem solving. After the group has put the strips in the correct order, each student takes a strip and lines it up in the order of how the math problem is solved. Other groups provide feedback as to whether the order is correct.

- Show a brief (2–4 minutes) video clip that reinforces the content objective and complements the reading assignment prior to reading a passage of informational text. Have students work in pairs to discuss specific questions about the video clip so that they have a grasp of the big ideas before participating in reading (Reutebuch, 2010).
- Spell difficult words or math formulas to the tune of B-I-N-G-O or another song while clapping out each letter, number, or symbol.
- Make lectures or presentations more compelling to the brain by using objects, photographs, slides, graphs, bulletin board displays, and color. Visuals are important for remembering information. Change things up: Use vivid posters, drawings, videos, and other ways to grab attention (Jensen, 2008).

## ■ Differentiating Ideas for Multi-level Classes

We know that most classes with English learners have students with multiple proficiency levels. Even those designated ESL 2, for example, may have some students who have stronger listening skills than writing skills or stronger reading skills than speaking ones. Teachers have at their disposal a variety of ways to differentiate spoken English to make it comprehensible for our diverse English learners. Almost every utterance can be modified in some way to address the variety of proficiency levels of students in your classrooms. Several considerations include the following.

- Use a slower rate, clear enunciation, and simple sentence structure for beginning speakers; use a more native-like rate and sentence complexity for intermediate and advanced speakers of English.
- Remember that you make a huge contribution to your students' attitude toward school. Particularly in the early grades, students' experiences form their impressions about school and learning. At any age, learners in a positive environment are more likely to experience enhanced learning, memory, and self-esteem (Jensen, 2008, 2013). Differentiating how information is delivered so that it is comprehensible helps students with lower levels of proficiency feel accepted, understood, and as much a part of the class as native speakers of English.
- Allow students to provide differentiated responses to questions and assignments. For oral responses, provide sentence frames for those students who need them. With written assignments, beginning speakers may require partially completed information (e.g., Cloze procedure), while advanced speakers may only need a word bank, or other support, to complete the assignment. Level of support should be differentiated so that students at each level of proficiency are able to understand expectations and be successful in lessons.