11

IDENTIFYING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

When we ask ELLs to identify similarities and differences, we give them the opportunity to learn content at a deeper level. In order to complete this task, students are required to activate prior knowledge, make new connections, construct meaning, and talk about their reasoning.

Generalizations from *Classroom Instruction That Works*

Classroom Instruction That Works identifies four generalizations from the research on identifying similarities and differences.

1. Teacher-directed activities deepen understanding for students and increase their ability to use knowledge. In teacher-directed activities, teachers provide a variety of explicit instruction regarding similarities and differences. Doing this allows students to better use the knowledge they are learning, because they will have received the knowledge linguistically and nonlinguistically.

When we were working on similes and metaphors, it was hard for the ELLs to really compare and figure them out since some of it went right over their heads. So one thing I used was a picture describing the metaphor or simile: "His strength was like the towering mountains around him." So they drew what they thought would be somebody strong.

—Amy Libertini, Berry Creek Middle School, Edwards, Colorado

It's important to use familiar contexts. A lot of times I'll start with stories that [students] are familiar with. I think I've even done movies or things that fit more into pop culture because that is something that is motivating to them. We will do one as a group, and they kind of giggle, "Oh, I can't believe we are talking about Spiderman vs. Batman." It's something that they can really do, and it doesn't feel so academic, but they are learning the skill of identifying similarities and differences.

—E. B.

During such an activity, you explain the steps and provide the information to be compared. When teaching ELLs how to identify similarities and differences, here are some tips that will facilitate student understanding:

- Represent what you say with visuals
- Use short, simple sentences with clear articulation
- Include gestures and facial expressions
- Use high-frequency vocabulary (and remember that nouns are better than pronouns)
- Reduce idiomatic expressions

The best advice given by mainstream teachers with ELLs in their classrooms is: When you think you have modeled enough, do it one more time!

2. Students should independently identify similarities and differences. Have students begin with a familiar topic, such as comparing school lunches over two days. Then, lead them into more content-related comparisons. This will help bridge the gap between teacher-directed and student-directed activities.

Preproduction students in particular will benefit from comparing familiar items because the familiar is here and now; it is laden with context and it forces us to use everyday vocabulary. Jim Cummins (1984) refers to this type of communication as "cognitively undemanding and context embedded" (p. 138). Context-embedded situations provide many clues for ELLs. The more talking opportunities that can take place in a meaningful communicative context (i.e., related to a student's background), the more successful the student will be.

As students move to unfamiliar contexts, they are pushed into using the vocabulary of academic English. Cummins (1984) calls this type of communication "cognitively demanding and context reduced" (p. 139). When students are asked to identify similarities and differences in order to gain insights, see distinctions, and change perspectives, the task becomes more academic in nature. Cummins notes that the reason many ELLs do not develop strong academic skills is because much of their initial instruction takes place in cognitively demanding, context-reduced situations that are inappropriate for the early stages of language acquisition.

3. When students represent similarities and differences in graphic or symbolic form, it enhances their ability to identify and understand similarities and differences. As we know from Chapter 4, accompanying verbal or written information with a visual representation helps ELLs make connections and construct meaning.

Representing similarities and differences in graphic or symbolic form should accompany both teacher-directed and student-directed activities. The advantage of having students use graphics and symbols is that they are required to use language to explain these nonlinguistic representations.

4. There are four different forms of identifying similarities and differences: comparing, classifying, creating analogies, and creating metaphors. Each of these forms is accompanied by language complexities that may need to be addressed and modified depending upon the student's stage of language acquisition. For example, Preproduction and Early Production students will do well with comparing two items according to various attributes (e.g., color, size, shape, function, composition, parts). Such an activity is appropriate at this level because it can involve pointing and one- or two-word responses. Speech Emergence students will do well with teacher-directed analogies as they fill in the blanks for relationships (e.g., "thermometer is to _____ as odometer is to _____"). Developing metaphors, however, requires sentences that express a student's ability to identify a general or basic pattern in a specific topic and then find another topic that is different but has the same general pattern. Students will need to be in the two final stages of language development before they can create student-directed metaphors.

I always tell my ELLs that if you have an assignment, break it down into what's the same, what's different. If you just start writing, a lot of times it doesn't make as much sense, because your mind is going all different places. So if you organize your writing into a compare/contrast pattern before you write, it makes [things] a lot easier to understand. You have to really model this up front and then let them do it. Usually, I think this is something that kids—particularly second-language learners—can be successful with.

—*E. B.*

Classroom Recommendations

Classroom Instruction That Works suggests five recommendations for identifying similarities and differences.

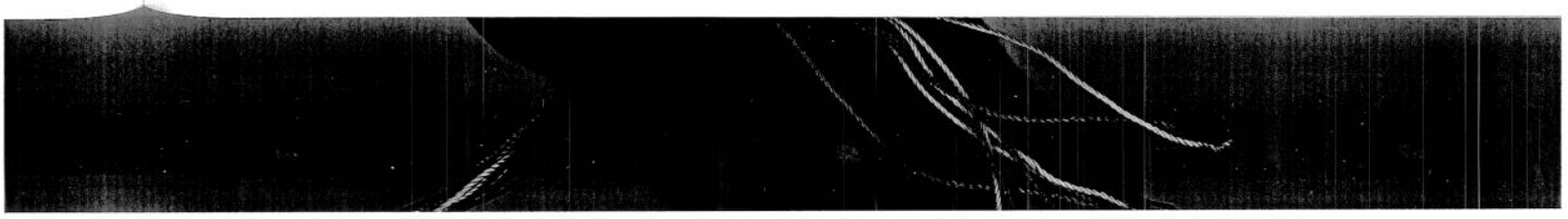
1. Remember to use different methods when asking students to identify similarities and differences. Many ELLs will benefit from orally identifying similarities and differences, whereas Intermediate, Advanced Fluency, and English-dominant students can engage in the same activity using written language.

2. Model each method of identifying similarities and differences. Provide visuals for ELLs while teaching them the steps of the task, use clear and concise speech with shorter sentences, and reduce your use of idioms while speaking.

3. Begin with a familiar topic when modeling. Using culturally familiar topics is one method of adapting a lesson for ELLs.

We were studying the ice men and mummies, so the students broke apart a cookie and pretended to be archaeologists. Some of the ELLs' comparisons were very literal, and some of them were very evaluative, so it was really good. The chocolate chip cookie was the bones, and that's why they were broken, and they did some great comparing with that. "Similarities and differences" is a strategy to understand things, but also a strategy to make sense of the new instruction coming in.

—*E. S.*



When I taught the students how to think about similarities and differences, we were studying the great migration of African Americans from the South to the North in the 1930s. I tried to relate that to something that my ELLs could relate to, which was immigration from Mexico. They found a lot of similarities and differences. That was good for the kids because the move from Mexico was such an important part of their lives and something that they are still dealing with on a daily basis as immigrants.

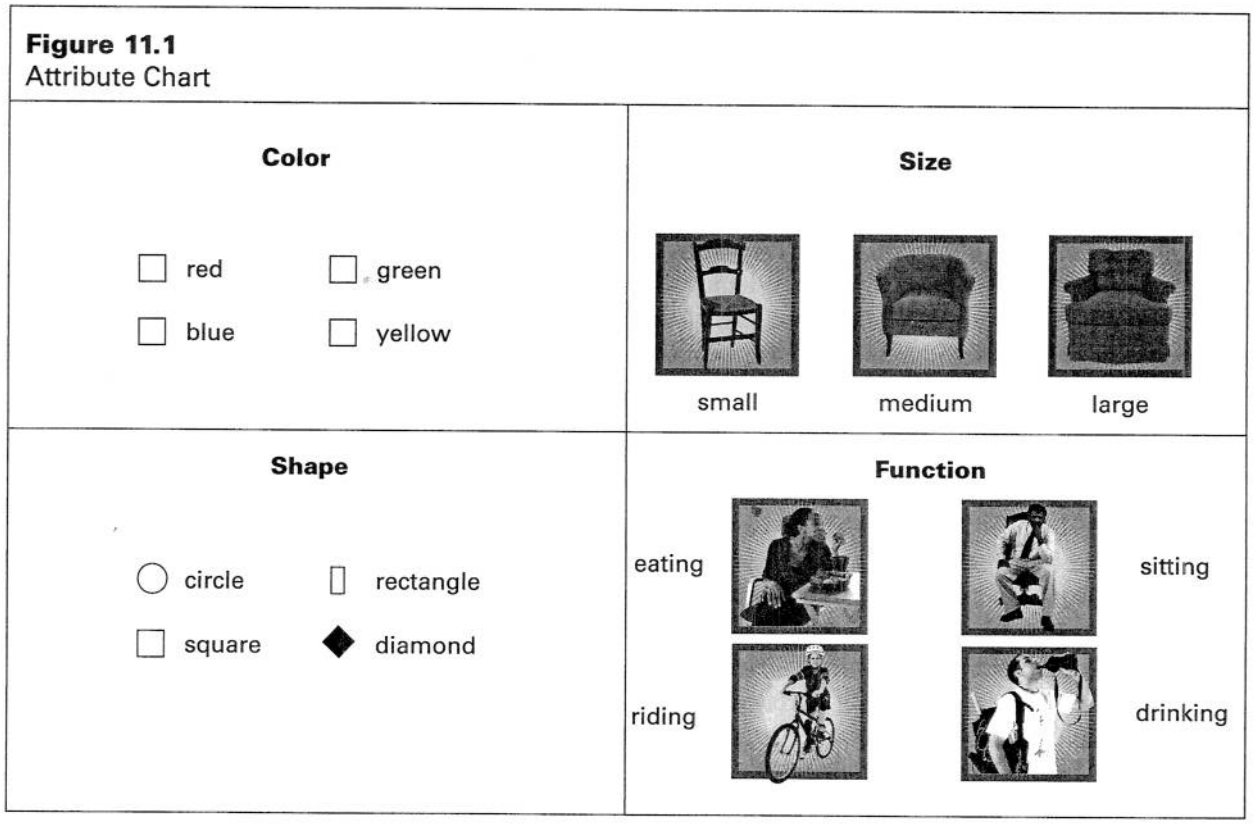
4. Use graphic organizers to represent the similarities and differences. Visual representations are always highly effective with ELLs. (See Chapter 4 for more on this topic.)

5. Guide ELLs through the process of identifying similarities and differences but lessen the support as you repeat activities.

Adapting Identification of Similarities and Differences to the Stages of Language Acquisition

Identifying similarities and differences has long been used in ESL classes to build basic vocabulary in different categories, including color words and words used to describe size (adjectives), shape words (nouns), and words for functions (verbs). This is done with an attribute chart (see Figure 11.1). The teacher gives a small group of students two objects, such as an apple and an orange, and then directs the students to the color box.

Figure 11.1
Attribute Chart



Preproduction
Students can point to the red color swatch when holding the apple and repeat the word "red."

Early Production
Students can complete a sentence starter with a one-word response: "The apple and the orange are the same because they are both . . . ."

Speech Emergence
Students can complete a sentence starter with a phrase or short sentence: "The apple and the orange are different because . . . ."

Intermediate and Advanced Fluency
Students will not need the sentence starters, but their responses will need some shaping. You should encourage them to "sound more like a book" by using words other than "same" and "different."

The attribute chart can be gradually increased to include more characteristics, such as the composition of items (what they are made of) and parts of the items (e.g., eraser and lead for a pencil). Plan for oral language development as students talk about what is the same and what is different. Attribute charts allow Preproduction students to build vocabulary, Early Production students to use familiar vocabulary, and Speech Emergence students to practice using sentences. Intermediate and Advanced Fluency students are able to work on improving their academic language knowledge by using words other than "same" and "different" as they compare items.

The next step is to allow students to select items to compare. This is a three-step process:

1. Select the items you want to compare.
2. Select the characteristics of the items on which you want to base your comparison.
3. Explain how the items are similar and different with respect to the characteristics you selected.

The process may be stated in simpler terms for young students:

1. What do I want to compare?
2. What is it about them that I want to compare?
3. How are they the same? How are they different?

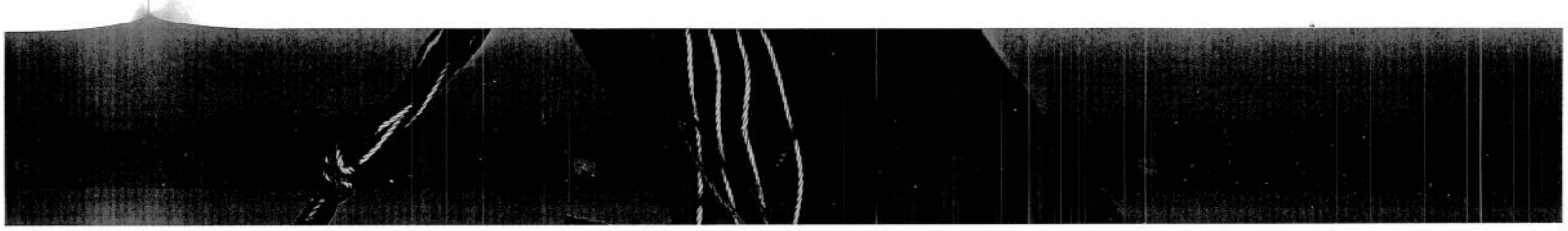
Model the steps with a think-aloud: "First, I have to pick two things to compare. I want to compare an apple and an orange. Next, I have

We use similarities and differences a lot when we're analyzing literature and the motives of the authors and characters. We are constantly comparing and contrasting characters within a given selection or just one story compared to a different story. We use Venn diagrams or compare-and-contrast charts. That's what we do the most because our data show that it has the highest correlation [to improved academic achievement].

—W. G.

We do character analysis by talking about and writing similarities and differences. Besides comparing and contrasting two characters to each other, we also compare and contrast them to ourselves and our culture.

—Jolene Smith, Kayenta Intermediate School, Kayenta, Arizona



to pick the characteristics I'm going to compare. I want to compare color, shape, taste, and their parts. Finally, I describe how they are the same and different: The apple and the orange are the same because they are both round; the apple and the orange are different because the apple is red and the orange is orange."

After you have modeled the steps, make them available by posting them in the classroom. Students will have fun with this activity as they compare familiar objects from nonacademic topics.

It will not take long for students to become familiar with Venn diagrams (see Figure 11.2). Teachers can add another layer to the Venn diagram by having students select the characteristics of the items to be compared (Figure 11.3). ELLs can talk about similarities and differences, while English-dominant students write about the comparisons.

An additional level of complexity can be added by using a comparison matrix (see Figure 11.4). Initially, provide students with familiar items and tell them which characteristics to compare. Gradually, they can add to the list of characteristics (e.g., texture, how items are eaten, nutritional value).

Preproduction

Students are working to learn vocabulary and can be drawing pictures.

Early Production

Students are also working at an oral level using vocabulary. While you are circulating, be sure to model with sentence starters: "The apple, orange, and banana are the same/different because _____."

Figure 11.2
Basic Venn Diagram

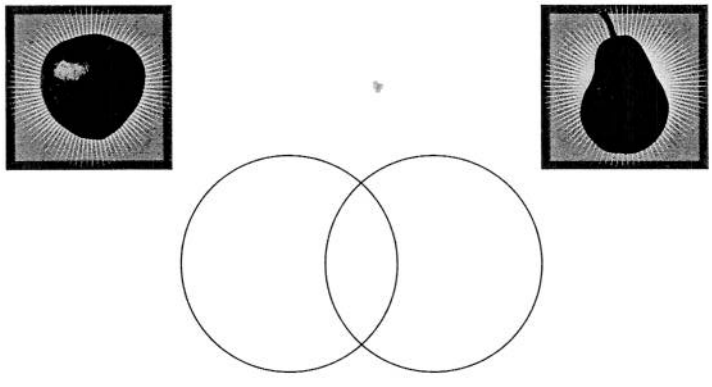
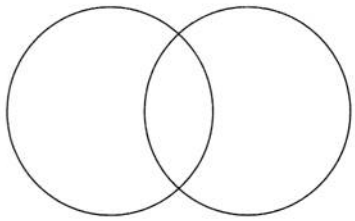


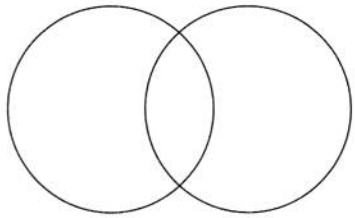
Figure 11.3
Venn Diagram: Comparing Characteristics

Items to be compared: apple and orange

Characteristic 1: skin



Characteristic 2: nutritional value



Speech Emergence
Students will rely less on sentence starters as they begin to produce longer sentences. As you listen, help these students by expanding the sentences, such as by turning short, disjointed sentences into compound sentences with conjunctions such as "and" and "because." These students can also be engaged in writing activities.

Intermediate and Advanced Fluency
Students can write about the similarities and differences they identify with the help of teacher feedback, as can English-dominant students.

Classroom Example

Figure 11.5 presents a real-life classroom example of an assignment dealing with similarities and differences. Figure 11.6 presents an example of a completed comparison matrix to go along with the activity. As you adapt the lesson for ELLs, you will want to focus on the Word-MES formula as discussed in Chapter 2.

Figure 11.4
Comparison Matrix

Characteristics	#1 Apple	#2 Orange	#3 Banana	Similarities and Differences
1. Color				
2. Size				
3. Shape				
4. Composition				

Preproduction
Students will be building vocabulary (word selection): *land*, *mountains*, *ocean*, color words, and words to describe size.

Early Production
Students will be using modeled sentence starters when talking about similarities and differences.

Speech Emergence
Students will be expanding their language as they talk and write.

Intermediate and Advanced Fluency
Students will begin to "sound like a book" as they write their comparisons.

Being able to describe a word according to its attributes is one of the first strategies ELLs will use in defining words. Next, they will provide examples of the word and then use synonyms. It is not until the later stages of language acquisition that they will define a word in the formal way that English-dominant students do—in terms of a larger class to which it belongs (i.e., defining "belt" as a clothing accessory or "dresser" as furniture).

Figure 11.5
"Stars or Starfish" Classroom Example

Subject: Science

Content Objective: To understand the composition and structure of the earth's atmosphere (e.g., temperature and pressure in different layers of the atmosphere, circulation of air masses).

Items you will be comparing: ocean, land, mountains

Characteristics to keep in mind: color, size, shape, sight, sound, and pressure

Starting point questions:

1. What do I want to compare?
2. What is it about them that I want to compare?
3. How are they the same? How are they different?

During our next unit, we will be learning about the deep, mysterious ocean. As we begin to understand the environment in the ocean, I'd like you to engage in an ongoing comparison. Using knowledge you acquired during our previous unit on the earth's atmosphere, identify the similarities and differences between what it would be like to go deeper and deeper into the ocean and what it would be like to go higher and higher to the top of a major mountain peak. Use characteristics for your comparison that highlight sights and sounds you would experience, but also be sure to demonstrate your understanding of the composition and structure of the earth's atmosphere.

Summary

Identifying similarities and differences allows ELLs rich opportunities to develop their second language. Teacher-directed activities are important as students become familiar with the tasks of comparing, classifying, creating metaphors, and creating analogies. Allow for plenty of talk time as students demonstrate verbal abilities before moving them into written forms of distinguishing similarities and differences.

Figure 11.6
Completed Comparison Matrix for "Stars or Starfish" Classroom Example

Characteristics	#1 Ocean	#2 Land	#3 Mountains	Similarities and Differences
1. Color	blue green	brown green gray	brown green purple	They share one same color, green.
2. Size	covers 2/3 of the earth	takes up a lot of space	tall	They are all different because the ocean covers more of the earth than land and the mountains are tall.
3. Sounds	waves	cars wind	wind	Land and mountains are the same because you can hear the wind from both of them. Ocean is different because you do not hear wind, you hear waves.
4. Pressure	more pressure as you go deeper	no more, no less	less pressure as you go higher	No similarities. Ocean and mountain are different because the pressure increases as you go lower and decreases as you go higher.