

# Comprehensible Input

## CONTENT OBJECTIVES

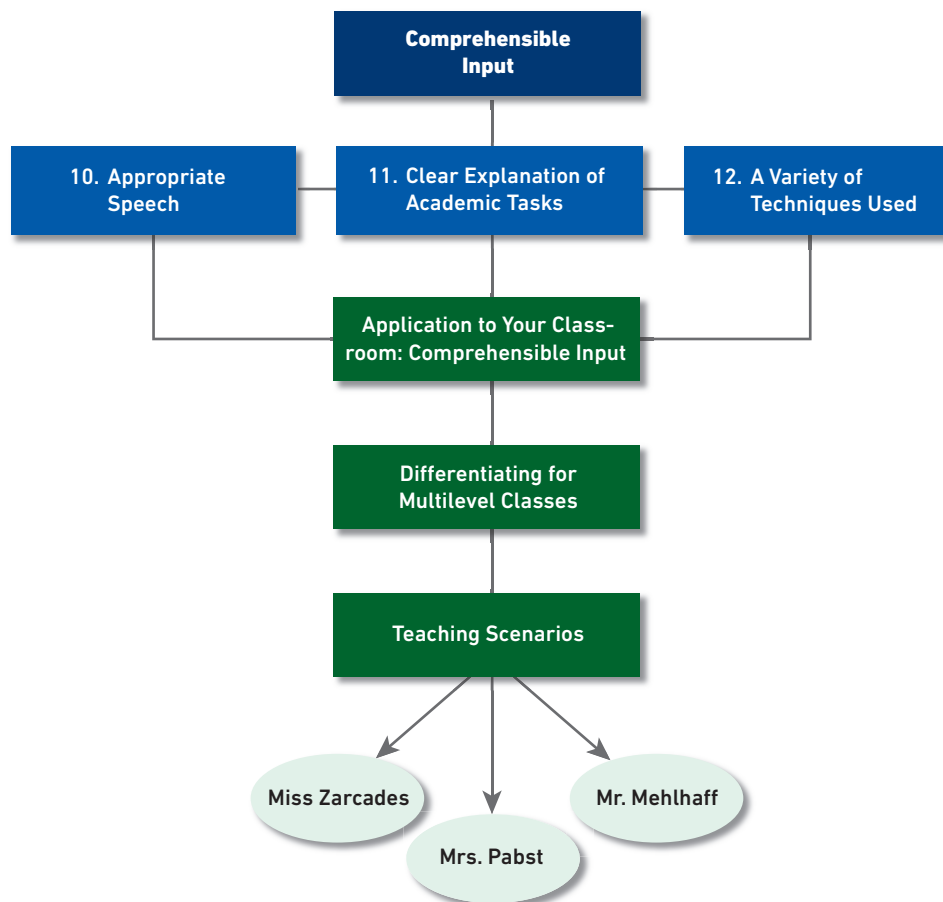
This chapter will help you to . . .

- Identify three techniques for presenting content information that enhance comprehension for multilingual learners.
- Name elements necessary for providing clear directions for completing academic tasks.

## LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you to . . .

- Discuss modifications to teacher speech that can increase student comprehension.
- As part of a lesson plan, write several techniques to make academic language accessible for multilingual learners.



**As you** look through SIOP’s features, you will see that they reflect what we know about effective instruction for all students—English speakers and multilingual learners alike. However, some SIOP features are essential for making instruction meaningful for multilingual learners (August & Shanahan, 2006, 2010). The features of the Comprehensible Input component make SIOP instruction different from “just good teaching.” Making a message understandable for students is referred to as *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1985). A culturally responsive SIOP teacher considers the unique linguistic needs of multilingual learners and modifies teaching accordingly. Regardless of classroom setting—whether a designated English language development/ESL lesson, a lesson in a dual language program, or a content area lesson—using comprehensible input techniques is necessary for making subject matter accessible and also for developing second language proficiency. ■



## ■ Background

“Teaching students in a Dual Immersion program makes the use of comprehensible input non-negotiable. Many of our students come in with little to no experience in the target language. Ensuring comprehensible input techniques are used during our lessons is the key that allows students to unlock the content.”  
—Angie Medina, Dual Immersion Literacy Teacher, California

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 multilingual 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 academic tasks. 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.

Mandarin Chinese has a concise way of expressing the sentiments of many multilingual learners. *Ting bu dong* literally means *I hear but I don’t understand*. Students hear the teacher but don’t always understand the message. Specialized teaching techniques are needed when working with multilingual learners who are expected to master rigorous content material to meet high academic standards in a language they do not yet 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. While visuals are important, SIOP teachers make a conscious effort to make the lesson accessible through a wider range of supports. Communication is made more understandable through speech that is appropriate to students' proficiency levels. Teachers enunciate and speak 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, teachers adjust their speech levels to match the students' needs. 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 high academic standards in each grade level. Across grade levels, students are expected 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 multilingual learners will be able to achieve these expectations.

In this chapter, we will discuss a number of ways to make teacher talk comprehensible to students so that lessons are understandable for them. In the scenarios that follow later in the chapter, you will see examples of third-grade teachers who use comprehensible input techniques with varying degrees of effectiveness when teaching an economics lesson.

**SIOP®**
**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. 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 multilingual 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, words get slurred together. Students have difficulty understanding, especially if there is other noise around the room. 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 (<https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/WIDA-ELD-Standards-Framework-2020.pdf>).

- Entering: “Cold day.”
- Emerging: “Day is cold and there snow.”
- Developing: “The day is cold and there is lots of 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 multilingual learners with exposure to grade-level language, SIOP teachers carefully monitor the vocabulary and sentence structure they use in order to match the students’ proficiency levels, especially with students at beginning levels of English proficiency. Teachers simplify sentence structures by using subject–verb–object format with beginning students and reduce or eliminate embedded clauses and passive voice. For example, in a social studies 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., 2012), especially the complex text called for in most state standards.

Finally, using idioms may create confusion for multilingual learners, especially beginners who are trying to make sense of a new language, since these common sayings do not have exact translations. Some common idioms include “below the belt” for unfair; “put one’s foot down” meaning to be firm; “see eye to eye” for agreeing; “get the hang of” meaning to become familiar with; and “get a person’s back up” indicating to make someone annoyed.

Multilingual learners are better served when teachers use language that is straightforward, clear, and accompanied by a visual representation that contributes to comprehensible input and helps students to understand the lesson’s content. It is



Comprehensible Input benefits students by inviting all students to access grade-level learning while they continue to build on their social and academic language skills.

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difficult for students to learn if a teacher’s delivery of information is too fast, too complex, or inarticulate.

## **SIOP®** SIOP® FEATURE 11:

### **Clear Explanation of Academic Tasks**

Multilingual 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, Bailey and 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 multilingual 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 multilingual 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 student comments from the study that you would likely hear from students today:

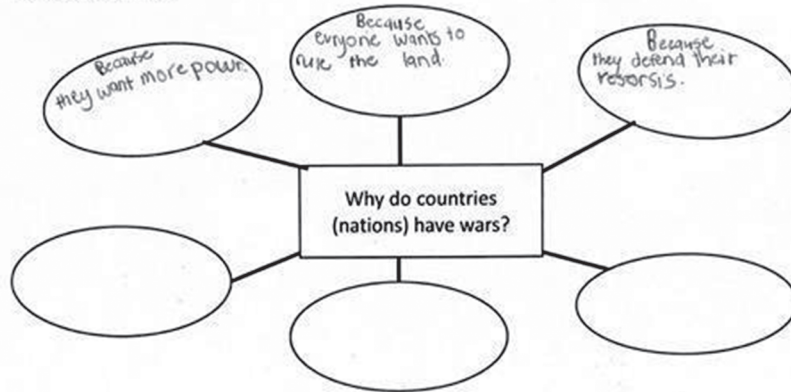
- “She doesn’t explain it too good. I don’t understand the words she’s saying because I don’t even know what they mean.”
- “She talks too fast. I don’t understand the directions.”
- “He talks too fast. Not patient.”
- “It helps when he comes close to my desk and explains stuff in the order that I have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

As you can see in Artifact 4.1, the teacher provided clear, comprehensible instructions for how to complete the activity. First, the graphic helps students

## ARTIFACT 4.1 Interactive Idea Mapping

**Causes Idea Mapping:** Why do you think countries (which are also called nations) have wars? Why do countries fight? Write as many ideas as you can think of below.



**What do other people in your group think?**

Each person takes a turn asking:	Each person takes a turn answering:
_____ what do you think?	"I think countries have wars because ____."

Jorge thinks a cause is Countries want more power.

Mia thinks a cause is they want to protect their resources.

Oslo thinks a cause is countries want to take control of other countries.

Now, write an answer that combines your group's ideas. Call the teacher when you think you have an answer that includes all of the group members' ideas.

Our group thinks that countries have wars because they want to rule, and take control of other countries to get power and resources.

understand that they need to write several ideas. Next, the sentence frame facilitates discussion as each student took a turn answering. Finally, students combined their ideas into a single answer with the sentence starter that was provided. These clear instructions, including visuals and sentence frames, enable multilingual learners to participate in activities with grade-level material.

The same is true for inquiry lessons, but with some modifications. Teachers sometimes misinterpret having a clear explanation of the lesson's expectations as being incompatible with an inquiry approach when in fact all lessons, inquiry or not,

have expected outcomes for students that require some explanation. While explaining each part of the lesson may give away the inquiry process, usually teacher directions at the beginning of the lesson are brief and are limited to introducing materials and describing the task. Recall the last student quote above that “It helps when he . . . explains stuff in the order that I have to do it.” Inquiry lessons need to provide enough language support so that multilingual learners aren’t disadvantaged. Students usually work in cooperative groups, which provides an opportunity for students less proficient in English to be helped by their peers. However, multilingual learners likely will become frustrated if they don’t understand what their peers are talking about or exploring. Some initial explanation and review of vocabulary is necessary, as well as teacher supervision of groups during different phases of the inquiry lesson, so that clarification can be provided, as needed.

Typically, 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. Which column more closely applies to the way you present directions to your students?

The teacher described in the left column uses a written agenda so that if students don’t understand, weren’t paying attention, or simply forgot, they have the

**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 five questions on the board.</li> <li>3. Write your answers on your whiteboard.</li> <li>4. Complete the graphic organizer.</li> </ol> <p>After giving students a few minutes to review their notes and discuss 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 whiteboards 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 a 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, while 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>

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 contrast, the teacher in the right column gives information and instructions orally, and only a handful of students participate in the whole-class, teacher-dominated Q&A. When it is time to complete the graphic organizer, most likely many students are unsure about where to begin or what information is pertinent. A critical academic task, writing a summary, is left to be done as homework. Undoubtedly, few students will be able to complete the assignment because the teacher gave the students no model, guidelines, or practice before asking them to do the work independently.

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. Better yet, record yourself giving directions and watch/listen to see how comprehensible the explanation was. It can be eye opening!

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 (Boswell, 2015; Graham, 2019; Linares, 2018). For intermediate and advanced students, focused lessons on “voice” or “word choice” may be appropriate, while beginning students benefit from models of complete sentences using adjectives or forming a question.

## SIOP®

### SIOP® FEATURE 12:

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

Effective SIOP teachers make content concepts clear and understandable for multilingual learners using a variety of techniques. We have observed some teachers who teach the same way for multilingual learners as they do for native English speakers, but rely on pictures to illustrate words for multilingual learners. While visual supports are effective and necessary, multilingual 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; TESOL, 2018; Zucker, et al., 2021). High-quality SIOP lessons offer students a variety of ways for making the content accessible to them. Some techniques include:


- Use gestures, body language, visuals, 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

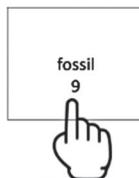
that help the reader. One is (holds up 1 finger) headings (points to the heading). Headings tell us what the text will be about. What is the heading for this text? (Class reads together.) Another feature is captions (points to the caption below an illustration). Captions give information about a photo or illustration. There are also bold words (points to bold words). These words are important for understanding the text.” In this case, the teacher used gestures and visuals to make the oral explanation more understandable for students. SIOP teachers also include visuals, as seen in Artifact 4.2, Vocabulary Dice Game, on worksheets to make the oral explanation clear. The teacher describes the steps of the game, pointing to each step on the game board worksheet. Since the steps and icons are part of the game board, they are visible for student reference and eliminate confusion.


- Model a process, task, or assignment. As an example, when a teacher discusses the process of water changing to ice she doesn't only rely on an explanation of the process. She uses several techniques to augment the information presented verbally. First, 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


**ARTIFACT 4.2 Vocabulary Dice Game**

### Vocabulary Dice Game

**Step 1:** Roll the dice. 

**Step 2:** Find the vocabulary word that matches the number on the dice. 

**Step 3:** Tell your partner a sentence using the vocabulary word. 

**Step 4:** Listen to your partner's feedback. 

paleontologist 10	uncover 2	buried 3
remove 4	location 5	skeleton 6
prehistoric 7	clue 8	fossil 9

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 a document reader, interactive whiteboard, or chart paper. The teacher shows several 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 and models how students will describe the condition in the first column (e.g., heats). Then the teacher asks students what effect the sun, or heat, has on ice. The students answer and in the second column the teacher records how the ice changed (e.g., melted), and in the third column 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. Furthermore, in this case, there is a written example students can consult if they have questions later.

The importance of modeling isn't limited to multilingual learners. One time the SIOP authors were asked to film a description of “use-tomorrow” activities for teachers. The request was easy enough to fulfill but we were unsure of what it entailed: a demonstration, a PowerPoint presentation of the activity, an oral description? After a slew of emails, we were sent a short video clip that modeled what was needed. Simple! Once we saw a model of exactly what was expected, the task was easy.

- 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. Previews can occur through book walks, anticipation guides, brief video clips, and the like.
- Allow students alternative forms for expressing their understanding of information and concepts. Often multilingual learners have learned the lesson's information but have difficulty expressing their understanding in English, either orally or in writing. Hands-on and kinesthetic activities can be used to reinforce the concepts and information presented, with a reduced linguistic demand on these students. In a kindergarten class, children might mime the stages of plant growth: squatting with arms around knees for a seed, extending one arm for a sprout, standing with a foot extended and arm extended for root and seedling, standing with both arms up and feet apart for plant.

## ■ Application to Your Classroom: Comprehensible Input

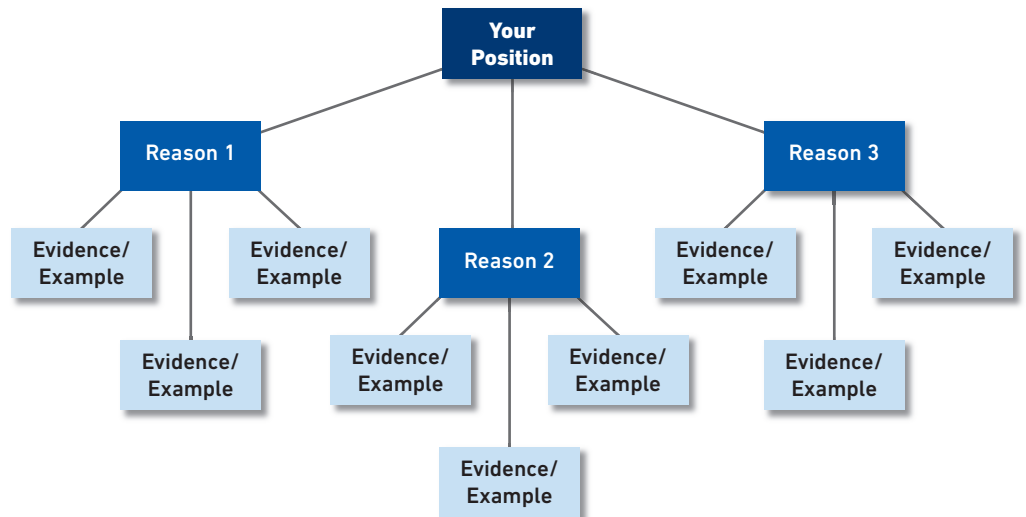
In the section that follows, you will find ideas you can apply to your own classroom. Teaching ideas and activities should be planned with a purpose in mind. That said, identify how each of the ideas are connected to SIOP's Features 10–12.

- **Capitalize on technology.** SIOP teachers use the video and audio aspects of technology to provide many ways for their multilingual learners to learn. It's fairly easy to supplement the presentation of information with images, videos (e.g., YouTube

and PBS Kids), slides (e.g., PowerPoint, Google Slides, Haiku Deck), and the innumerable websites and apps available to make a lesson’s content more understandable for multilingual learners. However, make sure that students aren’t overwhelmed by the tools used. When using slides, consider limiting a presentation to fewer than a dozen slides. This limitation causes teachers to be precise in their language use and not risk overwhelming students with too much information. For example, in a lesson on buoyancy, a teacher wanted to make sure students were engaged and had access to the content. The first slide read, *Sink vs. Float: What is buoyancy?* On that initial slide, in addition to the title, the teacher inserted images that clearly represented those concepts. The subsequent slide revealed the objectives of the lesson. Following the objectives were slides with important vocabulary accompanied by related images. For example, for the word *predict*, he added clipart images of a fortuneteller and the weather forecast. The final slides described the tasks the students must complete. The teacher decided to limit the presentation to eight slides so students wouldn’t be frustrated by too much information. In addition to the clipart images, the teacher searched YouTube and found several videos showing experiments with buoyancy. He also added an animation showing the equation for density and a problem being solved. This presentation format ensured an accessible amount of information was shown in a comprehensible manner.

- **Use graphic organizers effectively.** New ideas and concepts presented in a new language can be overwhelming for multilingual learners. Graphic organizers take the information, vocabulary, or concept and make it more understandable by showing the key points graphically. SIOP teachers make sure that the graphic organizer they use matches the task and leads to attaining the lesson’s objectives. 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.

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, 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, which provides an overview of the argumentation process:



See Vogt and Echevarría (2022) *99 Ideas and Activities for Teaching English Learners with the SIOP® Model (2e)* for many SIOP-appropriate graphic organizers.

- **Provide repetition.** It is well established that repetition strengthens connections in the brain (Jensen & McConchie, 2020) and repetition of vocabulary and language structures helps with language acquisition (Rogers, 2019). Multilingual learners are learning through a new language, and in order for input to be comprehensible, they need multiple exposures to words, concepts, and skills. Frequency of encounters has been found to be important in vocabulary learning (Webb & Nation, 2017); however, excessive practice of a single word or skill can become monotonous and defeat the purpose.

SIOP teachers provide context when using repetition to teach vocabulary and language structures. For example, the math activity called *Every Student Gets a Chance* (Vogt & Echevarría, 2022) begins with the teacher writing the words and their corresponding numbers for the following: million (1,000,000), thousand (1000), hundred (100), tens (10), and ones (1) on the board. The teacher reads each word, pointing to its number, then asks a volunteer to read each word as the teacher points to the number. Next, a second volunteer reads aloud the same information, and so it continues so that each student who feels comfortable can choose to read the information aloud. Once students are able to recognize and repeat the words used in place value and reading large numbers, write a large number such as 182,672,824. Show students how to identify numbers in sets of three, e.g., 182 (one hundred and eighty-two *million*), 672 (six hundred seventy-two *thousand*), 824 (eight *hundred* twenty-four). The same process is followed by asking for a volunteer to read the number; ask a second volunteer to read the same number, and so on. Finally, break students into small groups and continue practicing in small groups with a variety of large numbers. The teacher circulates to provide support.

By contextualizing the words and providing practice, the vocabulary terms are more meaningful and the repetition is more likely to result in language retention.

- **Explicitly teach cognates.** SIOP teachers make a habit of looking for and pointing out cognates to their multilingual learners throughout all their lessons. Cognates provide many multilingual students with a unique linguistic resource to use in making sense of words. Cognates are words with “ancestral roots” that are similar in appearance and meaning (G.E. García & Godina, 2017), and they occur in English and other ancestrally related languages, such as Spanish–English, French–English, Italian–English, Romanian–English, German–English, and Greek–English (García, et al., 2020). Some examples of cognates include *colony* (English)/*colonia* (Spanish), *diagram* (English)/*diagrama* (Spanish), and *invention* (English)/*invención* (Spanish) (Vogt and Echevarría, 2022). Multilingual students can be taught to use cognates to improve their spelling, writing, and reading (García, et al., 2020). Cognates are found across content areas and can be used to enhance comprehension. 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.” Explicitly teach cognates to students, point out the cognates you encounter in teaching materials, write cognate pairs

for students to see, have students keep a cognate notebook to record when they find a cognate in their independent reading, engage students in activities such as circling all the cognates in a reading passage, and the like.

- **Employ flipped lessons.** A flipped classroom offers potential for multilingual learners since content is learned at home, typically through a device, and allows students to stop, pause, and replay as needed. SIOP teachers use flipped lessons so that their multilingual learners have the opportunity to work at their own pace, reviewing content as many times as is necessary. Students can write down questions at home and bring them to class. In-class time is spent with individual and group work; students often work at their own pace. For example, in a secondary science lesson, students view at home the assigned video presentation on the concept of periodic motion and relate it to the movement of a pendulum. In a Google document, students answer the following questions covered in the video:

1. What is a pendulum?
2. What is simple harmonic motion?
3. Where is velocity the greatest in a swinging pendulum?
4. Where is the restoring force the greatest in a swinging pendulum?
5. What is angular frequency?

When students return to class, they participate in a jigsaw activity with each of five groups discussing one of the questions. Next, each group presents its answer to the class. As each group does their presentation, other students clarify the answer they wrote at home with the information presented. Finally, students complete a worksheet that allows them to apply the information learned.

## ■ Differentiating for Multilevel Classes



When I'm teaching a SIOP lesson, comprehensible input provides students with multiple opportunities to access language while ensuring my output is comprehensible, at times through my actions. Furthermore, I can add cultural relevancy and increase comprehensibility through translanguaging. Students use of L1 provides access to L2.

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We know that most classes with multilingual learners have students with multiple proficiency levels. Some students have stronger listening skills than writing skills or stronger reading skills than speaking ones. Many multilingual 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 student proficiency.

- **Use home language.** In SIOP classes, all the students' linguistic resources are welcomed into the classroom and are used purposefully. When the teacher and/or peers use multilingual learners' home language strategically during lessons, it provides the comprehensible input they need to gain conceptual knowledge. Even monolingual educators can take steps to acknowledge multilingual students' *translanguaging* (Garcia, 2020), or the ability of multilingual learners to use all their linguistic and cognitive resources to make sense of the academic content being delivered in a new language. They may switch between English and Spanish (or another language) while speaking, discussing topics, and completing tasks. Translanguaging should be acknowledged as a resource to be used while students are learning and practicing English.

- **Offer choice.** When students explore content information on their own, let them make choices for themselves. Bookmark a variety of websites with a range of text and visual options, and, if possible, include some in the native languages of your students. Work with the school librarian to create a temporary classroom library with books at different reading levels on the topic being studied. Provide a picture glossary for key terms that the students are likely to encounter when exploring the topic.
- **Record step-by-step instructions.** These instructions can be used for completing a task or project, using an electronic tablet application. Multilingual 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. Multilingual learners may be unaware that the headings or bolded words in a text are those used to complete a graphic organizer.
- **Address social-emotional needs.** Using the techniques discussed in this chapter to differentiate teaching for levels of proficiency communicates to multilingual learners that they are important and are as equally valued as their English-speaking peers. 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, students in a positive environment are more likely to experience enhanced learning, memory, and self-esteem (Jensen & McConchie, 2020).
- **Permit differentiated responses.** 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.
- **Provide audiotope texts.** 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. Having 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 themselves, the same passage may be read more slowly with clear enunciation for beginning speakers, or synonyms may be substituted for difficult words.

## ■ The Lesson

### Economics: Natural Resources and Products (Third Grade)

The following lessons take place in an urban elementary school where multilingual learners make up approximately 30% of the school population. In the classrooms described, a mix of language proficiency levels are represented, ranging from beginning speakers to advanced English speakers. Students have varying levels of literacy in their native languages.

Teachers in this school have a weekly grade-level planning meeting, where they co-plan lessons. During this time, teachers develop content and language objectives and share ideas for the week's lessons, thus ensuring that they follow similar pacing. As you will see, although the objectives are the same, the teachers have their own ways of teaching the lessons.

Third-grade teachers Miss Zarcades, Mr. Mehlhaff, and Mrs. Pabst are all teaching a unit on Economics. The lessons described focus on distinguishing the difference between a natural resource and a product, and address the standard: *Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.* The classes have been studying natural resources, learning about which ones are renewable and nonrenewable, and examining the problems associated with scarce resources.

The current lesson takes place over two days. On the first day, the three teachers introduced the lesson by pointing out that we use products every day and that most come from natural resources. They used the example of paper (product) being made from trees (natural resource) and the classes read a text about the production of paper. Then the students were told that they would be asked to select a product they wanted to research. The vignettes that follow describe Day 2 of the lesson.

The lesson's objectives are:

Content: Students will

- investigate how a product is made and the natural resources used to produce it.
- distinguish between a finished product and a natural resource.

Language: Students will

- write a summary of the production process using key vocabulary.
- orally present their research findings.

## ■ Teaching Scenarios

### Miss Zarcades

As was her practice, Miss Zarcades reviewed the content and language objectives she had posted for students. She asked students to read along with her, pointing to each word as she read aloud so that all students, including multilingual learners,

could follow along. She began this second day of the lesson by asking each group to quickly say what product they had researched the previous day from texts and Internet sources. Since she had distributed a worksheet to guide—or scaffold—their information gathering, she reviewed on the document reader a sample completed worksheet about the production of a pencil. She went through each section, being careful to enunciate clearly and repeat the specific academic vocabulary words that were key terms in the lesson, such as *renewable resource*, *product*, and *production*. She paused periodically to make sure that all group members were following along on their own worksheets and checking that they had filled in the section correctly. She told the groups that they had ten minutes to review their worksheets and add any additional information. She set an online timer on her interactive whiteboard. As students worked together, Miss Zarcades circulated around the classroom, assisting groups or individuals who needed support.

Next, she distributed poster board and pointed to the samples displayed on the wall. She instructed groups to use their creativity to draw a similar poster that would reflect the production process outlined on their worksheet. Each member of the group chose one section of the worksheet to illustrate—that is, the product, the natural resource used in the product, the source of the natural resource, and whether it was a renewable or nonrenewable resource. The groups were given fifteen minutes to complete a simple illustration of the process as a visual to accompany their oral presentations. Again, Miss Zarcades set the online timer.

After the posters were completed, the groups gave oral presentations of their projects. Each member of the group told about their part of the poster using complete sentences and academic terms. Miss Zarcades had written sentence frames on the whiteboard for those students who needed language support: “The product we researched was \_\_\_\_.” and “Production of \_\_\_\_ uses \_\_\_\_ resources” (renewable or nonrenewable). After the oral presentations were made, Miss Zarcades played a quick game of Stand Up/Sit Down. She named an item and asked students to stand if it was a finished product or sit if it was a natural resource. Throughout the lesson, Miss Zarcades used language structures and vocabulary that she believed the students could understand at their level of proficiency. For beginning learners, she spoke slowly, often contextualizing vocabulary words, and enunciated clearly. Also, she avoided the use of idioms, and when she sensed that students did not understand, she paraphrased to convey the meaning more clearly. At the conclusion of the lesson, she reviewed the content and language objectives with her students.

**Check your understanding:** On the SIOP form in Figure 4.2, rate Miss Zarcades’s lesson on each of the Comprehensible Input features.

### Mr. Mehlhaff

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Mr. Mehlhaff enjoys his students and is friendly but he has a traditional approach to teaching. He began the lesson by reading the content and language objectives. Then he told students to continue researching the products they had started investigating the day before. He had asked each student to select a product and work independently to gather information. Some students seemed lost about how to extract pertinent information from text and Internet sources. Quite a few sat quietly, while others began talking among themselves. Mr. Mehlhaff sensed that some students were off task, so he stood and repeated the directions orally, speaking rather quickly

**FIGURE 4.2** Comprehensible Input Component of the SIOP® Model: Miss Zarcades’s Lesson

	4	3	2	1	0
10. <b>Speech appropriate</b> for students’ proficiency levels (e.g., slower rate, enunciation, and simple sentence structure for beginners)			<b>Speech</b> sometimes inappropriate for students’ proficiency levels		<b>Speech</b> inappropriate for students’ proficiency levels
11. <b>Clear explanation</b> of academic tasks			<b>Unclear</b> explanation of academic tasks		<b>No</b> explanation of academic tasks
12. <b>A variety of techniques</b> used to make content concepts clear (e.g., modeling, visuals, hands-on activities, demonstrations, gestures, body language)			Some techniques used to make content concepts clear		<b>No techniques</b> used to make concepts clear

and curtly. He wrote on the board: *Product, Natural Resources Used*, to help guide students in completing the task. He pointed to the words and repeated that they were supposed to be looking for information about their product (pointed to word) and writing down which natural resources (pointed to word) were used. He gave students more time to “get to work.”

After a while, Mr. Mehlhaff paired students and told the class that the partners were going to share information about their products with one another. He reminded them that they needed to use academic language, including the specific terms that were the focus of the lesson. He referred them back to the language objective and read it to them, stressing that he wanted to hear students using key academic terms and phrases. He called on two of the top students in class and asked them to come up and demonstrate what partners were supposed to do. The students faced each other, and Mr. Mehlhaff told one, “Ask him the name of his product” and the student asked his partner, who then answered. Next Mr. Mehlhaff prompted, “Now, what about natural resources?” and the student asked his partner which natural resources were used to make the product. After this demonstration, Mr. Mehlhaff told the class that partners were going to follow the same questioning format, asking one another about their products. Students began talking with their partners, asking and answering questions with varying levels of success.

**Check your understanding:** On the SIOP form in Figure 4.3, rate Mr. Mehlhaff’s lesson on each of the Comprehensible Input features.

**Mrs. Pabst**

Mrs. Pabst asked the class to chorally read the lesson’s content and language objectives, which were written on the board. She was sure to read slowly so that all students, including multilingual learners, were able to follow along. She asked

**FIGURE 4.3** Comprehensible Input Component of the SIOP® Model: Mr. Mehlhaff's Lesson

	4	3	2	1	0
10. <b>Speech appropriate</b> for students' proficiency levels (e.g., slower rate, enunciation, and simple sentence structure for beginners)			<b>Speech</b> sometimes inappropriate for students' proficiency levels		<b>Speech</b> inappropriate for students' proficiency levels
11. <b>Clear explanation</b> of academic tasks			<b>Unclear</b> explanation of academic tasks		<b>No</b> explanation of academic tasks
12. <b>A variety of techniques</b> used to make content concepts clear (e.g., modeling, visuals, hands-on activities, demonstrations, gestures, body language)			Some techniques used to make content concepts clear		No <b>techniques</b> used to make concepts clear

if there were any questions from the previous day's assignment and requested a show of hands of students who knew what their product was. All students raised hands. The previous day Mrs. Pabst had let students pick a partner and then work in pairs to select a product and gather information about its associated natural resources.

Mrs. Pabst told the students that today they would identify where the natural resources in their products came from. She pointed to the large map on the wall. Students were told that they would create a symbol that represented each resource used in their product. As Mrs. Pabst explained this process, she used her normal, somewhat rapid speaking style that she used with her English-speaking students. Then she passed out paper for making two copies of each symbol—one to put on the large world map and the other for the map key, or legend. She pointed out that a *map legend* is a key to the symbols used on a map. "It is like a dictionary so you can understand the meaning of what the map represents." She modeled what the students would complete by showing a symbol for trees (paper products) and placed one on the map where logging takes place and another on the map legend, writing "trees for paper production" next to the symbol. Mrs. Pabst then told students to get started working with their partners to create a symbol and find the location of their product's natural resources. Most pairs could design a symbol, but several struggled locating the sources. After all students had completed this task, Mrs. Pabst had each pair come to the map and tell the name of the product, the natural resource used, and where the natural resource came from. They then put one symbol on the map and the other on the map key. When all students had completed their oral report, Mrs. Pabst reviewed the content and language objectives and asked if they were met.

**Check your understanding:** On the SIOP form in Figure 4.4, rate Mrs. Pabst's lesson on each of the Comprehensible Input features.

**FIGURE 4.4** Comprehensible Input Component of the SIOP® Model: Mrs. Pabst’s Lesson

	4	3	2	1	0
10. <b>Speech appropriate</b> for students’ proficiency levels (e.g., slower rate, enunciation, and simple sentence structure for beginners)			<b>Speech</b> sometimes inappropriate for students’ proficiency levels		<b>Speech</b> inappropriate for students’ proficiency levels
11. <b>Clear explanation</b> of academic tasks			<b>Unclear</b> explanation of academic tasks		<b>No</b> explanation of academic tasks
12. <b>A variety of techniques</b> used to make content concepts clear (e.g., modeling, visuals, hands-on activities, demonstrations, gestures, body language)			Some techniques used to make content concepts clear		No <b>techniques</b> used to make concepts clear

## ■ Discussion of Lessons

Look back at your rating forms and think about the reasons you scored the lessons as you did. What evidence is in the scenarios? Read on to see our analyses.

**10. *Speech Appropriate for Students’ Proficiency Level (Rate and Complexity)***

- Miss Zarcades: 4
- Mr. Mehlhaff: 0
- Mrs. Pabst: 1

- **Miss Zarcades** was attuned to the benefit of modulating her speech to make herself understood by the students. She slowed her rate of speech and enunciated clearly to accommodate beginning learners, and she adjusted her speech for the other, more proficient speakers of English. She used a natural speaking voice, but paid attention to her rate of speech and enunciation. Further, Miss Zarcades repeated key academic vocabulary terms, which helps all students, but especially multilingual learners. Finally, she adjusted the level of vocabulary and complexity of the sentences when speaking and used sentence frames so that all students could participate at their level of proficiency. For this reason, Miss Zarcades’s lesson received a “4” for this feature.
- **Mr. Mehlhaff** seemed unaware that his students would understand more if he adjusted his oral presentation to accommodate the proficiency levels of multilingual learners in his class. He gave few instructions to assist students in completing the task, and those instructions he gave did not take into consideration his rate of speech or complexity of speech, variables that impact multilingual learners’ ability to comprehend information in class. Also, making sense of

written information independently and creating original sentences are inordinately difficult tasks for multilingual learners. Unwittingly, Mr. Mehlhaff set the students up for failure, and then he was frustrated when they were off task. He spoke quickly and curtly, which did not enhance comprehension. Mr. Mehlhaff's lesson was given a "0" for this feature.

- Generally, **Mrs. Pabst's** rate of speech and enunciation were similar to that used with native English speakers. She didn't consciously adjust her speech (rate or complexity) to the variety of proficiency levels in the class, although she did have students chorally read the objectives slowly so all could follow along. Mrs. Pabst could have paraphrased some of her instructions and questions, using simpler sentence structure, when some students struggled to understand. Because Mrs. Pabst made minimal adjustments while speaking to multilingual learners, her lesson received a "1" for this feature.

#### 11. *Clear Explanation of Academic Tasks*

Miss Zarcades: 4

Mr. Mehlhaff: 2

Mrs. Pabst: 3

Making your expectations crystal clear to students is one of the most important aspects of teaching, even if it's an inquiry lesson. When working with multilingual learners, explicit, step-by-step directions can be critical to a lesson's success. It is difficult for almost any student to remember directions given only orally, and oral directions may be incomprehensible to many multilingual learners. A lesson is sure to get off to a rocky start if students don't understand what they are expected to do. Written procedures provide students with a guide. Although Mrs. Pabst modeled using the map and legend, she didn't write instructions for student reference, nor did she review sources where students could find information, which resulted in a delay in some students getting started. Otherwise, she would have received a "4" for this feature.

- **Miss Zarcades's** lesson received a "4" for this feature because she used a teaching style that supported student success by making her expectations for completing academic tasks clear and understandable. She modeled almost every task students were expected to complete. During the lesson she first checked for understanding by using a "popcorn" approach, quickly asking each group the name of their product. Then she modeled for the class a completed worksheet and gave each student a chance to check their own work from the previous day. If an individual student or group was confused or had done the worksheet incorrectly, it was important for Miss Zarcades to make sure they all understood what to do and were doing it correctly before they spent more time on the task. She then provided time for them to make their own additions or corrections, and was careful to oversee their work. Throughout the lesson, tasks were modeled so that students at all levels of English proficiency knew the expectations and, with the scaffolding she offered, were more likely to be successful in completing the work. She took into account the linguistic differences in her class and differentiated accordingly. The sentence frames let the students know exactly the kinds of complete sentences that were expected during their oral presentations.

Using the online timer for time management, Miss Zarcades provided students with boundaries for the tasks—letting them know how much time she expected them to spend—and helped them learn to manage their time. Overall, she understood the value of being explicit in what she wanted the students to do balanced with developing their own independent learning.

- Although **Mr. Mehlhaff** was a veteran teacher, he did not provide the kind of guidance that all students benefit from and that is critical for multilingual learners. He expected young students to work independently, gathering information from text and Internet sources. Exposing students at all levels of English proficiency to complex text is important, but scaffolding is essential to help students access the information. Many students, and especially multilingual learners, were unsure of the expectations or process for completing the assignment. When students were off task, Mr. Mehlhaff attempted to explain further by rereading the objectives, but that probably did little to make the task clearer. He did assist by having two students model how to work in pairs asking questions about the assignment. This gave students an idea about how to conduct their pair work. Thus, Mr. Mehlhaff’s lesson was given a “2” for this feature.
- **Mrs. Pabst** first got students focused on the task by reading the objectives and asking them to remember the product they had chosen the previous day. She told them explicitly what they were going to do first: Identify where the natural resources came from that were used to make the products. This kind of clarity helps multilingual learners to know precisely what is expected. In addition, she modeled part of the task that students were to work on. She showed the symbol she had created to represent paper products and put it on the map, just as they would do when they finished. Even without words, the students, including multilingual learners, could see what the process was: Find out where your natural resource comes from, draw a symbol, and prepare to place it on the map and legend with a brief explanation. The lesson would have received a higher rating had Mrs. Pabst actually modeled or explained how students were to extract information about where the natural resources come from. She said that they would create a symbol to represent the resource, but didn’t sufficiently explain how they would go about finding the information that their symbol would represent. A worksheet to guide them, as Miss Zarcades provided, would have scaffolded the task better for students. Mrs. Pabst’s lesson received a “3” for this feature.

## 12. *A Variety of Techniques Used to Make Content Concepts Clear*

Miss Zarcades: 4

Mr. Mehlhaff: 1

Mrs. Pabst: 2

- Throughout the lesson, **Miss Zarcades** used a number of techniques that supported students’ learning and helped them be successful in completing the assignment. She provided a worksheet to scaffold students’ organization of information and she showed the sample completed worksheet, carefully going through each section. All of the visuals she showed and pointed to increased students’ comprehension. By giving students a worksheet and poster board for

their illustrations, she made the lesson more engaging and provided more than one way to express the information they had gathered. One can imagine that the atmosphere in Miss Zarcades’s class is positive, encouraging, and nonthreatening for multilingual learners. This kind of environment instills confidence in students about their ability to learn and be successful in school. Because of the variety of effective techniques used, Miss Zarcades’s lesson received a “4” for this feature.

- **Mr. Mehlhaff** is a kind and friendly teacher, but he did not use many teaching techniques that increased students’ comprehension of the lesson. His teaching style was one of teacher lecture and student performance without scaffolding. He expected young learners to work independently, which is difficult for most young students, especially multilingual learners who may not even understand the words in the text. Thus, completing a summary of the natural resources used to produce a product was a nearly impossible task. He modeled how to discuss the information in pairs, but one might expect that few multilingual learners had actually independently gathered sufficient information for the oral exchange. Think about the difference between Miss Zarcades’s scaffolded lesson and Mr. Mehlhaff’s reliance on independent work. This lesson received a “1” for use of comprehensible input techniques.
- **Mrs. Pabst** used teaching techniques in the lesson, but some of her choices were not useful, especially for multilingual learners. First, she asked if there were any questions. Few multilingual learners typically ask for clarification or assistance in front of the class. Then she provided them with the application activity of creating a symbol to place on the map. However, there was no technique used to check for understanding as to whether the students investigated how a product was made and learned about the natural resources used to produce it (the objective). Although she modeled how to create a symbol and place it on the map, she depended on the map symbol activity to guide students’ understanding of the content. Instead, she might have used a technique for checking understanding of the production process, or provided an outline or graphic organizer for students to make sense of the information they were expected to gather. Gestures, modeling, activities that promote manipulation, and the like are important for increasing multilingual learners’ understanding of the lesson, but these techniques must lead to meeting the lesson’s objectives. For these reasons, Mrs. Pabst’s lesson received a “2” for this feature.

(For more examples of lesson and unit plans in history and social studies for grades K–6, see Short, Vogt, and Echevarría, 2011.)

## ■ Final Points

As you reflect on this chapter and consider the impact of comprehensible input on learning, consider the following main points:

- Although comprehensible input techniques are critical for multilingual learners, English speakers are not disadvantaged by their use. All students benefit from well-articulated speech, a clear explanation of tasks, and techniques that make information understandable.

- Effective SIOP teachers constantly modulate and adjust their speech to ensure that the content is comprehensible.
- Concepts are taught using a variety of techniques, including modeling, gestures, hands-on activities, and demonstrations, so that students understand and learn the content material.
- Effective SIOP teachers provide explanations of academic tasks in ways that make clear what students are expected to accomplish and that promote student success.

## ■ Discussion Questions

1. In reflecting on the content and language objectives at the beginning of the chapter, are you able to:
  - Identify three techniques for presenting content information that enhance comprehension for multilingual learners?
  - Name elements necessary for providing clear directions for completing academic tasks?
  - Discuss modifications to teacher speech that can increase student comprehension?
  - As part of a lesson plan, write several techniques to make academic language accessible for multilingual learners?
2. Many times in classrooms, discipline problems can be attributed to students not knowing what they're supposed to be doing. If students don't know what to do, they find something else to do. What are some ways that you can avoid having students become confused about accomplishing academic tasks?
3. If you have traveled in another country, or if you are a multilingual learner, reflect on difficulties you had in understanding others. What are some techniques people used to try to communicate with you? What are some techniques you can use in the classroom?
4. For the lesson on economics, what are some comprehension checks that are quick, nonthreatening, and effective for determining if a student is ready to move on?
5. Using the SIOP lesson you have been developing, add to it so that the Comprehensible Input features in the lesson are enhanced.