



Inclusive Access to a Diploma:
Reimagining Proficiency
for Students with Disabilities



Defining Alternative Means of Expression for English Language Arts/English Language Development-Based Content

Integrating Inclusive, Culturally, and
Linguistically Responsive Alternative
Means of Expression

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Executive Summary

In today's diverse classrooms, providing different ways for students, especially students with disabilities, to communicate their understanding of coursework is an important cornerstone of creating inclusive, culturally, and linguistically responsive learning opportunities and environments. Educators in California can expand opportunities for its unique and diverse student population to demonstrate the extent to which they acquire knowledge and skills by providing all students with alternative means of expression. Alternative means of expression are the different assessment mediums (tools, strategies, and assessment types) offered to students with disabilities within instruction that give students flexibility in how they demonstrate their learning while still meeting coursework proficiency requirements, especially those requirements tied to earning a diploma.

Expanding ways of assessing students may play a particularly important role in English Language Arts (ELA) and English Language Development (ELD) settings where language and literacy requirements are prioritized. In these contexts, some students may struggle with traditional or narrowly defined assessment mediums, such as writing (Tomlinson 2014). Traditional assessment methods may not fully capture the range of skills and understanding that students possess, particularly for students with disabilities, multilingual learners, or those who are dually identified as having a disability and being a multilingual learner (Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009). By incorporating alternative means of expression, teachers can offer multiple avenues for students to demonstrate their knowledge, engage more deeply with content, and express their learning in ways that resonate with their individual strengths and experiences. As such, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching plays a critical role in this approach. It acknowledges and values the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, ensuring that instructional methods and assessments are inclusive and equitable (Boutte 2014; Ladson-Billings 1995). By integrating culturally and linguistically responsive practices, teachers can





create learning environments that respect and reflect the identities of all students, fostering a sense of belonging and motivation to succeed. This document describes ways to provide culturally and linguistically responsive alternative means of expression for students with disabilities to meet ELA/ELD coursework requirements, both within ELA/ELD stand-alone courses and for ELA/ELD content requirements that have been integrated into other content areas needed to graduate with a standard diploma.

Alternative Means of Expression Connections to Accessibility and Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Defining alternative means of expression that reflect the cultural values, languages, and experiences of students, including those with disabilities, makes education more relevant and engaging for them (Delpit 2012; Gay 2010). Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching is an inclusive educational approach that integrates students' diverse ability levels, cultural backgrounds, languages, and interests into the learning process to foster equity, academic success, and a supportive environment for all learners. Instructional techniques applying this approach increase student motivation and achievement by connecting their education to their lived experiences (Johnson 2021). Incorporating students' cultural strengths and community resources into classroom instruction and assessment also offers a more flexible learning environment, expanding opportunities to embed individualized education program (IEP)-defined supplementary aids and services within core instruction.

While the *Inclusive Access to a Diploma: Reimagining Proficiency for Students with Disabilities* initiative does not specifically prescribe the instructional techniques schools and districts apply to create inclusive learning environments, this brief elevates the importance of local educational communities identifying tools and strategies that build on inclusive, culturally, and linguistically responsive teaching and assessment tenets.





Accessibility

Alternative means of expression significantly enhance accessibility in education by offering students multiple ways to demonstrate their understanding and skills. This approach acknowledges that traditional assessments, such as written tests and essays, may not be the most effective for every student, particularly students with disabilities (Hanley and Hogue 2024). By offering alternative means of expression, such as visual arts, digital media, oral presentations, and kinesthetic activities, teachers can accommodate diverse learning preferences and effectively include students who need these modalities as a means for access. This inclusivity is crucial for fostering an equitable learning environment where every student can thrive.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive instruction involves recognizing and valuing the cultural backgrounds of students and integrating their cultural contexts into the learning process (Ladson-Billings 1995). By doing so, educators can create more inclusive and effective learning experiences. Providing specific examples of culturally responsive instruction demonstrates how educators can tailor the educational experience to align with the cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and experiences of diverse students.

For instance, if a student comes from a community with a strong tradition of oral storytelling, an alternative means of expression might focus on developing strong verbal communication skills through activities such as participating in storytelling circles, presenting speeches, or engaging in discussions. These alternative means of expression not only address academic objectives like literacy and language development but also honor and incorporate the cultural practices that are meaningful to the student (Johnson 2021). Another example could be integrating music and dance from a student's cultural heritage into a project that explores themes from a novel or





historical event, allowing students to connect their learning to their cultural identity and personal experiences.

Incorporating these culturally relevant methods can transform the classroom into a more dynamic and inclusive space where students feel seen and valued. When students see their cultural identities reflected in their education, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated (Paris and Alim 2017). Furthermore, alternative means of expression can bridge the gap between home and school by involving family and community members in the educational process. Inviting community elders to share their stories, incorporating local traditions into the curriculum, or using community resources as teaching tools can enrich students' learning experiences and strengthen the connection between their education and their lives.





Incorporating Alternative Means of Expression in English Language Arts/English Language Development Courses

Integrating alternative means of expression in ELA and ELD courses is essential for creating a more inclusive and effective learning environment. This process begins by identifying key Big Ideas defining proficiency within an ELA/ELD course using the *2014 California English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework (ELA/ELD Framework)* with the *California English Development Standards* and the *California Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy*. Once course big ideas¹ have been established, educators must unpack varied standards that establish what success in a big idea looks like based on the competencies and skills that support it. Understanding the requirements for proficiency in ELA/ELD-based content also requires educators to select culturally and linguistically relevant complex text sets² that provide the literary structures for integrating the course's big ideas. Once these boundaries have been established, students and educators are free to partner together to find viable alternative means of expression that both meet the constraints of the requirements and align with students' preferences, strengths, and needs.

Table 1 outlines various strategies for incorporating alternative means of expression into ELA/ELD courses.

Table 1. Alternative Means of Expression Response Types

¹ For more on how to identify Big Ideas for ELA/ELD-based courses please refer to the *Identifying and Unpacking ELA/ELD Big Ideas Practice Brief*.

² For more on how to select and scaffold complex texts for ELA/ELD-based courses please refer to the *Selecting and Scaffolding Complex Texts Practice Brief*.





Response type	Description	Examples
Verbal responses	Verbal expression allows students to articulate their understanding through spoken word, beneficial for those from strong oral traditions.	Recorded conversations Storytelling Speeches Dramatic readings Podcast series Text-to-speech software Adaptive keyboards Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices Speech-to-text software
Pictorial/visual forms	Visual representations help students illustrate themes, characters, or settings, enhancing comprehension and engagement.	Drawings Paintings Digital art Graphic organizers Storyboards
Multimedia projects	Integrating various media forms engages students and provides diverse ways to demonstrate comprehension.	Video projects Digital storytelling Multimedia presentations Podcasts Blogs
Written narratives	Traditional methods allow students to craft detailed responses.	Essays Reflective journals Creative writing pieces Literary analyses
Performance-based assessments	Students demonstrate their understanding through performance, integrating cultural practices.	Role-plays Skits Debates and reenactments Oral history projects





Using English Language Arts/Literacy and English Language Development Standards to Identify Viable Alternative Means of Expression in Other Content Areas

Leveraging ELA/Literacy and ELD standards to identify alternative means of expression across other content areas can greatly enhance student engagement and understanding. These standards provide a framework for incorporating diverse communication methods that can be applied in subjects such as science, social studies, mathematics, art, and physical education. Integrating the discipline of literacy, which focuses on the specific literacy practices and conventions of each subject area, can further enhance students' ability to comprehend and express content knowledge effectively. This approach not only supports the development of literacy and language skills across the curriculum but also empowers students to express their knowledge and ideas in meaningful, culturally relevant ways, using the specific literacy practices of each discipline.





Conclusion

Incorporating alternative means of expression in ELA and ELD content is vital for fostering an inclusive and engaging educational environment. By using ELA/Literacy and ELD standards, educators can create diverse assessment methods that align with students' cultural backgrounds and individual strengths, including those of students with disabilities. This approach not only enhances student motivation and achievement but also provides a holistic and culturally responsive framework for learning, ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, can demonstrate their understanding and skills effectively.

Emphasizing literacy across the disciplines ensures that students can effectively comprehend and express content knowledge across various subjects. Integrating these practices into interdisciplinary projects, visual and performing arts, digital media, and reflective writing allows for a richer educational experience that respects and incorporates the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all students. This method is particularly beneficial for students with disabilities, as it offers multiple avenues for them to engage with and express their learning in ways that accommodate their unique needs and strengths.

By adopting these strategies, teachers can create dynamic and supportive classrooms where every student can thrive. This practice brief outlines the importance and methods of implementing alternative means of expression, ultimately aiming to prepare students for success in a multicultural and interconnected world. Through these inclusive practices, educators can ensure that all students are given the opportunity to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities.





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