

SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES FOR NEW ENGLISH LEARNERS

- 1. Minimize Front-of-the-Room Teacher Talk:** As the ultimate goal is to foster greater academic independence of students, it is crucial for teachers to release responsibility for learning to students by stepping away from the front of the room. This frees the teacher up to act as a facilitator of learning, one who circulates and provides targeted assistance where needed. The primary vehicle for this type of teaching is an activity guide, the enhanced, highly-scaffolded worksheets that lead small groups and individuals through a series of interactive activities as a way of achieving the objectives of a lesson. Scaffolds such as visuals, sentence starters, clearly written directions and friendly fonts make activity guides easier for students to navigate independently. Another strategy for creating a more student-centered classroom is to consistently use certain routines and conversational structures so that students will know precisely what to do and how to do it when the teacher says, for example, “Let’s Turn and Talk.” Establishing common routines and structures across multiple classrooms in a school provides students with a learning context in which they already know much of what will be expected, allowing them to focus solely on that which is new: content, language, and academic skills.
- 2. Foster Student Collaboration:** As with the development of any skill, one does not learn a language through observation, but by practice. Through collaborative activities and projects, students have the chance to develop both their academic and social language through structured and supported conversations with their peers. The use of oral language with their peers allows students to access text and abstract concepts that they would not otherwise be able to access on their own. Collaboration affords them the chance to rehearse the application of new knowledge jointly before being expected to do so individually. Collaborative tasks should contain structured interdependence, through which students are required to participate and interact with one another in either English or the home language. Having multiple productive conversations occurring across the room simultaneously (as opposed to the ping-pong nature of traditional teacher-student interactions) enables more students to actively use language instead of passively listen to it. Structuring collaborative tasks so that all include individual accountability is crucial to ensure all students are engaging with the material and not just allowing one student to do the work. Collaboration also fosters a strong sense of classroom community that lowers the affective filter as students become more comfortable with one another. Since working together cohesively does not come naturally to most students, collaborative skills must be explicitly taught.

3. **Explicitly Teach Students the Language Features They Will Be Expected to Use:**

Many teachers focus on the acquisition of content-specific vocabulary, but language development encompasses much more. Students need to be explicitly taught academic language of all kinds, including language functions (words and phrases that allow students to engage in skills like comparing and contrasting, supporting an argument with evidence and reasoning, etc.), so-called “mortar” words that help to connect complex concepts through transitions (*however, thus, furthermore*), high-frequency academic tool-kit words (*analyze, hypothesize, evaluate*), pronunciation, awareness of formal vs. informal registers for speech and writing, idiomatic/figurative speech, and many more. As language is connected to thought, limited academic language can diminish full understanding of content and students’ ability to fully engage in learning activities. Academic language should not be taught in isolation or be seen as separate from the teaching of content. Instead, teachers should examine the challenges and opportunities for language development that are inherent in texts and activities they are asking their students to engage in and determine the aspect(s) of language to teach that will best support students in fully participating and achieving the desired outcomes of the unit. If students have not, for example, been taught the language function of persuasion and its accompanying language structures (words, phrases, syntax and punctuation), they cannot engage in an academic debate. In preparing their arguments for such a task, students would need explicit practice around the use of persuasive language functions and structures in order to be able to formulate their arguments clearly.

4. **Use of the Home Language:** There is a common misconception that allowing students to use the home language in classrooms where the target language is English is a crutch that hinders students from acquiring English. Since language and thought are interconnected, restricting the language someone can speak (i.e. forcing someone to only use English, especially when that person’s English is basic) can limit the complexity of that person’s thought. As a result, use of the home language opens the door to participation in higher-order thinking by supporting students in the processing and comprehension of new academic knowledge. Structuring conversations in which students can use their home language to understand the directions of an activity, discuss their experiences related to a topic, prepare for reading a text in English (by reading one on the same topic in their home language first), are all crucial scaffolds for full participation. There is a significant body of research showing that learning a concept in one language transfers to another.¹ Collaborative activities need to be structured with enough flexibility so that students can determine the language most useful for them to engage with the content at a

¹ For more information, refer to the Common Underlying Proficiency Model developed by Jim Cummins.

given moment. That said, teachers should build in specific opportunities when English needs to be used—e.g. making (rehearsed) presentations, writing a key word or sentence in English after having discussed it in the home language, sharing back in English after a conversation in the home language, etc. Teachers should encourage students to seek out home language assistance when needed, whether that entails enlisting a fellow student to offer an explanation in that language or using a dictionary or bilingual translation device. If students are using bilingual dictionaries, they must also be taught how to use them, including how to find words alphabetically and how to choose the correct definition. Teachers can facilitate this flexible use of language in their classroom (known as “translanguaging²”) by structuring activities in small collaborative groups in which students not proficient in English are strategically paired with students more proficient in English who also speak their home language.

5. **Utilize Visual Resources:** As expressed by the old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words,” the use of one picture can lighten the cognitive burden presented by a significant amount of text. The use of all sorts of visual (or low-linguistic load) resources such as charts, graphs, photos, short video clips, artwork, diagrams and others helps students establish a foundation for a concept in order to better access text, peer discussions, and the target content in general. These visual resources can be hung up around the room so that students can easily reference them throughout the course of a unit. Having students discuss these resources as well will support them in building schema connected to the target content. As this schema takes shape, they can begin attaching new academic language to it and subsequently access related texts. Another key visual resource is the use of clear physical gestures when speaking, which also lightens the linguistic load for students by reinforcing the teacher’s message in a non-verbal way.

6. **Differentiate to Ensure that All Students Can Participate in Meaningful Work:** While all students should be expected to achieve the same content and language objectives within a particular curricular unit, the route they take and the way in which they demonstrate the achievement of those objectives may vary greatly. Students with less English proficiency can be given shorter, less complex text to read, heavily-scaffolded templates for writing, and resources in the home language in order to build background knowledge or engage in research. Performance-based tasks that allow for some flexibility in how students demonstrate mastery of the objectives are also crucial for differentiation. Some students may be asked to write

² Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei (2014) *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan

extensively with multiple examples while others may write about the topic with fewer details and examples. Still others may need to write in their home language and translate only key ideas into English. A student with emergent literacy may need to rely on gathering information from a read-aloud (audio book, other student, teacher) or from limited text and visuals, and represent achievement of objectives through more visual and/or oral means as well.

7. **Access and Build Students' Background Knowledge:** With recently-arrived immigrant English Learners from many different countries, it is crucial to “start before square one” by not assuming that students have the particular background knowledge connected to the content, language, or academic skills at the heart of a particular unit. These students come from vastly different academic backgrounds; some may have had little formal education while others might come with extensive experience in school. That said, all of these students do bring with them a wealth of knowledge, talents, and experiences. Thus, when beginning a new curricular unit, teachers should start by designing activities that will help students to access any prior knowledge that they may already contain about the focus topic. For example, while students may have never previously studied Mendelian genetics, they will be able to discuss varied physical traits and resemblances that occur within their families. Activities should be structured to elicit this knowledge and explicitly connect what is already familiar to them to the focus topic. For students with emerging literacy and/or emerging proficiency in English, it is best to design more orally-based background-building activities that are more accessible. The more these activities help students connect target concepts to their own lives and experiences, the more culturally relevant the content becomes. Once teachers have ascertained what students already do and don't know about the target content, they should design additional activities that fortify students' background knowledge, ideally through more visual, oral, and low-linguistic load resources that will expand the breadth and depth of their understanding.
8. **Use Lower-order Thinking Skills to Build Towards Higher-order Thinking Skills:** To be adequately prepared for the rigors of university life and the world of work, English Learners must be able to engage in higher-order thinking skills: analysis, application, evaluation, and creativity. As with other academic skills, the ability to engage in higher-order thinking does not come intuitively and students need to be explicitly taught how to do so. In order to be able to access these skills within a curricular unit, students must first engage in the lower-order thinking skills - memorization and understanding - that provide the building blocks for higher-order thinking. When organizing classroom tasks, teachers should ensure that lower-

order thinking activities are used as a scaffold to support students in being able to access and engage in higher-ordering thinking activities.

9. **Organize Curriculum into Longer Units:** Curricular units that last for several weeks -- as opposed to traditional "skill-building" curriculum comprised of short, disconnected activities -- help to reinforce vocabulary, literacy, content knowledge and a variety of academic skills. As students gain background knowledge working on the same topic over several weeks, they are able to access higher-level texts and material since they are already familiar with the topic and the vocabulary that they encounter. This extended emphasis on the same topic also fosters greater higher-order thinking, since students will already have a solid foundation of understanding of content and academic language.

10. **Provide Students with Models of the Materials They Will Be Expected to Produce:** No matter how adept a teacher is at giving directions, there is no better method for communicating expectations to students than by providing them with models of the products they will be creating. In fact, such models lessen the need for more verbal instructions and explanation by the teacher. For example, in order for a student to be able to write a letter to their senator as part of a project, they would need to see and analyze several samples of such a letter: what components they contain, how the various parts are structured, and the academic vocabulary that is commonly used in this specific type of writing.