

Empowering ELLs

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May 25, 2018 / 3 Comments

88. Language Scaffolds: Lowering the Barriers to Comprehension

One of my most viewed posts is on the three main types of scaffolding: [sensory, interactive, and graphics](#). [Galina \(Halla\) Jmourko](#) commented on the post saying that I actually left out two other important forms of scaffolding: language and emotional scaffolding.

Jmourko was right!

These two additional forms of scaffolding further help ELs access content, communicate their understanding, and feel safe being a part of our schools. I'll describe language scaffolding in more detail today and will explore emotional scaffolding next week.

How to Scaffold Language

Beginning ELs

- **Labeling:** Connect keywords with visuals.
- **Student's Home Language:** Let ELs process content in their native language.
- **Repetition:** Develop familiarity with vocab words by having ELs repeat them.
- **Word Banks:** Take the guesswork out for students by identifying key words.

Developing ELs

- **Modified Texts:** Provide a text that contains the same content but with modified language.
- **Guiding Questions:** Offer questions before processing a text to focus students' attention.
- **Sentence Starters:** Help ELs begin their thinking with sentence starters.
- **Sentence Frames:** Support ELs by helping them connect ideas together.

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One of the two scaffolds is included below. What she calls "Verbal and Textual Supports" can be grouped under what I call "Language Scaffolding". Though our terminology is different, the concept is the same: **make the language more accessible to empower ELs to communicate.**

Language Development Supports For English Language Learners To Increase Comprehension and Communication Skills

Environment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcoming and stress-free Respectful of linguistic and cultural diversity Honors students' background knowledge Sets clear and high expectations Includes routines and norms Is thinking-focused vs. answer-seeking Offers multiple modalities to engage in content learning and to demonstrate understanding Includes explicit instruction of specific language targets Provides participation techniques to include all learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrates learning centers and games in a meaningful way Provides opportunities to practice and refine receptive and productive skills in English as a new language Integrates meaning and purposeful tasks/activities that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are accessible by all students through multiple entry points Are relevant to students' lives and cultural experiences Build on prior mathematical learning Demonstrate high cognitive demand Offer multiple strategies for solutions Allow for a language learning experience in addition to content

Sensory Supports*	Graphic Supports*	Interactive Supports*	Verbal and Textual Supports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Real-life objects (realia) or concrete objects Physical models Manipulatives Pictures & photographs Visual representations or models such as diagrams or drawings Videos & films Newspapers or magazines Gestures Physical movements Music & songs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graphs Charts Timelines Number lines Graphic organizers Graphing paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In a whole group In a small group With a partner such as <i>Turn-and-Talk</i> In pairs as a group (first, two pairs work independently, then they form a group of four) In triads Cooperative learning structures such as <i>Think-Pair-Share</i> Interactive websites or software With a mentor or coach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Labeling Students' native language Modeling Repetitions Paraphrasing Summarizing Guiding questions Clarifying questions Probing questions Leveled questions such as <i>What? When? Where? How? Why?</i> Questioning prompts & cues Word Banks Sentence starters Sentence frames Discussion frames Talk moves, including <i>Wait Time</i>

*From Understanding the WIDA English Language Proficiency Standards: A Resource Guide, 2007 Edition... Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of the WIDA Consortium—www.wida.us.

Galina (Halla) Jmourko, ESOL Coach, PGCPs; 2015, Rvsd. 2016

Jmourko

NCTM 2016

<https://twitter.com/HallaJmourko/status/962743850686124032>

into two categories:

- language scaffolds for Beginning ELs and
- language scaffolds for Developing ELs.

Because Beginning ELs are learning language at the vocabulary and phrase level, there are particular scaffolds used for them. Developing ELs are learning language at the sentence level, so they also get specific scaffolds that are not appropriate for Beginning ELs.

Language Scaffolding: Beginning ELs

Oftentimes, the language we speak or the texts we give students are significantly beyond some ELs' current ability to comprehend. Therefore, to scaffold challenging language for Beginning ELs, we can:

- Use labeling:** connect key words with visuals
- Use repetition:** develop familiarity with the words by having ELs repeat them
- Provide word banks:** take the guesswork out for students by identifying key words
- Incorporate a student's home language:** let ELs process content in their native language

Because the first three strategies are widely used, I will zoom in on one of the most shunned yet most effective practices for ELs at any stage – incorporating their home languages.

Home Language: A valuable tool

When working with students who are brand new to English, I reach for the asset they already bring with them from their home countries: their home languages. There's no English-only policy in my classroom! All languages are welcomed at anytime.

I like to think of allowing ELs to use their home languages as being like swimming with both our arms and legs. Conversely, English-only policies are like trying to swim with your just arms. It's possible to swim with just your arms... but it's tiring, less effective, and frustrating.

Don't assume that your content teachers will automatically be opposed to this strategy either. Using students' home languages is appealing to content teachers because it helps ELs quickly access content without a language barrier. ELs can process content in any language!

For example, Mr. James (a 7th grade Individuals and Society teacher – IB language for social studies teacher) wanted students to watch a video about the [Cold War](#) that was, understandably, narrated in English. However, we have several Beginning ELs who would not be able to understand the complex language used in it. So we allowed them to watch the video using subtitles from their own language to scaffold their understanding and make sure they were getting a fair shot at comprehending what was actually going on.

Doing this allowed our Beginning EL students to:

1. learn the same content as other students and
2. feel that they are like other students – capable of understanding complex information.

Teachers who use this asset-based approach to supporting ELs believe that ELs can learn grade-level content and that home languages are a powerful tool that facilitates learning.

Language Scaffolding: Developing ELs

Once our ELs have progressed further in English, we should still continue to offer language scaffolds that foster their academic language skills. While scaffolds for Beginning ELs mainly focus on building vocabulary, Developing ELs need more guidance on communicating in sentences and extended texts.

The following five types of scaffolding help Developings ELs:

- Understand complex ideas in written and spoken texts, and
- Communicate complex ideas in writing and in speech

1. Modified Texts


Some texts have more information than is really needed, while others don't provide enough context. When modifying a text, teachers can add in the missing context or omit details that aren't essential to the main idea.

I sometimes like to modify the language of the text to be more EL-friendly. This includes restructuring overly complex sentences filled with dependent clauses that overwhelm an EL's reading skills. If ELs have developed academic language skills in their home languages, then I leave sentences with complex structures in tact to give them a chance to read in academic English.

Additionally, when there is a challenging vocabulary word, I might add a short definition or provide a synonym beside it. This keeps the academic register of the text at a high level, while also making it easy for new academic language to be incorporated into an EL's lexicon.

For example, the image below is taken from a text by NPR called "[This scientist aims high to save the world's coral reefs](#)". I copied the entire article into a Google Doc and added "waste from companies, factories" behind the term "industrial waste" to make the concept more understandable.

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ccess to the content. [Texts in content classes should not be reading assessments for ELs.](#)  Instead, they should be sources of information. In short, if ELs don't understand the text, they won't gain any information so it is more important in content classes to make the language accessible to them so they can understand the highest level content possible.

2. Guiding Questions

ELs with developing academic language skills also benefit from having guiding questions as they watch a video, read an article, or engage in a discussion. Guiding questions help narrow in on the details that the ELs have to focus on.

For example, when the ELs were reading the above article about coral reefs, I asked the students to look for the consequences of a highly acidic ocean.

3. Leveled Questions

Jmourko also suggests using probing and clarifying questions. I have housed these two types together under the category "Leveled Questions".

After students watch a video or read a text and are about to engage in a discussion, we can ask identifying and describing questions, such as those that begin with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *how*. After students correctly answer these questions, we can move to more higher-order questions, such as those that begin with *why*.

If I notice that my ELs are struggling to answer the identifying questions, I stop to clarify their understanding by re-watching or re-reading a selected section. The magic of Leveled Questions is that it has this built-in formative assessment feature that can double as differentiation.

4. Sentence Starters

Academic language has a particular way of structuring sentences which is quite different than social language. The example below illustrates the difference:

When we use sentence starters with ELs, we model the language of academic writing. Sentence starters provide just the first part of the response; ELs are expected to pick up where it leaves off.

Without sentence starters, ELs might know the answer but not know how to start it off or become stuck on how to form the sentence. If your ELs say they don't know how to communicate an idea, that's a sign to use a sentence starter.

5. Sentence Frames

The ability to logically string ideas together like pearls on a necklace is an indicator of deep understanding and critical thinking. ELs are highly critical thinkers but often need some support. And one such form of support is Sentence Framing.

A sentence frame provides the beginning of an idea and also contains a transition to another related idea. The transition is what ELs often omit in their writings or discussions and is what distinguishes this scaffold from sentence starters.

The example below is from Mr. Arno's [science lab report template](#). We designed sentence frames so that students could use science-specific language correctly. Additionally, these sentence frames steered students' thinking as they designed their experiments.

Takeaways

When we scaffold language for ELs, we create a bridge between language and content. Teachers who expect ELs to learn grade-level content and master content-specific skills scaffold language to make this possible.

Contrary to popular perception, **scaffolding language is not about lowering the rigor of a task**. Instead, it's about providing lots of support to maintain high academic standards.

How do you scaffold language in your class? Leave a comment below.

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Summary

Article Name

Language Scaffolds: Lowering the Barriers to Comprehension

Description

Maintain high academic expectations by reducing the language barrier by providing specific language scaffolding for Beginning to Developing ELs.

 WIDA's Essential Actions, Sheltered Instruction  home language, word banks, scaffolding language, maintaining academic rigor, grade-level standards, labeling, modified texts, discussion frames, sentence starters, leveled questions, guiding questions, repetition

3 Comments

Pingback: [88. Language Scaffolds: Lowering the Barriers to Comprehension – Empowering ELLs – ESL Resources](#)

Rochelle

May 28, 2018 at 11:14 pm

Thanks once again, Tan. I would just like to add one more strategy, that is, direct instruction in academic vocabulary for both Beginnong and Developing ELLs.
Do any of you use this strategy with mixed groups of ELLs?

Tan Huynh ★

May 29, 2018 at 5:24 pm

Hi, Rochelle.

This is a great question, and thank you for contributing to the discussion! Your recommendation is a great one too! Students need to have content and academic vocabulary to achieve in the courses and to also be literate citizens. I recommend two articles for directly teaching vocabulary:

CONTENT vocab: <https://www.empoweringells.com/a18-tier-3-words/>

ACADEMIC vocab: <https://www.empoweringells.com/a17-tier-two-words/>

Thanks for taking the time to connect! It will help readers who have the same question.

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