Academic Writing: Scaffolding for Beginning ELLs
by Allison Balter and Lindsey Mayer

As a result of the U.S. Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers must think more strategically than ever before about academic language, particularly for English language learners (ELLs). Across all disciplines, the CCSS emphasize academic language and vocabulary, increased text complexity, a focus on multiple genres of text, and writing using textual evidence (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014). Similarly, states that use the WIDA Standards for ELLs have seen a shift in the theory of language instruction—from a focus on language development in isolation to learning language through academic content.

Academic language is "the set of all words and phrases that (1) describe content area knowledge and procedures, (2) express complex thinking processes and abstract concepts, and (3) create cohesion and clarity in written and oral discourse" (Zweirs, 2005, p. 60). It is the key to success in today's classrooms, and, in order to master it, students need explicit instruction at the word, sentence, and discourse levels (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014). According to most scales of English language development, ELLs begin to develop proficiency with academic language when they reach an intermediate level (Hong Xu, 2010). However, with new demands to develop academic language for all students, teachers are feeling more urgency around helping newcomers acquire these skills from the moment they enter our classrooms.

Based on our experiences teaching ESL in Grades 5–8 in Massachusetts, we argue that with the proper scaffolds, newcomers are capable of extended academic writing. Our method systematically scaffolds language, starting at the conceptual level and moving on to the word, sentence, and, finally, discourse level. This framework extends Zweirs' (2008) bricks and mortar analogy of academic vocabulary, which defines content-specific vocabulary as "bricks," and the general-utility words and phrases as the "mortar" that holds content-specific terms together (p. 22). By situating text structures in the context of thematic units, we help students understand the five commonly recognized expository text structures (Akhondi, Aziz Malayeri, & Abd Samad, 2011). The thematic vocabulary provides the bricks of language. Then, teachers develop students' conceptual understanding, or "blueprint," of a given text structure. Teachers support this blueprint with signal words (mortar) associated with the text structure. Together, the bricks and mortar create sentences, which act as "walls" that, when put together, form a "house," or an extended, organized discourse in a specific text structure. The case studies below demonstrate an application of this framework to develop sequencing and compare-contrast texts.

When applied to two distinct middle school settings in urban Massachusetts districts, this approach led to significant academic and linguistic gains for newcomers, as evidenced by improved scores on standardized assessments of language development, increased quantity and quality of writing across multiple genres, and improved performance in content classes. Notably, all students in these classes had arrived in the country within the last year, many within only a few months.

Case Study #1: Sequence

In the first case study, the teacher introduced sequencing during a thematic unit on morning routines, which naturally lends itself to describing steps in a process. Once students had developed the foundational vocabulary (the bricks) and could use it in simple sentences (e.g., "The woman takes a shower."), the teacher introduced the text structure of sequencing.

The teacher took several steps to lead students toward this text structure.

1. First, she used picture supports to develop the conceptual blueprint of sequencing. She used pictures to show different phases of a plane trip— a process with clear steps, void of any linguistic barrier.
2. Then, teacher introduced sequencing signal words (mortar)—*first*, *next*, *then*, and *finally*—attaching them to steps in a process.
3. Next, students applied this concept to morning routines vocabulary. Using picture supports, bricks, and mortar, students constructed the walls—complete sentences describing each picture (e.g., "First, the man wakes up.").
4. After students had written sentences for each routine, the teacher modeled putting these sentences together to form a well-constructed house—a cohesive paragraph.

With repeated practice throughout the unit, beginner ELLs were able to write extended academic sequencing texts and apply this structure to other topics.

See the handout, with student examples, on using sequence scaffolding.

Case Study #2: Compare & Contrast

In a different classroom, the teacher introduced the compare-contrast text structure using the same framework in a thematic unit on physical traits, a topic that easily demonstrates similarities and differences. After students learned foundational vocabulary (the bricks) for body parts—adjectives describing physical traits (*tall*, *short*, *bald*, etc.)—and practiced writing descriptive sentences about people and monsters, the teacher began introducing the compare-contrast text structure.

1. To establish the blueprint, the teacher activated background knowledge around the concepts of "same" and "different," connecting this to the academic terms "compare" and "contrast." Students looked at pictures of monsters and utilized a graphic organizer to identify similarities and differences in physical traits using familiar vocabulary and short phrases (green skin, three teeth, tall, no hair, etc.). This visual concept map supported the organizational structure of compare-contrast writing.

2. Next, the teacher introduced compare-contrast signal words within sentence frames:
   - "_____. However, _____."
   - "Both have _____."

   These sentence frames helped students situate the signal words in their correct syntactical context, thereby allowing students to combine descriptions of monsters' physical traits (bricks) with compare-contrast signal words (mortar) to build sentences comparing and contrasting their monsters (walls).

3. Using a t-chart, they categorized “sentences that compare” and “sentences that contrast.” The teacher modeled how to use this organizer to construct the final product (house): a two-paragraph text comparing and contrasting their monsters.

Even students with limited formal education and L1 literacy skills were able to write these paragraphs using an extra scaffold of color-coded paragraph templates. Students continued practicing and applying this text structure throughout the thematic unit and again in subsequent units, each time relying on fewer scaffolds.

See the handout, with student examples, on compare-contrast scaffolding.

Conclusion

These case studies demonstrate that, through strategic planning within the curriculum, teachers can systematically scaffold beginning ELLs’ academic language development. Starting at the conceptual level, then moving to the word, sentence, and, finally, the discourse level, even students with limited formal education and L1 literacy were able to “build the house” of an academic text.

While these cases reflect sequencing and compare-contrast, this same framework can be applied to other text structures (e.g., description, cause and effect, or problem and solution; for your reference and to see what these different approaches might look like, see this handout on text structures). Teachers should consider presenting the structures in a logical sequence, as they do increase in conceptual rigor. For example, sequencing is more straightforward and accessible than cause and effect. Further, they should consider which text structures are compatible with which thematic units.

Introducing these text structures within the ESL classroom, using familiar vocabulary, allows beginners to eventually apply them across the content areas, particularly in history, science, math, and language arts. Without an understanding of these text structures and the thought processes they represent, students will not be able to access important ideas, concepts, and relationships in the content—content to which they are held accountable. Whether or not newcomers feel ready for these academic demands, they are held accountable to them. However, as demonstrated through the case studies above, they *are* ready. They *can* do it. *They have to*. As teachers of ELLs, it is our responsibility to get them there, one brick at a time.

References

Akhondi, M., Aziz Malayeri, F., & Abd Samad, A. (2011). How to teach expository text structure to facilitate reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher, 64*(5), 368–372.

Gottlieb, M., & Ernst-Slavit, G. (2014). *Academic language in diverse classrooms: Definitions and contexts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Hong Xu, S. (2010). *Teaching English language learners: Literacy strategies & resources for K-6*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Zweirs, J. (2005). The third language of academic English. *Educational Leadership, 62*(4), 60–63. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ745443

Zweirs, J. (2008). *Building academic language: Essential practices for content classrooms*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Allison Balter is currently the director of English language learning for UP Education Network, a nonprofit school management organization in Massachusetts whose mission is to rapidly transform chronically underperforming schools in urban districts. She has taught ESL at the elementary and middle school levels in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and holds a Masters of Education from Boston University, where she also teaches courses in sheltered English instruction to new teachers.

Lindsey Mayer is currently in her sixth year teaching English as a second language at the Garfield Middle School in Revere, Massachusetts. A Teach For America alumna (Massachusetts, '09), she earned her BA in political science and global studies from Arizona State University, and holds a Masters of Education from Boston University.