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4 Ways to Adapt EL Scaffolds for Content Learning

by Scott E. Grapin

Content learning is no longer about memorizing discrete facts and following cookbook procedures. The latest college- and career-ready standards emphasize students making their own sense of the world by engaging in disciplinary practices, such as developing models in science and arguing from evidence in language arts (Valdés et al., 2014). For example, in an elementary science classroom, students develop explanatory models to make sense of what happens to all of the garbage produced by their local community (Lee et al., 2019). In a secondary language arts classroom, students analyze persuasive texts, from the Gettysburg Address to multimedia advertisements, to construct their own persuasive arguments about an issue relevant to their lives (Walqui et al., 2012). As students engage in these powerful learning experiences, they develop deep content understanding over time (Mehta & Fine, 2019).

Instructional scaffolds play a key role in ensuring English learners (ELs) have access to such powerful learning experiences. However, recent shifts in how content is taught and learned can also present tensions with scaffolds commonly used in TESOL. Such tensions become apparent when scaffolds initially intended as *supports* for ELs, such as preteaching vocabulary or providing sentence starters, instead act as *barriers* to ELs' meaningful participation in content classrooms. In this article,* I discuss four instructional scaffolds, tensions that may arise in using each scaffold, and classroom-tested adaptations of each scaffold to support ELs in meeting ambitious content learning goals.

1. Preteaching Vocabulary

Scaffold: Preteaching vocabulary involves introducing a targeted set of words and their definitions at the beginning of a unit or lesson.

Tension: Until students develop an understanding of content ideas, vocabulary may have little meaning to students. By defining words at the beginning of instruction, teachers may actually short-circuit opportunities for ELs to develop deep content understanding.

Adaptation: Invite ELs to use all of their meaning-making resources (e.g., everyday language, nonlinguistic modes, translanguaging) to begin making sense of content ideas. Then, introduce vocabulary in context *after* students have begun developing content understanding and when the vocabulary is useful for furthering that understanding.

For example, in an elementary science classroom, students engage in a series of investigations (e.g., compressing air in a syringe, weighing a balloon before and after it is inflated), all of which provide evidence that the smell of garbage is *something* (rather than nothing). At this point, the teacher introduces the term *particles* to name the something ("those tiny things too small to see") that students experienced in their investigations. In this way, vocabulary becomes a product of, rather than a prerequisite to, developing content understanding (Lee et al., 2019).

2. Providing Sentence Frames/Starters

Scaffold: Sentence frames (e.g., "There is a __ called __") and sentence starters (e.g., "I believe…") are partial sentences that jumpstart students' writing or speaking.

Tension: Sentence frames/starters can give the impression that using language in the content areas is about filling in blanks with fixed answers and finishing other people's sentences rather than engaging in authentic discourse. In particular, sentence frames/starters that are overly formulaic can inadvertently foreclose participation of ELs, who bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences from their homes and communities that may not fit neatly within the scaffolds provided (González et al., 2005).

Adaptation: Begin with open-ended prompts (e.g., "What did you notice?" and "What did you figure out?") that invite all student contributions, regardless of how they are expressed. Later in instruction, when students are ready to present their ideas in more polished form, provide sentence frames/starters that engage ELs in disciplinary practices.

For example, in a secondary language arts classroom, students are provided the following sentence starters to construct persuasive arguments (adapted from Walqui et al., 2012):

- My claim to persuade my audience is…
- My textual evidence to support my claim is…
- The reason I included this evidence is…

These sentence starters go beyond jumpstarting language production to apprenticing ELs into norms for engaging in the disciplinary practice of argumentation. For example, in language arts, claims are supported by textual evidence.

3. Using Visual Aids

Scaffold: Visual aids are nonlinguistic modes that support ELs in comprehending or producing language.

Tension: Visuals are more than scaffolds to be removed once ELs develop English (Grapin, 2019). Graphs, charts, tables, maps, and models are indispensable to content learning, just as they are essential the work of professionals in their fields (e.g., scientists).

Adaptation: Engage all students, regardless of English proficiency, in disciplinary practices that involve multiple modes. For example, in an elementary science classroom, students develop models using a combination of drawings and symbols to explain how the smell of garbage

travels (e.g., drawing dots with arrows to represent particles moving freely). In a secondary language arts classroom, students analyze the use of gestures, visuals, and sounds in multimedia advertisements and their persuasive effects on consumers.

When nonlinguistic modes are viewed as essential for all students to engage in content learning (rather than as aids for ELs only), this turns a deficit view of ELs as requiring remediation into an asset view that recognizes the rich meaning-making resources these students bring to content classrooms.

4. Designing Hands-On Activities

Scaffold: Hands-on activities typically involve students manipulating materials in their immediate environment.

Tension: Though hands-on activities benefit ELs by providing opportunities to use materials in the environment to communicate ideas (e.g., pointing to two objects and saying, "Look, the same!"), these activities tend to emphasize what students are doing with the materials (e.g., following a procedure) but not *why* or *for what purpose*. Thus, hands-on activities may not be sufficient, on their own, if the goal is for students to develop deep content understanding.

Adaptation: Design hands-on activities that connect to a broader goal of making sense of a phenomenon, problem, or text.

For example, in an elementary science classroom, students engage in hands-on investigations (e.g., compressing air in a syringe) toward the broader goal of making sense of the phenomenon of why garbage smells. In a secondary language arts classroom, students collaboratively sort sentence strips related to different modes of persuasion (e.g., ethos, logos, pathos) toward the broader goal of understanding how they can author texts that are convincing to their readers. When activities are designed with this broader goal at the fore, they become not only hands-on but also *minds-on* (Furtak & Penuel, 2019).

Conclusion

Rather than "throw away the playbook" and abandon scaffolds known to be effective with ELs, teachers can adapt when and how they use these scaffolds to deliver instruction that better aligns with contemporary content learning. What all of the adaptations have in common is that they foreground the rich resources, experiences, and goals that ELs bring from their homes and communities while also apprenticing ELs into disciplinary practices of disciplinary communities. These adaptations to instructional scaffolds will ensure that ELs don't just "get by" in content classrooms but that they *thrive*. Of course, any adaptation must consider the diverse strengths and needs of ELs in each teaching context. How are you adapting scaffolds?

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