Scaffolding for Success: Best Practices for Secondary ELLs
by Carla Huck and Beth Amaral

Scaffolding is an instructional technique, associated with the *zone of proximal development*, in which a teacher provides individualized support by incrementally improving a learner's ability to build on prior knowledge. Effective scaffolding can increase the students' independence in performing a task or learning a new concept through the gradual release of responsibility (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2008). One of the main benefits of scaffolded instruction is that it provides for a supportive learning environment. Students are free to ask questions, provide feedback, and support their peers in learning new material no matter what their level of language proficiency may be. When you incorporate scaffolding in the classroom, you become more of a mentor and facilitator of knowledge rather than the dominant content expert.

Planning for instructional scaffolding can be a challenge for those teachers new to working with ELLs. A few "tried and true" instructional scaffolds that have been implemented successfully across content areas in our high school include THIEVES, GIST, Conga Line, and Constructive Conversation Skills starters.

For Reading

THIEVES: Activating Prior Knowledge

This prereading strategy involves students surveying the specific elements of a textbook chapter to help them activate prior knowledge as well as identify their purpose and expectations for reading the chapter. Perusing the **t**itle, **h**eadings, **i**ntroduction, **e**very first sentence in a paragraph, **v**isuals and vocabulary, **e**nd-of-chapter questions, and **s**ummary before reading the text itself helps readers identify important concepts, establish a context, and note significant points.

Teachers can use a THIEVES note-taking organizer, or distribute laminated bookmarks with the elements outlined for discussion in pairs. See the THIEVES handout for use in your classroom.

GIST: Improving Comprehension

GIST stands for "**g**enerating **i**nteraction between **s**chemata and **t**ext." It is a comprehension strategy that is used both during and after reading. It helps students pull out essential vocabulary and concepts to summarize the passage. It is best to train students in the strategy by first displaying a passage on the board and then reading it with the class. With the students, pick out eight to ten of the most important words from the passage and underline or circle them. Then write a summary of the passage in a sentence or two using those words. Do this as a class for several passages of text, then ask students to try the technique on their own or in pairs.

Alternatively, teachers can use this strategy with content-based video clips. Students with less proficient listening comprehension skills will be able to "get the GIST" with structured listening tasks. We have even created a modified template for our ELLs to write 10 words they hear and

then use those words to write a one- to two-sentence summary. Students with higher proficiency can listen for Who, What, Where, When, Why and How information.

For Speaking

Conga: An Interactive Activity

As language teachers, we all know that one of the key principles of language acquisition requires students' frequent opportunities to interact with one another and with curricular information on a daily basis. Working from our completed GIST worksheets, we added a Conga Line interactive activity for students to share their ideas while enhancing listening and speaking skills. It is a useful strategy for formative assessment as well, as the teacher can circulate and monitor student responses throughout the process. How does it work? Well, cue up your Gloria Estefan "Conga" music and then have students:

- Count off by twos
- Form two lines of "ones" and "twos" facing each other
- For 30 seconds, ones will orally share their GIST summary with the person across from them
- After 30 seconds, the "twos" will share. Students may add to their responses if desired
- Then, the head of the line of "twos" will conga through the center to the end of the "twos" line and everyone will shift up one, giving everyone a new partner.
- Repeat!

Depending on class size and allotted time for the activity, the teacher can stop after several exchanges or complete the entire sequence with new pairs.

Constructive Conversation Skills Posters: Group Work

Another scaffold that supports academic language use while speaking in small groups is a Constructive Conversation Skills poster (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). With prompts and response starters for student reference as they work to build ideas during small group discussions, this chart can be modified for classroom use by selecting areas students need most help with, such as fortifying ideas with evidence from text or asking a peer for clarification of their comments.

You can also reduce the number of examples in each category and create your own customized handouts for students. To do this, you can model for the class using the fishbowl technique. This is an instructional technique to foster group discussions, with one group modeling and the other group observing and taking notes. Model for the class how to refer to the poster to keep the conversation moving forward, and then monitor for student use of these particular starters using a checklist as you circulate and listen in on group discussions. This chart can be used in any content area, addressing many CCSS standards, such as constructing and engaging in viable arguments, or making sense of problems and persevering in solving them, while at the same time helping all students meet content and language objectives.

Incorporating scaffolds into your practice will provide the incentive for students to take a more active role in the classroom. Aside from creating a supportive learning environment, scaffolds also empower students to take ownership for their learning. It is important that we make our scaffolding efforts transparent to students and employ them consistently, moving learners along the continuum from dependence to guided practice to independence.

References

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