

## **Six Scaffolding Strategies for the ESL Classroom**

*by Scott B. Freiberger*

Many times throughout the course of our careers, we may hear an exasperated teacher say, “Jane just doesn’t understand,” or, “No matter what I do, Johnny can’t seem to follow the lesson.” Does the student require an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and need to be pulled out of the classroom for additional support services? It is certainly possible that a perennially distracted or unfocused student may need to be evaluated for additional services; it is also possible, however, that incorporating some well-chosen scaffolding techniques could foster a child’s academic development and enable her or him to ascend.

In everyday use, a “scaffold” is a temporary support structure typically placed adjacent to a construction site that aids in the creation of buildings. After construction has nearly been completed, the scaffold is removed. In education, “scaffold,” originally coined by psychologist Jerome Bruner while expanding upon the work of previous research, has become synonymous with visual displays and other temporary tools used by educators to support learning. The operative word here is “temporary,” because we do not want our English language learners (ELLs) to forego independence in favor of temporary educational crutches.

These teaching strategies, if carefully planned and woven throughout curricula, may help English as a second language (ESL) students to reach higher learning plateaus. Scaffolds may include such techniques as drawing upon a student’s prior knowledge to enhance academic writing and discussions, frontloading vital vocabulary, the use of realia and other visual aids, and providing sentence starters and accountable talk to begin well-planned writing assignments and dynamic dialogue. Here are six scaffolding strategies that have proven successful in the ESL classroom.

### **1. Model for Your ESL Students**

No, I am not suggesting that you don flamboyant, feathered fedoras and strike a Madonnaesque pose, or install strobe lights and thin fluorescent pieces of impervious material inside your classroom. Modeling simply refers to demonstrating the language you would like to hear from your students and the actions and behaviors you would like to see them engage in while they partake of interactive learning activities. For instance, if you speak slowly and enunciate clearly, they should do the same.

Current research indicates that some forms of modeling may aid ESL students in their ability to self-correct errors in grammar and syntax (Xue & Hwa, 2010). Teacher modeling may also help students to better understand how their current acting and thinking may affect themselves and their classmates. For this reason, metacognitive demonstrations in which teachers think aloud as they model may be especially beneficial for ESL students, not only for language, but also for cognitive and social development. Select students could also model appropriate language for less proficient classmates during small-group learning sessions.

### **2. Frontload Vital Vocabulary**

According to Denti and Guerin (2008), it is a good idea to introduce significant vocabulary words prior to reading academic or fictional text. Using a picture or other visual image to correlate with key vocabulary, or “a graphic symbol or visual representation of the word,” may help ESL students to better grasp meaning (p. 123). It may also help to use “shades of meaning” cards or posters, or “synonyms or related words that almost mean the same as the target vocabulary word” (p. 123). Research has shown that frontloading and subsequently repeating key concepts, grammar, and vocabulary can enhance learning and help ELLs to internalize important information (Richard-Amato, 2010. p. 123). Finally, using a new word in context (creating a sentence relevant to the text to model meaning) may help ESL students to better grasp new material (Denti & Guerin, 2008, p. 123).

### **3. Use Visual Aids and Realia**

ESL students typically require additional assistance with English vocabulary development. For this reason, it is a good idea to add visual aids to your higher order thinking maps, such as Venn diagrams and KWL charts. Incorporating the use of visual aids invariably takes more planning than simply jotting down students’ responses in class, but with them your ESL students are likely to grasp material faster. Indeed, current research indicates that incorporating visual imagery to correspond to class materials can help learners to succeed (Hutton, 2013). Also, since many of our ELL public school students may not be familiar with either academic or social vocabulary, using realia as well as visual imagery to enrich literacy learning can help increase rigor and enhance the learning process, not only for ELLs, but also for all students.

### **4. Suggest Sentence Starters**

Research suggests that using sentence frames, or sentence starters, with ESL students may help spark creativity and enable students of all proficiency levels to develop better academic conversations and put pen to paper with a sharper focus. In addition, using sentence starters may help ESL students to internalize the writing process, and as they improve, develop “a more individualized format” for starting their sentences (Clegg, 1996, p. 89). Keep your sentence starters visible and highlight them to continuously guide classroom communication and help nourish a more natural flow of prose. If you refer to them continuously as you are teaching, this may help students to better understand natural English language form.

### **5. Hold Students Accountable**

“Accountable talk” refers to the academic language that begins Socratic seminars and classroom conversations. It forces students to ask when they don’t understand, provide reasons, ask for and provide evidence, and politely agree or disagree with classmates (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008, p. 99). Consider hanging a poster in the classroom showcasing pertinent language at the beginning of the year. Why? “Students take quickly to accountable talk, and many appreciate the guidelines because they prevent conversations from going astray” (p. 99). John Gonzalez, an experienced educator at P.S. 20Q John Bowne Elementary School in Queens, uses both small-group and whole-class discussion prompts to ensure students remain focused and

on target with their academic conversations. He pairs non-native speakers with little knowledge of the English language with a “student translator,” who works with new students to translate, transcribe, and explain information. This supports new students in learning the material, using correct words, phrases, and sentences, and holds them accountable for their work.

## **6. Activate Prior Knowledge**

In order to promote progress, it is imperative to make material relevant. How could students understand challenging text if they do not connect it to their lives? As an example, let us consider Theodore Roosevelt. How could an educator help ESL students understand Theodore Roosevelt, the adventuresome 26th president of the United States? While our ESL students may not have led an expedition to the Basin Brazilian jungle in the Amazon basin as he did, but, like the former president, it is likely that many of them had embarked on adventurous journeys before entering the classroom. Help students to make this connection. You may want to begin a lesson by defining “adventure” and asking, “Think of an adventure you had. What made it an adventure? Turn and talk with your partner using the sentence starters, ‘I remember when . . . It was an adventure because . . .’ ” Activating schema, or prior knowledge, helps students to connect to current material and better understand the main idea; it also may help ESL students to better infer and draw conclusions.

## **Infuse Technology**

An additional suggestion is to incorporate technology. Research supports the belief that technology integrated into classroom settings has overall positive effects. Kulik’s Meta-Analysis Study shows that, on average, “Students learn more in less time when they receive computer-based instruction” (Schacter, 1999, p. 4). Finally, “Students like their classes more and develop more positive attitudes when their classes include computer-based instruction” (p. 4).

## **Do Not Wait to Remove the Crutch**

Although some educators suggest increasing “wait time” for responses, in the era of high-stakes testing and the increasing rigor of Common Core Standards, ESL students must learn to respond more rapidly. Granted, there should be a brief “adjustment period” for new ELLs; all students (and their parents), however, must understand that along with increased academic rigor come higher standards for benchmarking progress, and protecting students for too long may, in fact, hinder progress and set unnecessary limits on learning independently.

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