Scaffolding Techniques for English Language Learners: Part 1

By Veronica Vasquez | Categories: ELL, Collaborative Literacy, Implementation

When supporting English Language Learners during instruction we must consider that the instruction is two-fold. Teachers are supporting content and language acquisition simultaneously. This is not an easy task!

Scaffolding has been praised for its ability to engage most learners. When the learning is scaffolded students are constantly building on prior knowledge and forming associations among new information, concepts, and language acquisition. Additionally, scaffolding presents opportunities for students to be successful before they move into unfamiliar territory. This type of instruction minimizes failure, which decreases frustration, especially for students acquiring a new language.

What is “Scaffolding”?  

Scaffolding theory was first introduced in the late 1950s by Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist. He used the term to describe young children's oral language acquisition. As young children are first learning to speak a language, their parents and caregivers provide informal frameworks that facilitate the children's learning. Scaffolding in the classroom consists of helpful interactions between the teacher and the student that enable the student to do something beyond what he could do independently. A scaffold is a temporary framework that is put up for support and access to meaning and is taken away when the student feels success and masters tasks, concepts, and, in this case, language acquisition.

Scaffolding techniques when used strategically and correctly does take time, but it is well worth it! Through scaffolding, English Language Learners are given the opportunity and the necessary support to acquire language while meeting rigorous academic standards.

Here are some benefits of scaffolded instruction:

- Students experience a supportive learning environment
- Students feel free to ask questions, provide feedback, and support their peers
- Teachers become facilitators of knowledge rather than content “experts”
- Students take a more active role in learning
- Students are able to take ownership of the learning and their classroom as a community of learners

When planning to meet the needs of ELL students we might consider incorporating two overarching types of scaffolds:

1. Verbal Scaffolds

How information is verbally presented or explained to the students during instruction. Here are ways to provide verbal scaffolds:

- Model the “think-a-loud”
- Slow your speech and enunciate
Reinforce contextual definitions
Simplify questions
Engage in read-alouds in which you model correct pronunciations and prosody

2. Procedural Scaffolds

Tools and resources to support the students as they gain access to the learning. Here are ways to provide procedural scaffolds:

- Provide explicit modeling through visuals, gestures, and realia
- Allow for visual tools (organizers) as students manipulate information
- Use wait-time when asking questions to give all students an opportunity to respond
- Provide discussion prompts (sentence frames) to support discussions
- Allow students to collaborate with other students often as they discuss the learning

In my next blog, I will explore how Collaborative Literacy offers explicit support for scaffolding instruction in support of English Language Learners.