Scaffolding UP for Multilingual Learners

A Guide to Responsive, Integrated Literacy and Language Learning

This document is intended for teachers and leaders to select responsive scaffolding strategies for multilingual learners in ELA instruction, identify unproductive overscaffolding, and engage in meaningful coaching conversations.

Goal of scaffolding

The goal of scaffolding is to enhance access to and comprehension of lessons for *all* students by using supports that are responsive to a variety of student strengths and needs (this is similar to CAST's Universal Design for Learning Principles). Asset-based scaffolding uses students' existing strengths, backgrounds, and prior knowledge to overcome barriers, many temporary, to accelerate learning and language development.

For multilingual learners (MLs), this often looks like providing multiple access points to the content of the day's lesson (e.g., personalized examples, reference to prior knowledge, multiple representations such as anchor charts, graphic organizers, home languages). Scaffolding can be preplanned based on prior student data or provided in real time based on in-the-moment student needs. Incorporated supports should always align with skills and knowledge central to the lesson's objective(s).

Types and examples of scaffolding strategies and supports

The charts below offer examples of what scaffolding can look like for multilingual learners, but they by no means provide an exhaustive list.

Home languages

Using home languages intentionally is one of the most effective scaffolds teachers can provide to MLs, because it enables students to "use their home language as a vehicle to learn academic English" (Najarro, 2023).

Scaffold	What it might look like
Bridging strategies: explicit connections and comparisons across languages	• Sharing cognates (words that have the same meaning and similar spelling and pronunciation across languages) for key vocabulary in text to support meaning-making • Contrasting morphological features (e.g., prefixes and suffixes) to help students expand their vocabulary • Contrasting syntax to help students learn new, increasingly complex sentence structures and patterns

Translanguaging: strategic and flexible use of all languages one possesses for learning and communication[1]	• Providing time for translanguaging, such as invitation(s) for students to:
	  ○ discuss key concepts in their home language before sharing in English[2]
	  ○ brainstorm ideas or take notes in any language before drafting in English

Translation: providing key terms or full blocks of text in a student's home language	• Translating only essential or abstract terms; that is, those that are difficult to represent through non-linguistic means (e.g., freedom) • Translating to make connections across languages, not as a substitute for instruction (e.g., helping students see how sentences are structured differently between languages, not simply providing the same text in their home language without reinforcing how to use the translation to extend their knowledge of English)

[1] See also "What Is Translanguaging and How Is It Used in the Classroom?"
[2] English is most commonly the language of instruction in the United States, but these concepts/practices could also be used with other languages in a dual language programs.

Language development

Because students are at different stages of language proficiency across multiple domains (i.e., reading, speaking, listening, writing), to accelerate access to grade-level content it is important to consider ways to honor their current skills. For example, for new users of a language, sentence frames can reduce anxiety and make complex interactions more accessible by providing a clear starting point and structure for the expected input. These frames can be designed to extend to formal and academic language, like practice-specific language functions (e.g., argue, compare, sequence), and use more precise/technical vocabulary or complex sentence structures that appear in grade-level content but not necessarily part of their everyday language.

Scaffold	What it might look like
Word/Phrase banks	• Posting a list of words (e.g., mini anchor charts in notebooks) that play a particular language function (e.g., words of comparison, sequence, justification) and/or technical terms about the content topic (e.g., for pronunciation: "phoneme," "blend," "tap"; for narrative: "character," "plot," "conflict") that students can use in responses to curriculum-based questions • Providing a range of options for words that play a particular language function (e.g., for sequence: "first," "in the beginning," "to start"; for contrasting: "but," "however," "on the other hand")
Sentence stems or frames	• Providing sentence stems to help students engage in meaningful discussions, to show agreement/disagreement, and to build on someone's ideas (e.g., "That's a good point, and I also think ___" "I understand your point, but I believe ___.") • Providing sentence stems that integrate language functions and academic vocabulary related to the objective (e.g., "The character felt ___ because ___." "The effect of ___ was ___.") • Offering complex or open-ended prompts—in which students are encouraged to share reasoning or detailed explanations—that help students reach the ideal structure or depth for a student response
Vocabulary support	• Offering a *brief* introduction to key terms in the day's lesson before focusing on the text can help students create meaning (e.g., "these are the words that will help us understand the topic and text more independently")—it's important that this preview be brief; when overused it reduces the need for students to make sense of a text themselves • Providing synonyms or familiar descriptions that might help students understand the meaning of new words and use those words appropriately (e.g., in a word bank, as side bars in student materials, verbal explanation)

Multimodal supports (varied modes of instruction and support)

Multimodal supports help multilingual learners access meaning as their English is still developing, allowing them to engage with grade-level content. They also reinforce language learning for all students by connecting new words and structures to images, actions, and experiences, making both the concept and the language more understandable and memorable. Aída Walqui and Leo van Lier explain that instruction for multilingual learners should include multiple forms of representation because "contextualized and supported language allows learners to participate in complex tasks before they fully control the language needed to do them" (p. 18).

Scaffold	What it might look like
Demonstrations	• Facilitating think-alouds for making inferences about a character • Demonstrating how to look for text evidence • Modeling how to use context or morphology (e.g., prefixes, suffixes) to understand the meaning of the word
Engineered text	• Chunking text and information by building in stopping points to discuss specific sections of a text • Embedding support for key terms and concepts: adding visuals, home language connections, student friendly and familiar descriptions
Graphic supports	• Collaboratively creating anchor charts with students that include unit key vocabulary or facts • Providing graphic organizers for plot or summary that students can complete while or after reading a text

Interactive supports	• Varying whole instruction and smaller groups/pairs (using cooperative learning strategies) that are designed intentionally, for example by:
	  ○ Same home language (see also *home languages*) to make meaning of new content and bridge to the new language
	  ○ Reading skill proficiency for targeted practice
	  ○ Heterogeneous language proficiency levels for productive struggle with language model supports

Sensory supports	• Using gestures/movement collaboratively (i.e., teacher and students) to reinforce the meaning and usage of key terms or concepts or asking students to use a gesture (e.g., number of fingers) as responses • Showing visuals to illustrate a concept during a read-aloud • Before reading, passing around objects related to the text's topic (e.g., seashells, a jar of sand for a story about visiting the beach) • Before reading, showing a short (e.g., 45-second) clip that builds on students' background knowledge about the text's topic, embedding supports within videos to highlight key information or language as needed

Personal connections

The authors of the *The Translanguaging Classroom* explain, "Students' lived experiences and knowledge should be treated as intellectual resources for learning" (p. 8). Personal connections to the content of the lesson help MLs make meaning and build deeper connections to what they're learning, which adds to their comprehension and engagement.

Scaffold	What it might look like
Personalized examples	• Asking students to make personal connections to the lesson's topic (e.g., "today we are going to learn about farm animals, have you ever visited a farm?") • Using a story from students' cultural backgrounds to introduce the theme or skill for the lesson • Asking students to generate their own personal examples for a concept after reading a text
Reference to prior knowledge	• Filling in the "K" column of a KWL (i.e., know, want to know, learned) chart on the text's topic before reading • Referring to and making connections to a text read in a previous lesson • Making connections to a topic or skill previously taught (in the same or different unit or grade level)

Tips for responsive scaffolding

For teachers planning scaffolds for their students, the following tips may be helpful:

- Anticipate potential barriers during lesson internalization: What specific parts of this lesson (e.g., text, task, concept, or language) might be especially complex or challenging for which groups of students?
- Articulate student assets that may help them overcome those barriers (e.g., a tradition of family storytelling could support literacy development, familiarity with the metric system could help students learn the imperial system).
- Use student data to inform support choice.
- Teach students how to use the support by explicitly modeling. For example, explain:
  - What the support is: "This is a concept map."
  - Why it is being provided: "We are using this to organize the causes and effects of the Revolutionary War."
  - How to use it effectively: "First, put the main idea here. Next, find three supporting details…"
- Monitor student usage of the provided supports:
  - Who is productively struggling (the support is working)?
  - Who is passively completing (the support is too easy)?
  - Who is frustrated or stuck (the support might be too challenging or inappropriate)?

Guidance for leaders

Look-fors and listen-fors during observations

When observing classrooms, the following look-fors and listen-fors are general characteristics of scaffolds being implemented effectively.

General Look-fors	General Listen-fors
• Academic language learners, including MLs, engaging with grade-level text and tasks • Variety of supports being used • Supports are purposeful, differentiated, and part of a progression toward independence or greater complexity and precision	• Students using academic language with support • Teachers prompting deeper thinking: "What makes you think that?" or "Can you explain that another way?" • Teachers affirming and building on home language use or cultural references • Opportunities for student metacognition and reflection on their learning

Signs of overscaffolding

As helpful as responsive scaffolding is when implemented well, when support becomes excessive, unnecessary, or too long-lasting, it can prevent students from developing independence. Overscaffolding is visible through limited opportunities for productive struggle, cognitive lift, and/or student agency needed to engage in rigorous, grade-level work (often a result of unrecognized lowered expectations).

In observations, this might look like the teacher:

- Doing most of the talking or thinking (e.g., after reading a portion of the text, the teacher immediately explains, instead of prompting students to make their own connections or inferences).
- Providing answers to questions directly, leading students to simply copy without demonstrating understanding.
- Spending a significant amount of time in an "I do" element of the gradual release model (i.e., "I do, we do, you do"), or overexplaining.
- Not considering the nature of the task and starting with high-intensity supports (e.g., think-alouds, modeled responses) when lighter supports (e.g., sentence stems) could suffice.
- Rounding up student responses or asking students to repeat peers' correct answers (e.g., instead of pushing for a student to give more details: "And what does that have to do with ___?," the teacher makes the connection for the student and/or builds on their answer without encouraging students to add to their own or their peers' ideas).

- Overusing read-alouds for all texts, reducing the need for students to engage in reading themselves (except when the activity itself is read-aloud or when it is developmentally appropriate for students).
- Spending an excessive amount of time frontloading background knowledge or preteaching vocabulary, assuming students have no funds of knowledge, rather than teaching in context (e.g., using the text) and enabling students to create meaning.
- Not connecting home language translations back to the new/target language.
- Using translation as a replacement for teaching word meaning, morphology, or context clues.
- Providing sentence stems so specific or scripted that students only fill in one word and don't produce language independently.
- Relying predominantly on visuals instead of modeling how to interact with the text or concepts.

Coaching conversations

During coaching conversations, the following questions can facilitate a productive dialogue about scaffolding:

- How do you decide what kind of scaffolding to provide and when to reduce it?
  - Choose supports based on the specific barrier(s) to access—whether it's language, background knowledge, or cognitive demand.
- What types of supports do you use first, and how do you decide when to decrease or increase the amount of support?
  - Begin with universal supports (e.g., sentence stems, visual aids), then increase support if students show signs of confusion or disengagement.
  - Reduce support based on student data (e.g., students demonstrating independent understanding, using academic language) or increase the linguistic complexity of the supports (e.g., use more complex sentence stems: *I believe ___ because ___. → Given the evidence, ___ can be justified by ___).*
- How do you monitor student use of scaffolds and adjust them?
  - Use checks for understanding, listen in on partner talk, read students' responses, and observe which students rely on scaffolding, and which types.
  - Look for evidence that students are beginning to internalize strategies.
  - Ask students to reflect on what helps them learn, and adjust scaffolding based on their needs and growth.
- When monitoring students' progress over time, what do you notice about students' language and reading skills?
  - Look for increased use of academic language, more complex sentence structures in their speech and writing, and stronger comprehension of texts over time.
  - Notice when students begin to express ideas more clearly and confidently during discussions and written responses.