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Promising Practices from the Field

Promoting Academic Success Through Sheltered Instruction: Making Text Accessible and Teaching Learning Strategies

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The instructional shifts highlighted by adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts speak to the more intentional use of scaffolds for all students. Teachers are reminded to plan for the use of curricular materials during classroom instruction that carefully builds in complexity. This support is provided by balancing informational and literary texts, providing both oral and written practice of academic language within each discipline, engaging in close and careful reading and writing, citing evidence from the text, and building language skills that focus on the comprehension and use of terms and concepts that cross curricular areas. (*engageNY.org*)

For those of us working with students learning in a second language, these shifts underscore what we have long known: Our students need a careful and intentional introduction to grade-level oral language and written text. In this on-going series focusing on eight components of sheltered instruction, we have referred to this

component as *Making Text Accessible*. Students also need the opportunity to learn and practice learning strategies that allow them to accelerate their own learning independently. This component, *Teaching Learning Strategies*, refers to the need for students to understand and practice how to accelerate their own learning. Certainly, teachers are employing engaging and effective teaching strategies. Here, we are referring to the strategies students can learn to use independently.

Learning and reading are active and dynamic processes.



Students talk together to deepen their understanding of text.

Effective readers select information from the text, organize that information, relate it to what they already know, retain important and relatable information, use that information in other contexts and, finally, reflect on the success of their efforts (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). How do our students know what information to select, particularly when the language, the cultural context, even the concepts themselves are new? How do they align new information and experiences with both informal and formal learning achieved in other contexts or in home languages different from English? We teach them ... that's how! We model learning strategies. We name those strategies (Johnston, 2004) and talk through each step with our students. We ask our students to apply strategies learned from one context to another. We frontload the linguistic, cultural and conceptual information they will need to engage in text.

For example, we may take headings and sub-headings from a second-grade social studies text on the levels of government and list them

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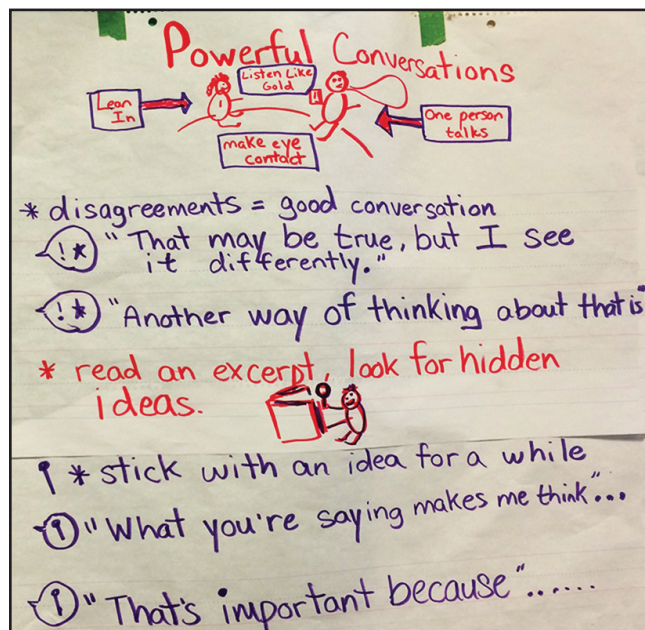
out for the students: federal, state and local. Then, take details from each section of the text and print them on sentence strips: “the city council makes laws and provides services to the citizens” or “the U.S. Congress writes the laws for all of the states” and ask teams of students to predict which section of the chapter this information might be found. Not only would we be planning for peer interaction, we would also be tapping into students’ prior knowledge and teaching students to consider what they already know about a given topic to apply to content-area reading.

We model good reading strategies and teach our students how to interact with text. We might, for example, take a passage from our science text and write it on chart paper. Then, we could mask various content-rich words in the passage. As a class, the students could brainstorm possible words that make sense for the masked words. As the initial letters of the word are exposed, brainstormed lists can be culled until the actual word is exposed. This will teach the students to focus first on context when encountering an unknown word or phrase, and later on the available grapho-phonemic cues.

We teach our students how to springboard from a particular piece of text to extend their learning of both the information presented and the text features the author used to convey that information. We even plan for ways for our students to engage creatively with the text. Students might work together to write an innovation for a shared book, or negotiate to create a freeze-framed tableau of a scene from a story while classmates attempt to identify the scene being depicted (Gibbons, 2002).

Fortunately, the interconnected quality of the eight components of sheltering creates a classroom context for all of this learning to take place. Accessing students’ prior knowledge and connecting new

learning to it is a powerful cognitive learning strategy. Interacting with peers in collaborative tasks and discussion develops metacognition by supporting careful planning, monitoring and evaluation of those tasks. Negotiating with peers, summarizing learning, citing evidence from student to student conversations as well as from related texts, all develop and practice cognitive strategies that can be used across the school day. And, questioning classmates for clarification and cooperating to complete tasks support social and affective learning strategies.



Anchor charts provide reminders for students' use and practice of learning strategies.

In order to avoid overwhelming our students, our planning must be measured and intentional. In an earlier edition of *Soleado* (Winter 2014—one article of this ongoing series on components of sheltered instruction), we discussed focusing on the language demands of both our content objectives and related instructional tasks. These same considerations can help to determine which learning strategies to introduce and practice. In CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language

Learning Approach), an approach to teaching and learning in a second language, Chamot and O'Malley (1994) have long advocated the direct teaching of metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective learning strategies. Metacognitive strategies focus on “executive processes that enable one to anticipate or plan for a task, determine how successfully the plan is being executed and then evaluate the success of the learning ... after learning activities have taken place” (p. 61). They include previewing ideas and concepts of a text, identifying the organization of the text, attending to key words, phrases and linguistic markers, checking for understanding and reflecting on one's learning.

These strategies translate to close reading of a text, taking note of the organization of the text and the words and phrases that affect or resonate with the students as readers, discussing those words and phrases and one's understanding of them with

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classmates, and finally, completing a quick-write or learning log as a reflection of the interaction with that text. These activities are consistent with supporting students' access to grade-level text. Teacher modeling, direct teaching of the steps that comprise the strategy, and practicing using other texts raise the intentionality of the strategy and the likelihood that the students will add it to their learning toolbox.

The same is true of cognitive learning strategies. These are the processes that make up learning taxonomies and depths of knowledge. They include linking new learning to prior knowledge and using imagery, inference, deduction, and transfer. Teaching students to organize concepts and vocabulary, classify information, justify opinions, analyze information, and synthesize learning supports them in every instructional scenario. In accessing text, these learning strategies begin with learning about and discussing the topic of a reading, reviewing the expected vocabulary and concepts of the reading by doing a picture walk, or carefully considering the graphs, illustrations, and other non-fiction text features. During reading, they support students in identifying transitional words and phrases, plotting information on graphic organizers that help the reader organize and classify, and identifying ideas that support or refute an argument. After-reading strategies that are consistent with a staircase of cognitive complexity support students in extending meaning and making text-to-text and text-to-self connections along with creative responses to the reading.

Social and affective learning strategies involve cooperation and collaboration; negotiating for meaning and clarification—asking questions, understanding feedback and other responses from classmates, and even self-talk support meaning-making and the ability to participate in class or partner discussions. They require much interaction with peers and provide real communicative opportunities to practice academic language.

There is a tendency among teachers of students learning in a second language to avoid complex, grade-level text because of the belief that linguistic and cultural factors will make reading impossibly difficult. Certainly, we must be cognizant of our students' proficiency levels and their previous experience with text. But, restricting their exposure to complex texts ensures that they will never meet the

academic demands of their grade level. Instead, we must plan for and implement learning scaffolds that provide support early when strategies and content learning are introduced and then withdraw that support over time, as students gain confidence and skill.

There are many effective and exciting approaches to teaching students to access and engage with grade-level text. Generally speaking, these approaches and strategies follow a before-during-after, or into-through-and-beyond structure that many of us learned in our teacher preparation program at the university. At Dual Language Education of New Mexico, we are fascinated with the detailed reading strategies of Pauline Gibbons and Jeff Zwiers, the Literacy Squared® work of Kathy Escamilla and Sue Hopewell, mini shared reading from Barbara Flores, and the transformative approach to complex text from Lily Wong Fillmore.

There is much to learn from these experts and we would do well to take advantage of professional development opportunities to learn more about these strategies and approaches; even creating our own book study groups with our colleagues! But we would be even better advised to set aside the traditional instructional approaches that were used when we were in school and actually try some of these newer and more innovative approaches. This step requires quite a bit of effort on our part, particularly as we begin planning for and implementing these shifts. But, our academic English learners deserve the rigor and complexity of grade-level text; they need to learn those strategies that accelerate their ability to learn concepts and skills and prepare them to live and work successfully. They deserve it and we have the skills and passion to help make it happen. Let's get busy!

References

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This series on sheltered instruction began in the Fall 2014 issue of Soleado. To see that article and the rest of the series, please visit soleado.dlenm.org.

