Pennsylvania
Department of Education

Supporting English Learners in the Classroom

A Practical Guide for Content Educators

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Introduction

A Shared Responsibility

The Basic Education Circular, 22 Pa. Code §4.26 – Educating English Learners, states:

> *ELD is a required component of all language instruction educational programs (LIEPs). ELD takes place daily throughout the day for ELs and is delivered by both ESL teachers and non-ESL teachers.*

English learners develop language through meaningful engagement with content. As a result:

- **Content teachers** play a critical role in making instruction understandable and accessible
- **ESL teachers** play a critical role in developing the language students need to engage with that content

These roles are distinct but significantly connected.

Role of the ESL teacher

English language development instruction, delivered by a licensed ESL teacher is its own content area. ELD in this context is driven by language, but it draws from general education content as a vehicle for instruction in order to contextualize language learning. It must be codified in a dedicated and planned curriculum specifically designed to develop the English language proficiency of ELs. ELD instruction provides systematic, explicit, and sustained language instruction designed to prepare students for the general academic program by focusing, in meaningful and contextualized circumstances, on the academic language structures that underpin social and academic constructs. It can be taught as a stand-alone class or course but may also be embedded within other courses with the direct support of an ESL program specialist as appropriate based on the program design and needs of the students.

Role of non-ESL teachers

ELD must be incorporated into all classes taught by non-ESL licensed teachers in which ELs are enrolled. These teachers are responsible for deliberately planning for and incorporating language instruction as well as supports, modifications, and accommodations needed to allow ELs to access the standards to which the course is aligned.

Purpose of This Resource

This document is designed to support content educators in meeting the needs of English learners (ELs) by organizing widely accepted research and instructional practices into a practical, classroom-focused guide.

It is not a curriculum, checklist, or compliance tool. Rather, it is a resource to help educators make informed instructional decisions that support both content learning and English language development.

When students cannot access the language of instruction, they cannot access the content. The goal is not to simplify the content or focus on different or lower standards, but to make the grade-appropriate standards and instruction understandable while fostering English language development.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is organized into four major sections to support different kinds of instructional planning needs. It is designed so that teachers can engage with it at whatever level of depth is most useful in the moment.

1. **Foundational Classroom Practices**

   The *Foundational Classroom Practices* section lists foundational adjustments to general classroom practice that should be in place whenever English learners are present regardless of the strategies being employed.

2. **Quick Reference**

   The *Quick Reference* section provides a concise, scannable list of instructional strategies organized by phase of instruction (before, during, and after). It is intended for teachers who need ideas quickly and want a menu to draw from without reading at length.

3. **Instructional Strategies in Depth**

   The *Instructional Strategies in Depth* section develops eight core strategies in greater detail. Each strategy includes a brief explanation of why it matters for English learners, a set of specific instructional moves, and a classroom example. This section is useful for teachers who want to understand the reasoning behind a strategy before trying it, or who are looking to strengthen a particular area of their practice.

4. **Appendices**

   The appendices provide extended instructional examples for each of the eight strategies, organized by grade band and content area. Teachers who want to see what a strategy looks like in their specific context (e.g., a middle school science classroom or with students at a particular proficiency level) will find concrete, ready-to-use examples in this guide.

5. **Explore Further**

   The *Explore Further* section offers a short list of nationally recognized, research-based resources for teachers who want to go deeper on any of the topics covered in this guide.

Foundational Classroom Practices

The strategies in this guide address specific aspects of instruction (e.g., how to scaffold reading, how to build background knowledge, how to structure interaction). But before any of those strategies can be effective, there are foundational adjustments to general classroom practice that should be in place whenever English learners are present. These are not lesson-specific techniques. They are habits of instruction that create the basic conditions under which ELs can access and participate in learning. A teacher who implements specific strategies without attending to these foundational practices is, in a sense, building on an unstable foundation. The practices in this section should become second nature. They should be the baseline from which all other instructional decisions are made.

- Slow the pace of speech during instruction, particularly when introducing new concepts or giving directions. This does not mean speaking unnaturally slowly, but deliberately enough that students have time to process language they are still acquiring. Watch for non-verbal cues from students as you speak and rephrase or repeat if they demonstrate confusion.
- Speak at a measured pace and avoid idiomatic language or colloquialisms that do not translate well (such as, "let's hit the ground running," or "it's not rocket science").
- Use consistent, predictable language for routine instructions and classroom procedures so ELs can build familiarity over time.
- Avoid over-correcting language errors in the moment, particularly during discussion, which shuts down participation.
- Be aware of cultural differences in how students relate to authority, express disagreement, or signal confusion. Silence and eye contact mean different things in different cultures.
- Position yourself visibly when speaking so students can use facial expressions and mouth movement as comprehension supports.
- Repeat and rephrase key information naturally rather than just repeating the same words louder.
- Allow adequate waiting time after posing questions to the whole class and after calling on individual students. ELs need additional processing time to formulate responses in a second language and will rarely volunteer if the pace of the room does not accommodate that.
- Be mindful of humor, sarcasm, and figurative language, which can be confusing rather than engaging for ELs at lower proficiency levels.

Quick-Reference: Instructional Strategies for English Learners

Organized by Instructional Phase

Note: The strategies in this section should be applied with the student's proficiency level in mind. Supports that are essential for entering and emerging level students may be unnecessary for students at expanding and bridging levels and applying them uniformly can limit language growth rather than support it. When in doubt, refer to Strategy 7: *Differentiate by Proficiency Level*.

BEFORE — Preparing Students to Access the Lesson

These strategies reduce barriers before instruction begins by building context, previewing language, and activating prior knowledge.

Building Background and Context

- Show images, video clips, or physical objects related to the topic before introducing text or lecture
- Connect the topic explicitly to students' prior knowledge or lived experience (for example, before a unit on migration, ask students what they know about why people move from one place to another).
- Briefly explain what the lesson is about and why it matters before diving into content
- Use anticipation guides to surface what students already know or believe about a topic

Pre-Teaching Language

- Identify 3–5 high-utility words or phrases students will need to access the lesson and teach them explicitly before the lesson begins
- Introduce sentence frames students will use during discussion or in writing before the task starts
- Preview key academic language structures (e.g., cause-and-effect, comparison) that will appear in the lesson
- Provide a simple bilingual glossary or translated word list for essential terms. Note that word-to-word glossaries, and even translated text, may not address all comprehension gaps. Students may be unfamiliar with some academic terms in their native language as well, so direct concept instruction may still be needed.

Preparing Text and Materials

- Preview the structure of a text for students before they read (headings, visuals, text features)
- Provide a graphic organizer or note-taking frame before reading or listening tasks
- Simplify or paraphrase directions in advance, then retain original academic phrasing alongside
- Give students a moment to preview questions they will be expected to answer before reading

DURING — Supporting Access and Participation in the Moment

These strategies make instruction comprehensible and create meaningful opportunities for language use as the lesson unfolds.

Making Content Comprehensible

- Pair verbal explanations with diagrams, models, or visual displays.
- Annotate texts, problems, or diagrams in real time rather than presenting pre-marked materials.
- Think aloud to make reasoning and meaning-making visible.
- Break complex sentences or multi-step directions into smaller, sequential chunks.
- Paraphrase dense academic language in plainer terms, then return to the original phrasing*
- Use gestures, demonstrations, and physical modeling alongside spoken explanation.
- Highlight or color-code key ideas, terms, or text structures as you teach.

** Note: Paraphrasing is a temporary bridge, not a destination. The goal is to give students a foothold on meaning so they can engage with grade-level academic language, not to replace that language permanently. A lesson that never returns to the original phrasing has not supported English learners. It has shortchanged them.*

Supporting Language Use

- Provide sentence frames or starters before asking students to speak or write.
- Use structured partner talk rather than open whole-class discussion for initial responses.
- Assign discussion roles (e.g., claim-maker, questioner, evidence-finder) so all students have a clear entry point.
- When posing questions to the whole class, allow additional wait time before taking responses. ELs need more time to process the question and formulate a response in a second language and will rarely volunteer if non-EL peers respond immediately.
- When calling on an EL directly, allow adequate time for the student to respond before stepping in. Jumping in too quickly to help or rephrase communicates that you do not expect the student to answer, which discourages participation over time.
- Rephrase questions at varying levels of linguistic complexity to give all students access.
- Encourage students to use their home language to clarify understanding with a peer when helpful and possible.

Monitoring Understanding (formative assessment)

- Use low-stakes, frequent comprehension checks (thumbs up/down, mini-whiteboards, exit slips) rather than relying on raised hands.
- Ask students to restate or paraphrase key ideas in their own words. When evaluating responses, focus on whether the student captured the meaning rather than on grammatical accuracy. An imperfect sentence that demonstrates content understanding is a successful response.

- Use strategic questioning. Move from simpler, concrete questions to more complex, abstract ones.
- Watch for nonverbal cues that may signal confusion. ELs may not ask for clarification verbally.
- Distinguish between language difficulty and content difficulty when students struggle to respond. A quick way to check is to ask the same question using a nonverbal or lower-language format, such as pointing, drawing, or choosing between two options. If the student responds correctly, the barrier is language, not content, and the instructional response should be different in each case.

AFTER — Scaffolding Output and Demonstrating Understanding

These strategies support ELs in showing what they know through speaking, writing, and other forms of expression.

Scaffolding Writing and Speaking

- Provide writing frames or templates that give students the structure of a response without doing the thinking for them.
- Allow students to talk through their ideas with a partner before writing.
- Offer graphic organizers, outlines, or brief planning time to help students organize their thinking before writing or speaking.
- Use mentor texts or model responses to show students what the expected output looks like.
- Scaffold oral presentations with an outline, speaking frame, or note card.

Assessment and Feedback

- Provide feedback on content understanding separately from feedback on language errors.
- Use rubrics that distinguish content mastery from language proficiency so ELs are not penalized for developing language.
- Allow multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding (drawing, labeling, oral response, written response, native language response).
- Allow drafting and revision. ELs benefit from iteration more than a single-attempt product.
- Use structured peer review protocols rather than open-ended peer feedback. For example, provide a response frame such as 'One thing that was clear was ___. One question I have is ___.' Open-ended prompts like 'give your partner feedback' place too much language demand on ELs and often produce little useful response from either the reviewer or the student being reviewed.

Extending and Reinforcing Language

- Return to key vocabulary and language structures introduced earlier in the lesson during the output phase.
- Celebrate language growth explicitly (note when a student uses a new term or structure correctly).

- Gradually remove scaffolds as students demonstrate independence rather than withdrawing them abruptly.
- Connect the language of the output task back to the frames and structures used during instruction.

Instructional Strategies in Depth

Making Content Comprehensible

1. Differentiate by Proficiency Level

This strategy is listed first because it is foundational to everything that follows. Proficiency level should be the first thing a teacher considers when planning any instructional support for an English learner. The strategies in this guide are not one-size-fits-all. A scaffold that is essential for a student at the entering level may be unnecessary or even limiting for a student at the expanding level. Knowing where your students are allows you to apply the remaining strategies with precision rather than uniformly, which is the foundation of genuinely responsive instruction.

Know your students' proficiency levels and use that information when planning support to calibrate scaffolds, *not to lower expectations*. Keep in mind that proficiency is not a single, fixed number. A student may be around a developing level in speaking and listening but at an emerging level in writing and reading. Supports should reflect where a student is at any given time in the specific domain the task requires. The best sources for this information are ACCESS scores, which provide proficiency levels by domain, classroom observations, and the ESL teacher, who can offer current, classroom-level insight into where a student is and what supports have been most effective. Making time for even a brief conversation with the ESL teacher at the start of a unit can significantly improve the quality and accuracy of the differentiation you provide.

Note: the examples throughout this guide are illustrative, not prescriptive. They are designed to show what a strategy looks like in practice, not to provide ready-made language for every classroom. A teacher reading an example and thinking 'my students would not understand even the simplified version here' is probably correct, and that is exactly the point of this strategy. The example is not the target. The target is understanding where your students are and calibrating the language, scaffolding, and complexity of the task accordingly. Every example in this guide should be read through the lens of your students' actual proficiency levels, not as a script to be followed as written.

Instructional Moves:

- For students at entering and emerging levels: prioritize visual supports, physical modeling, and opportunities to respond nonverbally or with single words and phrases before full sentences are expected.
- For students at developing levels: provide sentence frames, structured partner talk, and explicit vocabulary instruction; expect and support paragraph-level responses.
- For students at expanding and bridging levels: reduce scaffolding gradually, provide models of complex academic language, and focus on extending vocabulary and refining written expression.
- Avoid applying the same scaffold uniformly (e.g., a sentence frame that supports an entering student may be unnecessary and limiting for a bridging student).

Example: During a discussion task, an entering-level student is paired with a bilingual peer and responds using a visual organizer and a single-word frame: "I think ___." A developing student uses

a full sentence frame: "I think ___ because ___." An expanding student is asked to respond without a frame but is expected to use at least one content-specific term in their response. The task is the same; the scaffolding is calibrated to the student.

2. Reduce Linguistic Load Without Reducing Rigor

Academic language is dense by design. It is precise, compact, and often structured in ways that take years to acquire. For English learners, the language of instruction can become a barrier that has nothing to do with their ability to understand the underlying academic concepts. A student who cannot parse a complex sentence is not necessarily a student who cannot grasp the idea inside it. Reducing linguistic load means adjusting how content is expressed (simplifying the language used to deliver instruction) without simplifying the content itself or lowering the expectations attached to it. The goal is access, not reduction.

Instructional Moves:

- Break complex sentences into smaller, meaningful chunks that present one idea at a time, then reconnect those chunks to the original phrasing.
- Highlight or annotate key clauses and ideas in a text so students know where to focus their attention.
- Paraphrase directions and explanations using clearer or more direct language, then reintroduce the academic phrasing once students have a foothold on the meaning.

Example: Instead of: "Analyze how environmental factors contributed to population shifts during the Industrial Revolution."

Try: "We are going to figure out how the environment caused people to move during the Industrial Revolution."

Once students are oriented to the task, return to the original phrasing and explain what "analyze" and "contributed to" are asking them to do. The simplified version opens the door. The academic version is where students need to end up.

3. Make Meaning Visible

Much of what expert learners do when they read, solve problems, or analyze information is invisible. They make inferences, recognize text structures, and construct meaning through mental processes that are automatic and largely unconscious. This means that those processes are also largely inaccessible to students who are still developing both content knowledge and language. For English learners, this invisibility is a compounded barrier: they are trying to acquire language and content simultaneously, often without a clear model of how either works in academic contexts. Making meaning visible means bringing those hidden processes into the open. This can be done through visuals that make abstract ideas concrete, think-alouds that narrate reasoning as it happens, and real-time annotations that show students how a proficient reader or thinker interacts with material.

Instructional Moves:

- Pair verbal explanations with diagrams, models, labeled images, or graphic organizers so that students have a visual entry point alongside the spoken or written explanation.
- Think aloud during reading, problem-solving, or analysis to make the reasoning process audible and observable. Narrate what you notice, what you question, and how you arrive at meaning.
- Annotate texts, problems, or examples in real time rather than presenting finished, pre-marked materials so that students can see meaning being constructed, not just the result of it.

Example: While solving a math problem, narrate: 'First, I'm looking for what the question is asking… now I see I need to find the total before I can find the difference.' Write each step as you say it, and label what you are doing and why. Students see not only the solution but the thinking and language that produced it, and they gain a model they can begin to internalize and use themselves. Keep in mind that the language of the think-aloud should reflect the proficiency levels of the students in the room. For entering and emerging level students, use shorter, simpler narration and pair it with gestures or visual support. For more proficient students, the think-aloud can model more complex academic language and sentence structures.

4. Structure Student Interaction

Language is not acquired through exposure alone. It develops through use. Students who sit quietly through a lesson, understanding more than they can express, are not developing language. But simply getting students to talk or write is not sufficient either. Language develops through structured, purposeful use, and without intentional instructional design, students may be producing language without developing it. They need opportunities to produce language in conditions that are deliberately designed to support that development. For English learners, unstructured discussion often defaults to silence or minimal participation. This is not because students have nothing to contribute, but because the language demands of open-ended academic talk are high and the entry points are unclear. Structuring interaction means designing the conditions under which students can engage meaningfully (providing the linguistic scaffolding to get started, creating accountability for participation, and gradually releasing students toward independent language use as their proficiency develops).

Instructional Moves:

- Provide sentence frames or starters before asking students to speak or write. These give students a grammatical entry point so they can focus on meaning rather than simultaneously managing form and content.
- Use structured partner or small group talk rather than open whole-class discussion for initial responses, so that every student has a low-stakes opportunity to produce language before being asked to perform in front of the room.
- Set clear expectations for what a complete response looks like in terms of content, language, and form so students know what they are aiming for before they respond.

Example: Instead of asking: "What do you think?", which places the full linguistic burden on the student, try: "I think ___ because ___." The frame does not do the thinking for the student, but it provides the structure that makes the thinking expressible. Over time, as students internalize the pattern and gain confidence, remove the frame and expect students to generate that structure independently. The goal is always language independence. The frame is a temporary bridge, not a permanent fixture.

5. Teach and Reuse Academic Language

Vocabulary instruction is most effective when it is intentional, contextualized, and cumulative, but in practice, it is often reduced to a pre-teaching checklist. A teacher introduces a list of bolded terms before a lesson, students copy definitions, and the words are rarely encountered again in a meaningful way. For English learners, this approach is insufficient. ELs need far more than word recognition. They need to understand how academic language functions, which means knowing not just what a word means but what it does. Words like "analyze," "justify," "contribute," and "suggest" are not content vocabulary, but they are the words students need to think, discuss, and write academically across every subject. Intentional vocabulary instruction targets these high-utility words and phrases alongside content terms, embeds them in meaningful contexts, and returns to them repeatedly so that students develop genuine ownership of the language rather than surface familiarity with a definition.

Instructional Moves:

- Focus on high-utility words and phrases that appear across multiple tasks and disciplines. Do not limit vocabulary instruction to the bolded terms in instructional texts or glossary entries, which often address content vocabulary while leaving the language of academic thinking untaught.
- Reuse key language across multiple activities within a lesson and across lessons within a unit, so that students encounter the same words and structures in reading, discussion, and writing rather than in isolation.
- Emphasize how language functions. Teach students that "because" signals reasoning, that "however" signals contrast, that "the evidence suggests" signals an analytical claim. This will help them develop an understanding of what language *does*, not only what it *means*.

Example: In science, introduce the structure "The results show that ___ because ___." Use it first in teacher modeling, then in a whole-class discussion, then as the basis for a written response. When students encounter it again in the next lesson, it is no longer new. It is a tool they already have. Over time, that structure becomes part of how they think and write scientifically, not just a frame they borrowed for one task.

6. Build and Activate Background Knowledge

Content learning depends on prior knowledge. When students lack familiarity with the cultural, historical, or conceptual context of a topic, they struggle to make meaning even when the language is made accessible. For English learners, this gap is often about exposure as opposed to ability. Building background knowledge before and during instruction gives students the context they need to connect new content to something meaningful.

Instructional Moves:

- Before introducing a topic, briefly assess what students already know through any combination of discussion, images, or quick written responses. For example, before a unit on the American Revolution, display an image of a colonial protest and ask: 'What do you notice? What do you think is happening here?' Student responses give you a quick picture of what background knowledge exists and where instruction needs to begin.
- Use photographs, short video clips, or physical objects to build conceptual context before introducing text or lecture.
- Explicitly connect new content to students' prior knowledge or lived experience, including experiences from their home countries or cultures.
- When students lack background knowledge, build it directly rather than assuming they will acquire it through exposure to the content alone. For example, if students have no context for a unit on the Civil Rights Movement, do not begin with a primary source document. Begin with a brief, accessible explanation of the social and political conditions of the time, supported by photographs or a short video clip, before introducing any text or formal content.

Example: Before a unit on the Great Depression, rather than beginning with a reading, show a photograph and ask: "What do you notice? What do you wonder?" Use student responses to surface existing knowledge and identify gaps, then fill those gaps with brief, accessible explanation before the primary text is introduced.

7. Scaffold Reading Tasks

Grade-level texts present a significant challenge for English learners, not because the content is beyond them, but because the density, structure, and vocabulary of academic text can make it inaccessible. A student who struggles to get through a paragraph is not necessarily a student who cannot understand the ideas inside it. The barrier is often the language of the text, not the concept it is carrying. Scaffolding reading tasks means providing support for how students interact with text, not changing what the text asks them to understand. This is an important distinction. Giving a student a simplified version of a text at a lower reading level is not scaffolding. It is a substitution that removes the challenge rather than supporting the student in meeting it. True scaffolding keeps the text and the expectation intact while giving students the tools to access both. Done well, it builds the reading skills and habits that students will need to engage with complex text independently over time.

Instructional Moves:

- Chunk long texts into smaller sections and pause between sections to check understanding and reinforce key ideas.
- Provide graphic organizers that give students a framework for tracking information as they read (cause and effect, main idea and details, sequence of events).
- Use annotation guides that direct students' attention to specific features (a claim, a piece of evidence, an unfamiliar word) rather than asking them to annotate without direction.
- Preview text structure before students read: identify headings, visuals, captions, and text features and explain what they signal.
- Read aloud or provide audio support for complex texts so that students can access meaning through listening while also following along in print.

Example: Before students read a science article independently, walk them through the headings and any diagrams: "This section is going to explain the cause. This section will explain the effect. As you read, use your organizer to track both." Students read with a clear purpose and a framework rather than facing an undifferentiated block of text.

8. Use Formative Assessment That Captures Content Knowledge

Traditional formative assessment approaches can mask what English learners actually know. When a student cannot yet express an idea in English, that silence or incomplete response is often misread as a gap in content understanding rather than a gap in language production. Effective formative assessment for ELs separates, as much as possible, what a student knows from what they can currently say or write in English.

Instructional Moves:

- Use nonverbal or low-language response formats to check for understanding: sorting tasks, matching activities, labeled diagrams, thumbs up/middle/down, mini-whiteboards
- Ask students to demonstrate understanding through drawing, pointing, or physical modeling before requiring written or oral explanation
- Use strategic questioning that moves from recognition ("Which of these is an example of X?") to production ("Explain what X means") so that all students can show partial understanding
- When reviewing written responses from ELs, distinguish errors that affect meaning from errors that do not (a student who writes "the economy it was unstable" has demonstrated content understanding; the language error is a separate instructional target)
- Confer briefly with individual ELs during work time to check understanding orally rather than relying solely on written products

Example: At the end of a lesson on fractions, rather than asking all students to write an explanation, the teacher asks entering-level students to match a visual model to the correct fraction notation, developing students to complete a sentence frame, and expanding students to write their own explanation. All three formats assess the same concept, but the format is adjusted so language does not block the demonstration of content knowledge.

Appendix A: Instructional Examples for Making Content Comprehensible

This appendix provides extended examples of instructional moves that help make grade-level content more accessible. These examples illustrate how teachers can adjust how content is presented and discussed so that students can better understand and engage with the material.

Instructional Focus: Differentiate by Proficiency Level

This appendix provides extended examples of what differentiated instruction looks like in practice for English learners at different proficiency levels. Rather than organizing by instructional move, these examples are organized by proficiency band so that teachers can locate guidance based on where their students actually are. In each case, the content standard and the learning expectation remain the same. What changes is the type and intensity of scaffolding provided.

A note on proficiency levels: The examples below use the WIDA proficiency level framework, which describes six levels of English language development: Entering, Emerging, Developing, Expanding, Bridging, and Reaching. For practical purposes in the classroom and for this guide, these are grouped into three bands:

- Proficiency band 1: Entering/Emerging
- Proficiency band 2: Developing
- Proficiency band 3: Expanding/Bridging

Keep in mind that students can have different proficiency levels in different domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and assessment scores are only a reference point. Pay attention to students demonstrated proficiency in class along with tools including the WIDA proficiency level descriptors (PLDs), Language Charts, and Can-Do Descriptors to make decisions about support and assessment.

Proficiency Band 1: Entering and Emerging

Students at entering and emerging levels are in the earliest stages of English acquisition. They may understand more than they can express, and they often have strong conceptual knowledge in their home language that is not yet accessible in English. Instruction at this level should prioritize comprehensible input, nonverbal and low-language response formats, and visual and physical supports. The goal is meaningful participation, not silence while waiting for language to develop.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science | Standard: Students will identify the basic needs of living things.

- Provide a visual word bank with pictures alongside labels: sun, water, soil, air.
- Allow students to respond by pointing, drawing, or sorting picture cards rather than writing or speaking.
- Pair the student with a bilingual peer who can clarify in the home language when needed.

- During whole-class discussion, ask yes/no or either/or questions: "Does a plant need water, yes or no?"
- Accept single-word or gesture responses as complete and meaningful participation.

What stays the same: Students are learning the same science content and are expected to demonstrate the same conceptual understanding. The format of participation is adjusted, not the standard.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Social Studies | Standard: Students will explain the causes and effects of westward expansion.

- Provide a pre-labeled timeline with key events already identified. Students add illustrations or simple labels rather than constructing the timeline independently.
- Use maps with visual cues: color-coded regions, arrows showing movement, pictures representing key events.
- Provide sentence frames for oral and written responses: "People moved west because ___." / "One effect was ___."
- For assessment, allow students to label a diagram or match causes to effects rather than write a paragraph.
- Avoid cold calling. Give students advance notice of questions so they can prepare.

What stays the same: Students are engaging with the same historical content. Scaffolding reduces the language demand without reducing the conceptual demand.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: ELA | Standard: Students will analyze how a central idea is developed over the course of a text.

- Provide a heavily scaffolded graphic organizer with the central idea pre-filled and space for students to record one supporting detail per section.
- Use a color-coded or chunked version of the text with key sentences highlighted.
- Allow the student to respond orally to a teacher or aide rather than in writing.
- Use illustrations or diagrams alongside the text to provide visual context for key passages.
- Provide a bilingual summary or glossary of key terms if available.

What stays the same: Students are working with the same text and the same standard. The scaffolding reduces the language barrier to accessing the text without changing what students are expected to understand.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: Science | Standard: Students will explain the relationship between genetic variation and natural selection.

- Provide a visual diagram of the process with labels and arrows as a reference throughout the lesson.
- Use a simplified version of the core text alongside the original or provide a bilingual resource if available (make sure your students understand native language resources before using them).

- For written tasks, provide a sentence frame: "Genetic variation means ___. When the environment changes, individuals with ___ are more likely to ___ because ___."
- Allow students to demonstrate understanding through labeled diagrams before being expected to produce written explanation.
- Break the concept into discrete, sequential steps and check understanding at each step before moving forward.

What stays the same: Students are learning the same scientific concept. The scaffolding makes the concept accessible at their current language level without exempting them from the standard.

Proficiency Band 2: Developing

Students at the developing level have a growing foundation in English and can communicate in simple sentences, though they continue to need support with complex grammar, academic vocabulary, and extended discourse. They are often able to participate in structured interaction and to produce written responses with scaffolding. Instruction at this level should gradually increase language demands while continuing to provide sentence-level support and explicit vocabulary instruction.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Math | Standard: Students will solve and explain simple addition and subtraction word problems.

- Provide sentence frames for explanation: "First I ___. Then I ___. The answer is ___."
- Use manipulatives and visual models alongside the written problem.
- Allow students to explain their thinking to a partner before writing it down.
- Provide a word bank of math vocabulary: add, subtract, total, difference, more, fewer.
- Accept short written responses with grammatical errors as long as meaning is clear. Address language errors separately from content feedback.

What stays the same: Students are solving the same math problems and are expected to explain their reasoning. The scaffold provides the language structure for explanation without providing mathematical thinking.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Science | Standard: Students will describe the water cycle and explain the role of each stage.

- Provide a labeled diagram of the water cycle that students can reference while reading and writing.
- Use sentence frames for each stage: "During evaporation, ___." / "Condensation happens when ___."
- Pair reading with discussion. Have students talk through each stage with a partner before writing.
- Provide explicit instruction on transition words that signal sequence: first, then, next, as a result.

- For assessment, allow students to label and annotate a diagram alongside written explanation

What stays the same: Students are expected to explain the water cycle. The scaffolding supports sentence-level language production without reducing the conceptual expectation.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Social Studies | Standard: Students will analyze the causes of the Civil War from multiple perspectives.

- Provide adapted texts at a somewhat reduced lexical complexity while maintaining content accuracy.
- Use a structured discussion protocol with sentence frames: "From the perspective of ___, the main cause was ___ because ___."
- Provide a comparison organizer for students to track similarities and differences across perspectives.
- For written responses, provide a paragraph frame with space for claim, evidence, and explanation.
- Give explicit feedback on content first and language second. Distinguish between errors that affect meaning and those that do not.

What stays the same: Students are engaging with the same historical content and are expected to analyze multiple perspectives. The scaffolding supports the language demands of analysis without replacing the analytical thinking.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: ELA | Standard: Students will analyze how an author's choices about structure contribute to meaning.

- Provide an annotation guide directing students to identify structural features: "Mark where the narrative shifts. Circle the turning point."
- Offer sentence stems for analytical writing: "The author's choice to ___ creates the effect of ___."
- Use a short model paragraph to show what structural analysis looks like in writing before students attempt it independently.
- Use structured partner talk before whole-class sharing so students can rehearse their ideas
- Provide a vocabulary reference for the language of literary analysis: structure, pacing, perspective, shift, tension.

What stays the same: Students are reading the same text and are expected to analyze authorial structure. The scaffolding provides the language of literary analysis explicitly so that ELs can engage with the intellectual task rather than being blocked by unfamiliar academic vocabulary or language structures.

Proficiency Band 3: Expanding and Bridging

Students at expanding and bridging levels have developed significant English proficiency and can engage with grade-level content with decreasing levels of support. They are capable of producing extended discourse in speaking and writing and are developing the ability to use language flexibly and precisely. Instruction at this level should focus on refining academic language use, extending vocabulary, and gradually withdrawing scaffolding so that students move toward full independence. The most common mistake at this level is continuing to provide support that students no longer need, which limits language growth rather than supporting it.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: ELA | Standard: Students will describe characters in a story using key details from the text.

- Provide access to a vocabulary reference for descriptive language, but do not pre-fill any organizer. Students generate their own ideas.
- Encourage precise language use: "Can you tell me more about why the character did that? Is there a better word than 'nice'?"
- Ask follow-up questions that push toward elaboration: "How do you know? What in the story makes you think that?"
- Provide a mentor sentence as a model of strong descriptive writing, but not a sentence frame. Students generate their own sentences.
- Celebrate precise and independent language use explicitly: "I noticed you used the word 'determined' instead of 'tried hard'. That is exactly the kind of word choice strong writers make."

What stays the same: The shift at this level is away from frames and toward independent language production, with feedback that develops precision rather than just accuracy.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Science | Standard: Students will construct an explanation for how fossils provide evidence of past environments.

- Remove sentence frames. Students at this level should be constructing their own explanations.
- Provide a vocabulary reference for scientific explanation language without requiring its use mechanically.
- Push students toward complex sentence construction: "Can you combine those two ideas into one sentence? What word would connect them?"
- Require at least one piece of textual or observational evidence in the explanation.
- Provide feedback that addresses sophistication of language use: "Your explanation is accurate. How could you make the connection between the fossil and the environment more explicit?"

What stays the same: Instruction at this level focuses on developing precision and complexity in academic language. The focus on providing access to content is less at these levels of proficiency.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Social Studies | Standard: Students will evaluate the effectiveness of arguments made by historical figures.

- Assign the same primary source texts used with all students. DO NOT use adapted versions.

- Remove graphic organizers and sentence frames; students organize their own thinking and construct their own responses.
- Focus instruction on the language of evaluation: "What does it mean to evaluate an argument? What are you actually claiming when you say an argument is effective?"
- Push for precision in written responses: "This sentence is vague. What specifically made the argument effective or ineffective?"
- Provide feedback on register and tone: "This word choice is too informal for an analytical response. How might you rephrase it?"

What stays the same: Students are engaging with the same historical content at the same level of analytical complexity. The focus of support has shifted from access to refinement of language.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: ELA | Standard: Students will write an analytical essay that develops a complex claim supported by textual evidence.

- Assign the same essay prompt used with all students.
- Provide a revision checklist that includes language-specific criteria: precision of word choice, variety of sentence structure, appropriate academic register.
- In writing conferences, focus on the sophistication of the claim and the quality of the reasoning, not just surface-level errors.
- Push students beyond formulaic analytical writing: "Your claim is clear, but it is predictable. What would a more complex or surprising argument look like?"
- Address persistent grammatical patterns that affect clarity, not every error. Focus on patterns that recur and affect the quality of the writing.

What stays the same: Students are completing the same analytical writing task at full complexity. Support at this level is focused on developing the precision, sophistication, and independence that characterize strong academic writing.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Applying the same scaffolds to all ELs regardless of proficiency level

Do not:

- Provide sentence frames for students who have moved beyond needing them. This limits language growth rather than supporting it.
- Assume that because a student is designated as an EL, they need the most intensive scaffolding.
- Conflate entering-level supports with developing-level supports. They serve different students with different needs.
- Withdraw all scaffolding abruptly when a student seems to be doing well. Gradual release is more effective than sudden removal.

Do:

- Review students' proficiency level designations at the start of the year and update your understanding as students develop.
- Observe how students use scaffolds. A student who consistently goes beyond a sentence frame is signaling that it is no longer necessary.
- Differentiate within a single lesson. It is possible and practical to provide different levels of support to different students during the same task.
- Communicate with the ESL teacher about where students are and what support is most appropriate.

Key Takeaway Differentiation by proficiency level is not about sorting students into groups with different expectations. It is about calibrating the type and intensity of support so that every student can engage with the same rigorous content. The standard stays the same. The scaffold is what changes. And as students develop, the scaffold should change too, shrinking gradually as students demonstrate the capacity to work without it.

Instructional Focus: Reduce Linguistic Load Without Reducing Rigor

These moves support student understanding by making directions, texts, and explanations clearer—without changing the content or lowering expectations.

Instructional Move 1: Break complex sentences into smaller, meaningful chunks

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher temporarily breaks apart dense language so students can process one idea at a time, then reconnects those ideas to the original phrasing.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: Science

Original statement:

"Plants need sunlight, water, and nutrients from the soil to grow and stay healthy."

Instructional approach:

- Present one idea at a time:
    - "Plants need sunlight."
    - "Plants need water."
    - "Plants need nutrients from the soil."
- Use visuals (sun, water, soil) to reinforce each idea
- Recombine:
    - "Plants need sunlight, water, and nutrients to grow."

What stays the same:
Students are still learning the full concept, just in manageable parts.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Original sentence:

"When water evaporates from the surface, it cools the surrounding area."

Instructional approach:

- Break into steps:
    - "Water evaporates from the surface."
    - "This cools the area around it."
- Ask:
    - "What happens first?"

- “What happens next?”
- Reconnect:
  - “When this happens, it causes this.”

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Social Studies

Original sentence:

“Although the empire expanded rapidly, it faced internal challenges that eventually led to its decline.”

Instructional approach:

- Separate ideas:
  - “The empire expanded rapidly.”
  - “It had internal challenges.”
  - “Those challenges led to decline.”
- Then reconnect:
  - “Even though it expanded, it still declined because of internal problems.”

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Original sentence:

“Economic instability, combined with political unrest, contributed to the collapse of the government.”

Instructional approach:

- Break into components:
  - “The economy was unstable.”
  - “There was political unrest.”
  - “These caused the government to collapse.”
- Reconnect to original phrasing and discuss why that phrasing is used in academic texts.

Instructional Move 2: Highlight key clauses or ideas in a text

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher directs attention to the most important parts of a sentence or passage so students can focus on meaning rather than getting lost in details.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: ELA

Text:

“The main reason animals migrate is to find food and suitable living conditions.”

Instructional approach:

- Highlight or underline:
  - “main reason”
  - “find food”
- Ask:
  - “What is the most important idea here?”

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Science

Text:

“The author argues that renewable energy is essential because it reduces environmental damage and ensures long-term sustainability.”

Instructional approach:

- Label parts:
  - Claim: “renewable energy is essential”
  - Reasons: “reduces environmental damage,” “ensures sustainability”
- Use a simple organizer (claim → reasons)

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Text:

“Despite short-term economic costs, the policy is justified by its long-term societal benefits.”

Instructional approach:

- Highlight contrast:
  - “short-term costs” vs. “long-term benefits”
- Ask:
  - “Which idea does the author support?”

Instructional Move 3: Paraphrase directions using clearer or more direct language

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher restates directions in plain language, so students clearly understand the task, then reinforces the original academic phrasing.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: ELA

Original direction:

"Describe the differences between the two characters."

Paraphrase:

"Tell how these two characters are different."

Follow-up:

- "That's what 'describe the differences' means."

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: ELA

Original direction:

"Explain how the setting influences the events in the story."

Paraphrase:

"How does *where* the story happens affect *what* happens? Why is *where* the story happens important?"

Follow-up:

- "The setting means where the story happened. 'Influences' means how it affects the story."

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Science

Original direction:

"Analyze the factors that contributed to the outcome."

Paraphrase:

"What things caused this result? How did they lead to it?"

Follow-up:

- "You just analyzed the factors. Analyze means to examine, study, and consider."

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Original direction:

“Evaluate the effectiveness of the author’s argument.”

Paraphrase:

“How well does the author support their claim? Is the argument convincing?”

Follow-up:

- Return to the original term “evaluate” and connect it to what students just did.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Oversimplifying instead of supporting

Do not:

- Replace all academic language permanently
- Lower the complexity of the task

Do:

- Temporarily clarify meaning
- Return students to grade-level language and expectations as much as possible

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Key Takeaway

These moves change how clearly students can access and engage in learning. They do not change *what* students are learning.

Instructional Focus: Make Meaning Visible

These moves support student understanding by making abstract or unfamiliar ideas concrete through visuals, modeling, and real-time demonstration. When students can see how meaning is constructed, they gain access to both the content and the language used to talk about it.

Instructional Move 1: Use diagrams, visuals, and models alongside verbal explanations

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher pairs spoken or written explanations with a visual representation (a diagram, labeled image, physical model, or graphic organizer) so that students who cannot yet process the verbal explanation alone have another entry point into the content.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: Math

Concept: Adding two groups of objects

Instructional approach:

- Draw two circles on the board, place counters or dots in each.
- Say: “I have 3 here and 2 here. I’m going to put them together.”
- Move the counters together and write: 3 + 2 = 5.
- Point to each part as you say it: “Three… plus two… equals five.”

What stays the same:
Students are learning the same addition concept and notation. The visual makes the abstract equation concrete.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Concept: The water cycle

Instructional approach:

- Display a labeled diagram of the water cycle (evaporation, condensation, precipitation, collection).
- Point to each label as you explain it: “Water evaporates here… it turns into vapor and rises.”
- Draw arrows to show movement.
- Return to the diagram throughout the lesson as new vocabulary is introduced.

What stays the same:
The science content and vocabulary demands are unchanged. The diagram gives students a visual anchor for the language.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Social Studies

Concept: Push and pull factors of migration

Instructional approach:

- Draw a simple two-column chart: “Reasons people leave” / “Reasons people move somewhere new.”
- Populate it with examples as you explain: “Famine is a push factor… it pushes people out. Opportunity is a pull factor… it pulls people in.”
- Use arrows pointing away from a home country (push) and toward a destination (pull).

What stays the same:
Students are working with the same conceptual framework. The visual reinforces the directional metaphor built into the terminology.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Biology

Concept: Cellular respiration

Instructional approach:

- Display a flow diagram showing inputs (glucose, oxygen) → process → outputs (ATP, carbon dioxide, water).
- Label each stage and connect it to the equation.
- As you explain each component, point to its location in the diagram: “This is where ATP is produced… that’s the energy the cell can actually use.”

What stays the same:
The scientific content, terminology, and conceptual complexity are fully intact. The diagram makes the process legible before students encounter it in dense text.

Instructional Move 2: Think aloud to demonstrate how meaning is constructed

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher narrates their own thinking process while reading, solving, or analyzing. This makes visible the mental moves that proficient language users often perform automatically and invisibly.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: ELA

Text: A short picture book passage

Instructional approach:

- Read aloud slowly and pause: "Hmm, I'm not sure what this word means. Let me look at the picture."
- Point to an illustration: "The picture shows the boy frowning, so I think he feels sad."
- Say: "Good readers use pictures to help them understand."

What stays the same:
Students are developing the same comprehension strategies. The think-aloud names the strategy explicitly so students can use it independently.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Math

Task: Multi-step word problem

Instructional approach:

- Read the problem aloud, then pause: "First I need to figure out what the question is asking. Let me underline it."
- Underline the question, then say: "Now I see I need two steps. I have to find the total before I can find the difference."
- Write each step as you narrate it.

What stays the same:
Students are solving the same problem. Think-aloud makes problem-solving language and logic explicit rather than assumed.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: ELA

Task: Analyzing an author's word choice

Instructional approach:

- Read a sentence aloud: "The author uses the word 'crept' instead of 'walked.' I'm asking myself, why that word?"

- Pause: “Crept sounds slow and quiet… maybe secretive. That tells me something about the character’s intentions.”
- Write: “Word choice → creates mood / reveals character.”

What stays the same:
Students are engaging in the same literary analysis. The think-aloud makes the inferential process audible and reproducible.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Task: Evaluating a primary source

Instructional approach:

- Hold up the document: “Before I read closely, I’m checking who wrote this, when, and why, because that affects how I read it.”
- Read a line, then comment: “This phrase seems strong… almost defensive. I’m thinking about what the author was trying to justify.”
- Model annotating: “I’m writing ‘bias?’ in the margin here because I want to come back to this.”

What stays the same:
Students are applying the same source analysis skills. The think-aloud makes expert reading behavior visible rather than implied.

Instructional Move 3: Annotate texts or examples in real time

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher marks up a text, problem, or diagram live (underlining, circling, labeling, and adding notes) so students can track the development of meaning as it happens rather than receiving a finished, pre-annotated product.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: ELA

Text: A simple nonfiction sentence displayed on the board

Instructional approach:

- Read: "Butterflies start as eggs."
- Circle "start" and "eggs": "These are the important words. They tell us what happens first."
- Draw an arrow to a picture of an egg: "Here's what an egg looks like."
- Write "first" above the sentence.

What stays the same:
Students are engaging with the same text and concept. Real-time annotation shows them where to focus and models how readers mark up what matters.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Text: A paragraph about adaptations in animals

Instructional approach:

- Underline the topic sentence: "This tells us the main idea."
- Circle unfamiliar vocabulary: "I don't expect everyone to know 'camouflage' yet. Let's mark it and come back."
- Draw a bracket around a supporting example: "This sentence gives evidence. That's a different job from the main idea."

What stays the same:
Students read the same grade-level text. Annotation makes the structure of the paragraph visible as a language object students can study.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Math

Task: Solving a proportion

Instructional approach:

- Write the proportion and label each part: "numerator," "denominator," "cross multiply."

- Circle the unknown variable: “This is what we’re solving for. I’m going to keep my eye on it.”
- Annotate each step as it is completed: “Step 1: cross multiply. Step 2: divide both sides.”

What stays the same:
Students are working on the same problem. Live annotation gives them a labeled record of the process that mirrors the academic language they need to use.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: ELA

Text: An excerpt from an argumentative essay

Instructional approach:

- Read the opening claim aloud, then underline it: “I’m marking the claim so we can track how the rest of the essay supports it.”
- Label the next paragraph: “This is the first piece of evidence.”
- Draw a line connecting evidence back to claim: “I’m asking, does this actually support the claim? That’s what analysis means.”

What stays the same:
Students are engaging in the same argumentative reading. Real-time annotation models the critical reading process before students are asked to do it independently.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Providing the visual without using it

Do not:

- Display a diagram or anchor chart and then teach without referring to it
- Annotate a text before class and present it as finished rather than modeling the process live

Do:

- Build the visual or annotation in front of students so they see how meaning develops
- Return to visuals throughout the lesson, not just at the start

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Key Takeaway

When thinking, reasoning, and meaning-making are made visible, students gain access to both the content and the academic language used to engage with it. The goal is not to simplify. It is to illuminate.

Instructional Focus: Structure Student Interaction

These moves support language development by creating intentional, supported opportunities for students to use academic language in speech and writing. Language grows through use, not exposure alone, and structured interaction ensures that ELs have the scaffolding needed to participate meaningfully rather than remain silent on the margins.

Instructional Move 1: Provide sentence starters or frames to support discussion

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher offers a partial sentence that gives students a grammatical entry point into academic talk. The frame provides enough structure for students to focus on meaning rather than language form, while still requiring them to contribute their own thinking.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: Science

Discussion task: Sharing observations about a plant

Frame:

- "I see ___."
- "The plant has ___."

Instructional approach:

- Post the frames on the board with simple illustrations
- Model using one: "I see green leaves."
- Invite students to try: "Now you tell your partner what you see."

What stays the same:
Students are making and communicating observations, which is the same cognitive task. The frame reduces the language barrier without reducing the thinking.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Social Studies

Discussion task: Discussing the causes of a historical event

Frame:

- "One cause of ___ was ___ because ___."
- "I think ___ was important because ___."

Instructional approach:

- Introduce the frames before discussion begins.
- Point out the structure: "Notice this frame asks you to give a reason. The word 'because' is doing that work."

- After discussion, ask students how they might say the same thing without the frame.

What stays the same:
Students are analyzing causes and effects. The frame teaches the language of historical reasoning and cause and effect explicitly.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: ELA

Discussion task: Responding to a peer's interpretation of a text

Frame:

- "I agree with ___ because ___."
- "I see it differently. I think ___ because the text says ___."

Instructional approach:

- Introduce frames as part of a discussion protocol, not just as EL supports.
- Model a full exchange: teacher plays both roles to show how the frames enable academic disagreement.
- Gradually shift to open-ended discussion as students internalize the structure.

What stays the same:
Students are engaging in evidence-based literary discussion. The frames scaffold the language of academic dialogue.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Discussion task: Evaluating competing interpretations of a historical event

Frame:

- "The evidence suggests ___, which supports the argument that ___."
- "While ___ argues ___, the counterargument is ___ because ___."

Instructional approach:

- Present frames alongside the discussion prompt.
- Note that these structures appear in academic writing: "You'll see this kind of language in the sources we've read."
- Encourage students to adapt or expand the frames rather than use them verbatim.
- Adjust the language of the frames for students' English proficiency.

What stays the same:
Students are doing the same analytical and argumentative work. The frames model the register of academic discourse.

Instructional Move 2: Use structured partner or small group talk

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher designs talk tasks so that interaction has a clear purpose, structure, and language expectation rather than relying on open-ended discussion that can leave ELs without enough support to participate.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: Math

Talk task: Explaining how to sort objects by shape

Structure:

- Partner A explains their sort. Partner B listens and then repeats the main idea.
- Use a stem: "I put these together because they are all ___."

Instructional approach:

- Assign partners intentionally.
- Give each student a role (explainer, listener/reporter).
- Debrief by having the listener share what their partner said.

What stays the same:
Students are doing the same sorting and reasoning. The structure ensures both partners are practicing language, not just the more proficient speaker.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Talk task: Comparing two types of ecosystems

Structure:

- Each partner is given one ecosystem to "represent".
- They share information using a comparison frame, then together complete a Venn diagram.

Frame:

- "My ecosystem has ___, while yours has ___."
- "We both have ___."

Instructional approach:

- Build in time for individual preparation before partner talk begins
- Circulate and listen for language use, not just content accuracy

What stays the same:
Students are completing the same comparison task. The structure creates accountability for both speakers.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Social Studies

Talk task: Discussing perspectives on a historical decision

Structure:

- Assign each group member a role: claim-maker, questioner, evidence-finder.
- Each student must contribute before the group can finalize a response.

Instructional approach:

- Provide role cards with sentence frames attached to each role.
- Rotate roles across activities so students practice all functions.
- Debrief by asking one group member to summarize the group's reasoning.

What stays the same:
Students are engaging with the same historical content and reasoning. Structured roles ensure equitable participation.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: ELA

Talk task: Discussing the theme of a novel

Structure: Philosophical Chairs or Structured Academic Controversy

Both of these formats follow a similar pattern: students are assigned a position to argue, engage in structured debate, switch to argue the opposing position, and then work together to find common ground or a more nuanced synthesis. The switching step is particularly valuable for ELs because it requires them to produce academic language from multiple angles rather than defending a single position.

Philosophical Chairs is the simpler of the two formats. Students are divided into two groups based on a debatable statement related to the text (for example, 'The protagonist's choices were justified given the circumstances'). Each side argues their assigned position using evidence from the novel, then students have the opportunity to physically move if their thinking changes during the discussion.

Structured Academic Controversy is more scaffolded and works well for ELs at a range of proficiency levels. Student pairs are assigned a position, prepare an argument using evidence from the text, present it to an opposing pair, listen to the opposing argument without interrupting, ask clarifying questions, and then work together to find a shared position that acknowledges the complexity of the issue.

Instructional approach:

- Provide a list of academic language moves relevant to the task before the discussion begins: conceding a point, challenging an argument, synthesizing two positions.
- For ELs at developing levels, provide sentence frames attached to each language move: 'I concede that ___, however ___.' / 'The text suggests ___, which challenges the idea that ___.'
- After the structured discussion, ask students to reflect in writing: 'What argument did you find most convincing and why?'

What stays the same:

Students are engaging in the same thematic analysis and the same text. The structure creates the conditions for all students, including ELs, to produce academic language in a supported and purposeful context rather than in open-ended discussion where entry points are unclear."

Instructional Move 3: Set clear expectations for how students should respond

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher communicates explicitly what a complete response looks like (in terms of content, language, and form) so students know what they are aiming for before they respond.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: ELA

Task: Answering a comprehension question about a story

Expectation:

- "Use a complete sentence."
- "Tell me what happened and why."

Instructional approach:

- Show an example of a short answer and a complete answer side by side.
- Ask: "Which one tells me more? Which one uses a full sentence?"
- Practice as a class before asking students to respond independently.

What stays the same:
Students are answering the same comprehension question. The explicit expectation teaches them what "a complete response" means as a language goal.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Task: Explaining the results of an experiment

Expectation:

- "Tell what happened. Then explain why using what we learned."
- Frame: "The results showed ___ because ___."

Instructional approach:

- Post the expectation visibly before students begin writing or speaking.
- Model a response that meets it and one that does not.
- Ask students to evaluate: "Does this response meet the expectation? What is missing?"

What stays the same:
Students are reporting and explaining experimental results. The expectation teaches the structure of scientific explanation explicitly.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Math

Task: Explaining a solution process

Expectation:

- "Describe each step. Use math vocabulary. Explain why the step was necessary."
- Frame: "First I ___ because ___. Then I ___ because ___."

Instructional approach:

- Display the expectation alongside the problem.
- Have students compare their response to a model response.
- Focus feedback on language and structure, not only correctness.

What stays the same:
Students are solving the same problem and explaining their reasoning. The expectation makes mathematical communication a learning target, not just a byproduct.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Task: Written response to a document-based question

Expectation:

- "Make a claim. Support it with evidence from at least two documents. Explain how the evidence supports your claim."

Instructional approach:

- Review the expectation before students begin writing.
- Annotate a student sample (with permission) or a teacher-created model to show where each element appears.
- Return to the expectation when giving feedback: "Where is your evidence connected back to your claim?"

What stays the same:
Students are completing the same analytical writing task. The explicit expectation teaches the genre conventions of academic argument.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Using frames as permanent replacements for independent language use

Do not:

- Leave the same frames in place indefinitely without checking whether students still need them.
- Accept frame-dependent responses as the endpoint of language development.

Do:

- Plan explicitly for when and how scaffolds will be reduced.

- Celebrate when students extend or abandon frames on their own. That is evidence of language growth.

Key Takeaway

Structured interaction is about making participation possible and productive so that ELs can develop academic language through genuine use rather than silence or guesswork. It is not about making tasks easier.

Instructional Focus: Teach and Reuse Academic Language

These moves support vocabulary and language development by making word and language instruction intentional, contextualized, and cumulative. Isolated vocabulary lists are insufficient for ELs who need to understand not just what words mean but how they function in academic discourse.

Instructional Move 1: Focus on high-utility words and phrases tied to the lesson

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher identifies words and phrases that appear across multiple contexts and disciplines (not just key content vocabulary) and teaches them explicitly in connection to the lesson. These are often the words students need to understand directions, discuss ideas, and construct written responses.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: ELA

Target language: "describe," "similar," "different"

Instructional approach:

- During a read-aloud, pause at the word "similar": "This word means almost the same… like 'alike.'"
- Use it again in discussion: "How are these two characters similar?"
- Post the word with a simple visual on the word wall.

What stays the same:
Students are engaging with the same text and making comparisons. Teaching the word "similar" explicitly prepares them to use it in discussion and writing.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Target language: "causes," "as a result," "leads to"

Instructional approach:

- Introduce the words as a set: "These words tell us that one thing makes another thing happen."
- Use them while teaching the lesson content: "Erosion causes the soil to move. As a result, the riverbank changes."
- Ask students to use one of the phrases in a sentence about what they are learning.

What stays the same:
Students are learning the same science content. Explicitly teaching cause-and-effect language gives them the tools to talk and write about it.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Social Studies

Target language: "perspective," "context," "significant"

Instructional approach:

- Teach all three words before introducing a primary source.
- Use each one while modeling source analysis: "From whose perspective is this written? What is the historical context?"
- Ask students to use the words in their analysis: "In your written response, use at least one of these terms and use it correctly."

What stays the same:
Students are analyzing the same source. Teaching these words before the task removes the language barrier to participation without reducing the analytical demand.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: ELA

Target language: "implies," "conveys," "undermines," "reinforces"

Instructional approach:

- Introduce the words as tools for literary and rhetorical analysis.
- Model their use: "The author's word choice here *implies* distrust… not states it directly but *implies* it."
- Require students to use at least two of these verbs in a written analysis.
- Revisit the words in subsequent lessons to reinforce their use.

What stays the same:
Students are completing the same analytical writing. Teaching precise verbs of analysis gives ELs the language tools to participate in academic literary discourse.

Instructional Move 2: Reuse key language across multiple activities

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher plans deliberately for key words and phrases to recur throughout a lesson or unit (in teacher talk, student discussion, reading, and writing) so that students encounter academic language repeatedly and in varied contexts.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: Science

Target language: "living," "nonliving"

Instructional approach:

- Introduce the terms during a sorting activity: "Is this rock living or nonliving?"
- Use them during a read-aloud: "The book says the tree grows. That's what living things do."
- Return to them during a drawing activity: "Label your drawing. Is it living or nonliving?"

What stays the same:
Students are learning the same science concepts. Repetition across activities builds genuine understanding of the terms, not just memorization.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Math

Target language: "estimate," "reasonable," "approximately"

Instructional approach:

- Use these words consistently during instruction: "Before we solve, let's estimate. About how many do you think?"
- Require them in discussion: "Is your answer reasonable? How do you know?"
- Include them in writing prompts: "Explain your estimate. Is the answer approximately what you expected?"

What stays the same:
Students are completing the same math tasks. Consistent, repeated use of these terms develops both mathematical language and conceptual understanding.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: ELA

Target language: "theme," "evidence," "supports"

Instructional approach:

- Introduce the terms at the start of a unit and return to them in every lesson.
- Use them in discussion questions: "What evidence from the text supports this theme?"

- Require them in writing: “Your paragraph must include the word ‘theme’ and at least one piece of ‘evidence.’”
- At the end of the unit, ask students to define the terms in their own words.

What stays the same:
Students are engaging with the same literary concepts throughout the unit. Consistent reuse cements both the terms and the concepts they represent.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: Social Studies

Target language: “contributed to,” “in response to,” “shaped by”

Instructional approach:

- Introduce these as the language of historical causation and context.
- Use them in teacher explanations throughout the unit: “The French Revolution was shaped by Enlightenment ideas.”
- Require students to use them in discussions and written responses.
- Point out when they encounter these phrases in primary and secondary sources.

What stays the same:
Students are analyzing the same historical content. Repeated exposure to and use of these phrases develops the language of historical thinking.

Instructional Move 3: Emphasize how language functions

What this looks like in practice:
The teacher teaches not just what words mean but what they do, covering how language is used to explain, argue, compare, describe, or question. This prepares students to *produce* academic language, not only recognize it.

Elementary (Grades K–2)

Content Area: ELA

Language function: Describing

Instructional approach:

- Explain: "Describing words help us picture something… or see it in our minds."
- Read a sentence aloud and identify the describing words: "Fluffy, white, and cold. Those words describe the snow."
- Ask students to add a describing word to a simple sentence: "The dog is ___."

What stays the same:
Students are building the same foundational language skills. Teaching them that words have functions, not just meanings, builds metalinguistic awareness they will use across subjects.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

Content Area: Science

Language function: Explaining cause and effect

Instructional approach:

- Teach the function explicitly: "When scientists explain why something happens, they use cause-and-effect language."
- Show examples: "Because the temperature dropped, the water froze. The water froze because the temperature dropped."
- Have students rewrite a simple statement as a cause-and-effect explanation.

What stays the same:
Students are learning the same science content. Understanding how cause-and-effect language works prepares them to write and speak scientifically.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Content Area: Social Studies

Language function: Arguing and justifying

Instructional approach:

- "Introduce the function explicitly: 'In social studies, we often need to argue for a position. That means we state what we believe, explain why we believe it, and use evidence to support it.'"
- Teach the components: claim, evidence, reasoning.
- Show how each component uses different language: “Claims often sound like ‘I argue that…’ or ‘The evidence shows…’”
- Have students identify the function of each sentence in a model paragraph.

What stays the same:
Students are constructing the same arguments. Teaching language functions makes the structural expectations of academic argument explicit and learnable.

High School (Grades 9–12)

Content Area: ELA

Language function: Analyzing and interpreting

Instructional approach:

- Distinguish between summary and analysis: “Summary tells what happened. Analysis tells what it means or why it matters.”
- Show how analysis uses different language: “suggests,” “reveals,” “reflects,” “demonstrates”
- Have students revise a summary into an analytical statement using one of these verbs.
- Ask: “What does this language choice tell us about the author’s purpose?”

What stays the same:
Students are engaging with the same literary text. Teaching the language of analysis helps ELs move from retelling to interpreting. This is a major academic language leap.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Treating vocabulary as a pre-teaching checklist

Do not:

- Introduce a list of words before a lesson and consider vocabulary instruction complete.
- Teach vocabulary in isolation without connecting it to how the words function in context.

Do:

- Return to key words throughout the lesson and unit. Make sure you are modeling them in your own speech.
- Teach students both what words mean and how they are used.
- Create opportunities for students to use new language in speaking and writing, not only to recognize it in reading.

Key Takeaway

Vocabulary development is most effective when it is intentional, contextualized, and cumulative. The goal is for students to develop the ability to use academic language to think, discuss, and write across content areas, not just recognize words.

Instructional Focus: Build and Activate Background Knowledge

Instructional Move 1: Briefly assess what students already know before introducing a topic

What this looks like in practice: Before launching into new content, the teacher creates a low-stakes opportunity for students to surface whatever knowledge, experience, or associations they already have with a topic. This gives the teacher useful information about where to begin and gives students a chance to activate existing knowledge as a foundation for new learning. For English learners, this also signals that their prior experience, including experience from outside the United States, is relevant and valued.

Elementary (Grades K-2)| Content Area: Science | Topic: Weather and seasons
Instructional approach:

- Display a photograph of a snowy landscape and one of a sunny beach.
- Ask: "What do you see? What do you know about weather like this?"
- Accept responses in any form (e.g., pointing, single words, short phrases, drawing).
- Record student responses on chart paper under "What we know".
- Use the responses to identify what concepts and vocabulary students already have and where instruction needs to begin.

What stays the same: Students are engaging with the same science concept. The brief pre-assessment gives the teacher information about what prior knowledge exists and what needs to be built before instruction begins.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Social Studies | Topic: Immigration to the United States

Instructional approach:

- Ask students to do a one-minute quick write: "What do you know or think you know about why people move to a new country?"
- Allow students to write in their home language if needed.
- Do not collect or grade. Use the activity to surface prior knowledge and personal connections.
- After a brief share-out, note what students know, what they are uncertain about, and what misconceptions may need to be addressed.

What stays the same: Students are working with the same social studies content. The quick write activates existing knowledge and creates a connection point for students whose own families have immigration experience.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: ELA | Topic: Conflict and power in literature

Instructional approach:

- Before introducing the unit text, ask: "Think of a time when someone had power over a decision that affected you. What did that feel like?"

- Use a think-pair-share structure: students reflect individually, then share with a partner, then a few share with the class.
- Listen for the concepts students already have (fairness, authority, choice, resistance) and use those words to bridge into the literary concepts the unit will address.
- Note which students have rich conceptual knowledge that simply lacks the academic vocabulary to express it.

What stays the same: Students are preparing to engage with the same literary themes. The discussion surfaces conceptual background knowledge that ELs may have even when they lack the academic language to express it in English.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: Social Studies | Topic: Economic systems and inequality

Instructional approach:

- Before introducing any reading or lecture, display three images: a crowded urban market, a large corporate headquarters, and a government building.
- Ask: "What do you notice? What do these images have in common? What questions do they raise?"
- Use student responses to map what they already understand about how goods, money, and power are distributed.
- Explicitly acknowledge that students who have lived in different economic systems bring relevant knowledge to this unit.

What stays the same: Students are engaging with the same content. The image-based pre-assessment gives all students, including recent arrivals with limited academic English, a nonverbal entry point for demonstrating and activating prior knowledge.

Instructional Move 2: Use photographs, short video clips, or physical objects to build conceptual context before introducing text or lecture

What this looks like in practice: Before students encounter academic text or formal instruction on a topic, the teacher uses concrete, visual, or physical materials to establish a shared conceptual foundation. For English learners, this is especially important because academic text assumes familiarity with contexts and concepts that not all students have encountered. Visual and physical materials bypass the language barrier temporarily, giving students a concrete referent that makes the subsequent language of instruction meaningful rather than abstract.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science | Topic: Plant growth and needs

Instructional approach:

- Bring in a small potted plant, a cup of soil, and a spray bottle of water.
- Before any reading or instruction, let students observe and handle the materials.
- Ask: "What is this? What do you think it needs to stay alive?"
- Use student observations to introduce the vocabulary that will appear in the lesson: roots, soil, sunlight, water.

- Point to the physical object as each word is introduced: "This part, down here in the soil... these are the roots."

What stays the same: The physical objects make the vocabulary concrete before students encounter it in text, so the words refer to something real rather than something abstract.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Social Studies | Topic: Life during the American Revolution

Instructional approach:

- Show a two-minute video clip depicting daily life in colonial America before introducing any reading.
- After the clip, ask: "What did you notice? What was different from life today?"
- Record observations on the board and use them to build a shared reference point for the unit vocabulary: colony, taxation, loyalist, patriot.
- Return to specific images from the clip when these terms are introduced in text.

What stays the same: The video clip builds the visual and contextual background that the unit reading assumes, so students are not encountering both unfamiliar concepts and unfamiliar language simultaneously.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Science | Topic: Plate tectonics and geological change

Instructional approach:

- Before the unit reading, show a two-minute time-lapse video of a volcanic eruption and a short animation of tectonic plate movement.
- Ask students to describe what they see using whatever language they have: "What is moving? What is happening?"
- Use the video images as a reference throughout the unit: "Remember the animation we watched... this diagram is showing the same thing."
- For students with limited English, allow labeling of a still image from the video as an alternative to written response.

What stays the same: The video establishes a concrete visual model for processes that are otherwise invisible and difficult to grasp from text description alone.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: ELA | Topic: The Harlem Renaissance

Instructional approach:

- Before students read any primary texts, display several photographs from the Harlem Renaissance period: street scenes, musicians, artists, and community gatherings.
- Play a short audio clip of jazz from the era.
- Ask: "What do you observe? What do these images and sounds suggest about this time and place?"
- Use the discussion to establish the cultural and historical context students will need to read the literature meaningfully.

- Return to specific images when literary references to the period appear in the texts

What stays the same: The photographs and audio build the cultural background knowledge that the texts assume, giving ELs access to context they may not have encountered in prior schooling.

Instructional Move 3: Explicitly connect new content to students' prior knowledge or lived experience, including experience from their home countries or cultures

What this looks like in practice: The teacher deliberately identifies and acknowledges connections between the content being taught and knowledge or experience students bring from their own lives, including lives lived in other countries, languages, and cultural contexts. For English learners, this move is particularly significant because their prior knowledge is often invisible in a classroom that does not create space for it. Making these connections explicit validates students' existing knowledge as academically relevant and creates meaningful bridges into new content.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science | Topic: Weather patterns and climate

Instructional approach:

- When introducing weather concepts, ask: "What is the weather like where you are from? Is it different from here?"
- Use a simple world map to show students where different class members are from and note the different climates.
- Connect students' descriptions to the vocabulary being taught: "You said it rains a lot there. That is what we call a tropical climate."
- Use the diversity of experience in the room as instructional content, not just as a welcome gesture.

What stays the same: Connecting weather concepts to students lived experience gives ELs a personal knowledge base to draw from and demonstrates that what they know from home is academically relevant.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Social Studies | Topic: Government and Civic Structures

Instructional approach:

- Before introducing the structure of local and state government, ask: "How are decisions made in your community or in your family's home country? Who is in charge? How do people have a say?"
- Use student responses to build a comparative framework: "In some countries, one person makes decisions for everyone. In others, people vote. The United States has a system where..."
- Explicitly validate knowledge students bring: "The fact that you have lived under a different system actually helps you understand this one. You have something to compare it to."

What stays the same: Drawing on students' knowledge of other governmental systems builds comparative background knowledge that enriches understanding for the whole class, not just ELs.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: ELA | Topic: Theme of displacement and belonging in literature

Instructional approach:

- Before reading a text dealing with themes of migration or belonging, invite students to reflect: "Has there been a time in your life when you felt like you did not belong somewhere, or when you had to learn the rules of a new place?"
- Make clear that sharing is optional. Students can write privately without sharing aloud.
- Use the themes that emerge to introduce the literary concepts the unit will address: belonging, identity, displacement, adaptation.
- When these themes appear in the text, reference the class discussion: "Remember what we talked about earlier… what does this character's experience remind you of?"

What stays the same: For many ELs, themes of migration and belonging are not abstract. They are personal. Connecting the text to lived experience gives students a genuine interpretive lens rather than an academic exercise.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: Science | Topic: Environmental science and land use

Instructional approach:

- Before introducing concepts of deforestation, agriculture, and environmental change, ask: "What does the land look like where you or your family are from? Has it changed over time? Do you know why?"
- Use student responses to surface knowledge about farming practices, urbanization, logging, or environmental change in different parts of the world.
- Connect these experiences to the concepts being taught: "What you are describing, land being cleared for farming, is exactly what deforestation means. You already understand the concept; now we are putting academic language to it."
- Use the global diversity of student experience to illustrate that environmental issues are worldwide, not local.

What stays the same: Connecting scientific concepts to students' direct knowledge of landscapes and land use in their home countries demonstrates that ELs bring relevant, substantive background knowledge into the science classroom.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Treating background knowledge activation as a one-time warm-up

Do not:

- Ask a single opening question, record a few responses, and move on without returning to what students shared.
- Treat the pre-assessment as a social ritual rather than as instructional information.
- Assume that students who do not respond verbally lack prior knowledge. ELs at lower proficiency levels may have rich background knowledge they cannot yet express in English.

Do:

- Return to what students shared throughout the lesson: "Remember what you told us about the weather in your home country… this is how scientists would describe that."
- Use pre-assessment information to make decisions about where to start instruction, not just to check a box.
- Create multiple ways for students to demonstrate prior knowledge (drawing, pointing, writing in the home language, responding nonverbally) so that language proficiency does not obscure what students actually know.

Key Takeaway Background knowledge is not a prerequisite that some students have and others lack. It is something teachers can build, activate, and connect to, and for English learners, whose prior experience is often underestimated or invisible in the classroom, making that connection explicit can be critical in accessing content.

Instructional Focus: Scaffold Reading Tasks

Instructional Move 1: Provide graphic organizers that give students a framework for tracking information as they read

What this looks like in practice: The teacher provides a structured visual tool before students read that gives them a clear purpose and a framework for organizing what they encounter in the text. A graphic organizer does not simplify the reading. It gives students a way to manage the information as it accumulates, so they are not trying to hold everything in working memory while simultaneously processing unfamiliar language. For English learners, this reduces the cognitive load of reading academic text without reducing the academic demand of the task itself.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science | Text type: Informational read-aloud about animals and their habitats

- Before reading, give students a simple two-column organizer: "Animal" / "Where it lives"
- Read aloud and pause after each animal is introduced: "What animal did we just hear about? Where does it live? Let's fill in our chart."
- Allow students to draw rather than write if needed.
- After reading, use the completed organizer as the basis for discussion: "Which animals live in water? Which live on land?"

What stays the same: The organizer gives students a way to track information as it is introduced rather than trying to hold it all in memory until the end.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: ELA | Text type: Narrative text with multiple characters and a central conflict

- Before reading, provide a character and event organizer with columns: "Character," "What they want," "What gets in the way".
- Introduce the organizer before reading begins: "As we read, we are going to track what each character wants and what is stopping them. That is what conflict means."
- Pause at key moments in the text to give students time to add to their organizer.
- Use the completed organizer to support a discussion or written response about conflict and character motivation.

What stays the same: The organizer makes the abstract concept of conflict concrete and trackable while students read.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Social Studies | Text type: Informational text about the causes of World War I

- Before reading, provide a cause-and-effect organizer with space for multiple causes and a central event.
- Preview the organizer with students: "This text is going to explain several things that led to the war. Your job is to identify those causes and record them here."

- After reading independently or in pairs, students compare their organizers with a partner before whole-class discussion.
- Use the completed organizer as a planning tool for a written response.

What stays the same: The organizer gives students a reading purpose and a framework that mirrors the structure of the text itself.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: ELA | Text type: Argumentative essay or editorial

- Before reading, provide a claim-evidence-reasoning organizer with space for the author's central claim, supporting evidence, and the reasoning that connects them.
- Explain the organizer in terms of what readers do: "When we read an argument, we are always asking: what is the writer claiming, what evidence do they offer, and does the reasoning actually hold up?"
- Have students complete the organizer independently, then use it as the basis for a Socratic seminar or analytical paragraph.
- For entering and emerging students, provide the claim pre-filled and ask students to identify evidence only.

What stays the same: The organizer makes the structure of argument visible and gives students a tool for both comprehension and analysis.

Instructional Move 2: Use annotation guides that direct students' attention to specific features of a text

What this looks like in practice: Rather than asking students to annotate a text without direction, which requires them to already know what matters, the teacher provides an annotation guide that tells students specifically what to look for and mark. For English learners, open-ended annotation can be overwhelming because it requires both language proficiency and prior knowledge of academic text conventions. A targeted annotation guide focuses students' attention, reduces the cognitive load of reading, and teaches the habit of purposeful reading by making it explicit before students are expected to do it independently.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science | Text type: Simple nonfiction passage about the seasons

- Before reading, give students two colored pencils and a simple guide: "Circle words that name a season in blue. Underline words that describe the weather in red."
- Model the first sentence together: "Let's read this sentence. Do we see a season name? Do we see a weather word? Let's mark them."
- After reading, ask: "What season words did you find? What weather words did you find?"
- Use the marked text as the basis for discussion and as a vocabulary reference.

What stays the same: The annotation guide teaches students to read with a purpose and directs attention to the language of the text, not just its meaning.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: ELA | Text type: Informational text with a main idea and supporting details

- Before reading, provide a guide with two tasks: "Underline the sentence that tells the main idea of each paragraph. Put a star next to one detail that supports it."
- Model with the first paragraph: "I'm reading this paragraph and asking, ‘what is the most important idea here?’ That's what I'll underline."
- After reading, have students share what they underlined and discuss whether they identified the same main ideas.
- Use the annotated text to support a summary writing task.

What stays the same: The annotation guide makes the distinction between main idea and supporting detail explicit and actionable rather than conceptual.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Science | Text type: Science article with claims, evidence, and technical vocabulary

- Before reading, provide a guide with three tasks: "Box any word you don't know. Underline the author's main claim. Put a checkmark next to each piece of evidence."
- Explain each task before students begin: "Boxing words you don’t know is not a sign of weakness; it is a reading strategy. We will come back to those words together."
- After reading, compile the boxed words as a class vocabulary list and address them in context.
- Use the underlined claims and check marked evidence to discuss whether the evidence actually supports the claim.

What stays the same: The annotation guide teaches students to read analytically rather than passively.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: Social Studies | Text type: Primary source document

- Before reading, provide a guide with four tasks: "Circle the date and author. Underline the main argument or purpose. Put a question mark next to anything you find confusing or surprising. Star one phrase that seems especially important."
- Model the process with a short excerpt before students read independently.
- After reading, use the question marks as an entry point for discussion: "What surprised you? What confused you? Let's look at those moments together."
- Use the starred phrases as the basis for close reading and discussion of word choice and purpose.

What stays the same: The annotation guide structures the process of source analysis so that students develop the habits of a historian rather than simply reading a document for surface meaning.

Instructional Move 3: Preview text structure before students read

What this looks like in practice: Before students read, the teacher walks them through the visible features of the text (headings, subheadings, visuals, captions, sidebars, bolded terms, and text features) and explains what those features signal about how the text is organized and what it is trying to do. For English learners, academic text is often not just linguistically difficult but structurally unfamiliar. A student who does not recognize that a heading signals a shift in topic, or that a caption explains a diagram, is missing information that proficient readers use automatically. Previewing text structure gives all students access to that layer of meaning before the reading demands begin.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science | Text type: Nonfiction picture book with headings and photographs

- Before reading, flip through the book slowly with students: "Let's look at the pictures first. What do you see? What do you think this book is going to be about?"
- Point to a heading: "This word at the top tells us what this part is about. It is like a label for the section."
- Point to a caption: "This sentence next to the picture tells us more about what we are seeing."
- After the preview, ask: "Now that we have looked through the whole book, what are we going to learn about?"

What stays the same: The preview teaches students how nonfiction text is organized so they can use that structure to support comprehension while they read.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Social Studies | Text type: Textbook chapter with headings, subheadings, maps, and bolded vocabulary

- Before reading, walk through the chapter with students: "This chapter has three sections. Each heading tells us what that section is about. Let's read the headings and predict what we'll learn in each one."
- Point to bolded terms: "When a word is in bold, the author is signaling that this is important vocabulary."
- Point to any maps or charts: "This map is not decoration. It is giving us information we will need to understand the text."
- After the preview, ask students to write one question they expect the chapter to answer.

What stays the same: The preview teaches students to use the structural features of nonfiction text as a reading tool, which reduces the cognitive load of the reading itself.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: ELA | Text type: Informational article with an introduction, body sections, and a conclusion

- Before reading, explain the structure explicitly: "Most informational articles follow a pattern. They introduce a topic, develop it in sections, and then have a conclusion... or ending. Knowing this helps you read more strategically."
- Walk students through the article: "The introduction is going to tell us the main idea. Each section is going to develop one part of it. The conclusion is going to bring it back together."

- Ask students to predict the main idea from the introduction before reading the full article.
- After reading, ask: "Did the article follow the pattern we described? Where did it match? Where did it surprise you?"

What stays the same: Teaching text structure explicitly helps ELs anticipate how meaning is organized in academic writing, which makes comprehension more manageable.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: Science | Text type: Scientific research article with abstract, methods, results, and discussion sections

- Before reading, explain the structure of a scientific article: "Scientists write in a very specific format. The abstract gives you the whole article in a few sentences. The methods explain how they did the study. The results tell you what they found. The discussion tells you what it means."
- Walk students through each section heading before they read: "For our purposes today, we are focused on the results and discussion sections. Those are where the findings are."
- Teach students to read the abstract first as a preview strategy: "If you read the abstract carefully, you already know the main argument before you read the full article."
- For entering and emerging students, provide a simplified version of the abstract alongside the original.

What stays the same: Teaching the conventions of scientific writing as a genre gives ELs access to a structural map of the text before the language demands begin.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Providing the scaffold without teaching students how to use it

Do not:

- Hand out a graphic organizer without explaining its purpose or modeling how to use it.
- Assign annotation without demonstrating what purposeful annotation looks like in practice.
- Preview text features quickly as a routine without connecting them explicitly to what students will encounter while reading.

Do:

- Model the use of any scaffold before students use it independently.
- Explain why the scaffold is useful: "This organizer is going to help you hold onto the causes as we find them, so you don't have to remember everything at once."
- Return to the scaffold after reading to show students how it supported their comprehension: "Look at what you tracked while you read. Now you have everything you need to write your response."

Key Takeaway Scaffolding reading tasks means changing how students interact with a text, not what text they read. A graphic organizer, an annotation guide, or a text preview does not make reading easier. It makes the reader more strategic. For English learners navigating both language

and content simultaneously, that strategic support is often the difference between getting lost in a text and getting something meaningful out of it.

Instructional Focus: Use Formative Assessment That Captures Content Knowledge

A note on move selection: Three moves are developed in depth here: Using nonverbal and low-language response formats, using strategic questioning that moves from recognition to production, and distinguishing language errors that affect meaning from those that do not. These three address the most common points where ELs' content knowledge is misread or missed entirely.

Instructional Move 1: Use nonverbal and low-language response formats to check for understanding

What this looks like in practice: The teacher designs comprehension checks that allow students to demonstrate understanding without requiring extended English production. Sorting tasks, matching activities, labeled diagrams, mini-whiteboards, and multiple-choice responses all give teachers accurate information about content understanding from students who may not yet be able to produce the academic language to explain what they know. For English learners at entering and emerging levels in particular, the absence of language should never be read as the absence of understanding.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Math | Concept: Identifying shapes by their properties

- After teaching about triangles, rectangles, and circles, display a set of shape cards
- Ask students to sort the cards into labeled groups rather than naming or describing the shapes verbally.
- Use a mini-whiteboard check: hold up a shape and ask students to write or draw one property and hold it up.
- For a quick whole-class check, ask students to use hand signals: "Hold up three fingers if this is a triangle, four if it's a rectangle, make a circle with your hands if it's a circle."
- Read the responses visually across the room before deciding whether to re-teach or move forward.

What stays the same: Students are demonstrating the same mathematical understanding. The response format is adjusted so that language does not block the demonstration of content knowledge.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Science | Concept: Stages of the life cycle

- After instruction, give students a set of picture cards showing the stages of a butterfly's life cycle out of order.
- Ask students to arrange the cards in the correct sequence without writing or speaking.
- Once arranged, ask students to label each stage with a single word or draw an arrow showing the direction of change.
- Use the arrangement and labeling as formative data. A student who sequences correctly but labels incorrectly has shown content understanding and a language gap, not a content gap.
- Follow up individually: "Show me what happens after this stage". Pointing allows ELs to demonstrate knowledge nonverbally.

What stays the same: The sequencing and labeling task separates content understanding from the ability to write a paragraph-level explanation.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Social Studies | Concept: Causes and Effects of the Industrial Revolution

- Give students a set of cards with causes and effects written on them.
- Ask students to sort the cards into two columns and then draw arrows connecting causes to their corresponding effects.
- Use a gallery walk: students post their sorted cards and place a sticky dot next to any connection they agree with.
- For a quick exit check, display a cause on the board and ask students to point to the correct effect from three options displayed as images with labels.

What stays the same: The task design allows students to show complex conceptual understanding without requiring paragraph-level writing.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: Biology | Concept: Relationship between DNA, RNA, and protein synthesis

- Give students a partially completed flow diagram: DNA → ___ → Protein.
- Ask students to fill in the missing step, label the processes, and draw an arrow indicating where each process occurs in the cell.
- Use mini whiteboards for a rapid check: "Write the name of the process that happens in the nucleus… hold up your boards."
- For students who produce incomplete written responses, follow up with a pointing task. For example, "Show me on this diagram where transcription happens." to determine whether the gap is in content knowledge or in language production.

What stays the same: The diagram and nonverbal response formats allow teachers to distinguish between students who do not understand the process and students who understand it but cannot yet fully articulate it in English.

Instructional Move 2: Use strategic questioning that moves from recognition to production

What this looks like in practice: The teacher sequences questions from lower to higher language demand starting with questions that require recognition or selection (pointing, choosing between options, yes/no responses) before moving to questions that require production (explaining, describing, justifying). This sequencing allows all students to demonstrate partial understanding even when they cannot produce a full academic response, and it gives teachers a more accurate picture of what students actually know versus what they can currently express. A question that requires full sentence production may reveal a language gap while concealing content mastery. Strategic sequencing surfaces both.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: ELA | Skill: Identifying the main character and their feelings

Questioning sequence:

- Recognition: "Point to the main character in this picture."
- Selection: "Is the character happy or sad? Show me with your face."
- Single word: "What one word would you use to describe how the character feels?"
- Short phrase: "Why does the character feel that way? Try to tell me in a few words."
- Full response (for students who are ready): "How does the character feel, and what in the story tells you that?"

Instructional approach: Move through the sequence during whole-class discussion, directing different question levels to different students based on proficiency. Accept partial responses at each level as meaningful data. A student who points correctly and demonstrates the emotion nonverbally has shown comprehension even without producing language.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Science | Skill: Understanding the relationship between heat and states of matter

Questioning sequence:

- Recognition: "Which picture shows water as a solid? Point to it."
- Either/or: "When water heats up, does it become a solid or a gas?"
- Completion: "When water loses heat, it ___."
- Short explanation: "What happens to water when you heat it? Tell me in one or two sentences."
- Extended explanation (for students who are ready): "Explain the relationship between heat and the state of matter. Use the words solid, liquid, and gas in your answer."

Instructional approach: Use the lower levels as a floor, not a ceiling. If a student answers the recognition question correctly, move immediately to the next level. Do not assume that a student who struggles with the extended explanation does not understand the concept.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Social Studies | Skill: Understanding the concept of checks and balances

Questioning sequence:

- Recognition: "Which branch of government is shown in this image? Legislative, executive, or judicial?"
- Matching: "Match each branch to one power it has." (using a visual matching task)
- Either/or: "Does the President have the power to make laws, or to sign or veto them?"
- Short explanation: "What does it mean to check another branch's power? Give one example."
- Extended explanation (for students who are ready): "Explain why the framers designed a system of checks and balances. What were they trying to prevent?"

Instructional approach: Use the sequence to determine where each student's understanding breaks down. Is it at the recognition level (conceptual gap) or at the explanation level (language gap)? Those require different instructional responses.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: ELA | Skill: Analyzing the effect of an author's word choice

Questioning sequence:

- Recognition: "Which word in this sentence is doing the most work? Which one stands out to you?"
- Either/or: "Does this word create a positive or negative feeling? Or something more complicated?"
- Short response: "What does this word choice tell you about the author's attitude toward the subject?"
- Evidence-based: "Find one other moment in the text where the author makes a similar word choice. What effect does it have there?"
- Extended analysis (for students who are ready): "Write a sentence explaining how the author's word choice throughout this passage contributes to the overall tone."

Instructional approach: When a student stalls at the short response level, probe with an either/or question. If they answer correctly, they have demonstrated analytical understanding. The gap is in production, not comprehension.

Instructional Move 3: Distinguish language errors that affect meaning from those that do not

What this looks like in practice: When reviewing written or oral responses from English learners, the teacher evaluates content understanding and language accuracy separately. Not all language errors are equal. Some obscure meaning, while others are surface-level grammatical errors that have no effect on what the student is communicating. Treating all errors as equivalent leads to underestimating ELs' content knowledge and to feedback that is demoralizing rather than instructive. Making this distinction also helps teachers focus language instruction on errors that actually matter for communication rather than on every deviation from standard American English.

Elementary (Grades K-2) | Content Area: Science

Student response: *"The plant it need water and sun to growing."*

- Content evaluation: Accurate and complete. The student knows plants need water and sunlight
- Language errors: Subject pronoun repetition, subject-verb agreement, verb form
- Do any errors affect meaning? No. The response is fully comprehensible
- Respond to content first: "That's right, plants need water and sunlight."
- Address *one* language pattern briefly: "Here's how we usually say this in English: 'The plant needs water and sun to grow.' Can you say that with me?"

What stays the same: The content understanding is present and credited. Language errors are addressed as language instruction, not as evidence of content misunderstanding.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5) | Content Area: Social Studies

Student response: *"The colonists they was angry because England make them pay taxes but they don't have nobody in the government."*

- Content evaluation: Accurate. It captures taxation without representation clearly
- Language errors: Subject pronoun repetition, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, double negative
- Do any errors affect meaning? No. The response is entirely comprehensible and historically accurate
- Credit the content fully: "You've got the main idea exactly right."
- Select one language pattern to address: "One thing to work on: in English, we say 'they were angry,' not 'they was angry.' That's a past tense verb form. Let's practice it."

What stays the same: ELs' historical understanding is not penalized for developing language.

Middle School (Grades 6-8) | Content Area: Science

Student response: *"The photosynthesis is process where plant take carbon dioxide and sunlight and make into glucose and oxygen come out."*

- Content evaluation: Accurate. Inputs and outputs of photosynthesis are all correct
- Language errors: Article use, subject-verb agreement, preposition use, sentence structure
- Do any errors affect meaning? No. The response is scientifically accurate and comprehensible
- Credit the content: "This is accurate. You have the correct inputs and outputs."
- Provide a model in academic language: "Here is how a scientist might write this: 'Photosynthesis is the process by which plants convert carbon dioxide and sunlight into glucose, releasing oxygen as a byproduct.' Notice the verb 'convert'. That's the precise science word for what you described."

What stays the same: The response demonstrates content mastery. Language refinement is addressed as a separate instructional goal. Note: only one or two language errors are selected and addressed. Not all of them at once.

High School (Grades 9-12) | Content Area: ELA

Student response: *"The author she use the word 'crept' for show that the character is moving very slow and secret because he is afraid someone will see him. This word is more stronger than 'walked' and make the reader feel tense."*

- Content evaluation: Sophisticated. Identifies the word, explains connotations, compares to a neutral alternative, and identifies the reader effect

- Language errors: Subject pronoun repetition, verb agreement, comparative form, infinitive construction
- Do any errors affect meaning? No. The analysis is fully comprehensible and analytically strong
- Credit the analytical work fully: "This is strong analysis. You identified the word, explained its effect, and connected it to the reader's experience. That's exactly what literary analysis does."
- Select one language target: "'More stronger' is a double comparative. In English, we say either 'stronger' or 'more strong,' but not both. 'Stronger' is the standard form."

What stays the same: The analytical score reflects the quality of the thinking, not the surface errors in the language used to express it. Note: only one or two language errors are selected and addressed. Not all of them at once.

A Common Pitfall to Avoid: Conflating language proficiency with content knowledge

Do not:

- Mark a response as incorrect because of grammatical errors when the content is accurate.
- Interpret silence or minimal language production as a lack of understanding. Probe with nonverbal or low-language checks before drawing that conclusion.
- Reserve nonverbal and low-language assessment formats only for the lowest-proficiency students. Strategic questioning and error analysis apply across all proficiency levels.
- Provide feedback on every language error in a single response. Prioritize errors that affect meaning and address one or two patterns at a time.

Do:

- Design formative assessment tasks with multiple response formats so that language proficiency does not determine whether content knowledge is visible.
- Evaluate content and language separately, both in the moment and in written feedback.
- Use the recognition-to-production sequence as a diagnostic tool. A student who succeeds at recognition but not production has a language gap, not a content gap, and those require different instructional responses.
- Share observations about ELs' content knowledge with the ESL teacher so they can use that information to contextualize language instruction.

Key Takeaway Formative assessment is only useful if it accurately reflects what students know. For English learners, a task that requires extended English production to demonstrate understanding will routinely underestimate content knowledge, and that underestimation has real consequences for instructional decisions, grading, and how students are perceived. Designing assessment tasks that separate language from content, and reading student responses with that distinction in mind, gives teachers the accurate information they need to teach both content and language effectively.

Explore Further

- WIDA Teaching Resources
- Colorín Colorado Instructional Strategies for ELs
- IES What Works Clearinghouse: Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School
- Reading Rockets: English Language Learners
- Understanding Language (UL) at Stanford