Accelerate Success for English Learners

Students Work Beyond the Edge of Their Current Abilities With Formative Assessment

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This brief is part of a series that highlights key features of high-quality instruction for English learners[1] and the role formative assessment plays in their success. Formative assessment supports teachers to enact these features by providing them with tools to gauge and react to student learning in real-time. These practices also support students to assess their own learning which enhances their sense of agency. Overall, the series illustrates how instructional methods and assessment practices work together to improve English learner outcomes.

This brief highlights that quality instruction for English learners enables them to work beyond the edge of their current knowledge and abilities with scaffolds that build on their strengths.

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Introduction

It is both common sense and demonstrated in the literature that students learn more quickly and deeply when they engage in classroom activities pitched at the edge of their current learning.[2] Key to understanding this concept of "edge learning" is Lev Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD).[3] ZPD refers to the realm of what a student can do in interaction with others. Learning is not as effective when it is at the same level as what students already know and can do independently (too easy) or

> "Pedagogy must be oriented not to the yesterday, but to the tomorrow of the child's development."
>
> *Lev Vygotsky*
> *(1987, p. 211)*

when learning expectations are far beyond their current capacity (too frustrating). When learning is pitched at a level of challenge just beyond what students already know and can do (e.g., supported by the assets they bring to their learning and their interaction with others), this is their ZPD.[4] Teachers should not wait for English learners to become fully proficient in English before offering students opportunities to engage in this type of rigorous, authentic edge learning. To support students to enter into and participate in these types of learning opportunities, it is important for educators to provide English learners with appropriate instructional scaffolding and support. Research has found that giving English learners access to scaffolded, challenging content and coursework is a better predictor of achievement than

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students' level of English proficiency.[5] This means that, in practice, English learners should not receive less challenging content instruction than other students.[6]

> **Instructional scaffolding** is an intentionally designed and thoughtfully implemented temporary support that allows students to engage with content and participate in tasks that they cannot yet do independently.

Instructional scaffolding is an intentionally designed and thoughtfully implemented system of temporary support that allows students to engage with content and participate in learning tasks that they cannot yet accomplish independently. Scaffolding does not mean doing all the work and thinking for students, nor does it suggest reducing, postponing, or limiting students' access to grade-level content. It refers to providing both structured and contingent support for students from a teacher or peer to accomplish a task that they would not yet be able to do on their own. Scaffolding also should not be understood as a practice of keeping supports in place indefinitely but rather as a way for teachers to support students' emerging autonomy as they grow their competence. This is to say that once students' needs change—what they can do on their own expands, and they are able to accomplish work with more independence than they were able to previously—scaffolding is adjusted or removed.[7]

Taken together, these ideas suggest that educators should plan to engage in specific practices that make content accessible for students learning English, but this work should focus not on making content simpler or easier for English learners.[8] English learners at any level of proficiency can engage with conceptual, analytic, and linguistic practices within disciplinary contexts—such as using mathematical models to solve problems or comparing and contrasting character development in literature—[9] as long as they are provided with appropriate levels of support. This is work that requires a great deal from both students and teachers and necessitates ongoing professional learning.

To enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers

- ensure English learners engage with the same rigorous content from various starting points and linguistic profiles,[10]

- provide age or grade-level appropriate instruction and materials that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and aligned to English language development and content standards, and

- amplify access to content, including complex text, by providing English learners with a range of scaffolds and access points beyond the edge of their competence.

Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Using Evidence

Key to providing appropriate scaffolding that supports students to engage in rich, authentic tasks pitched at the edge of their knowledge is maintaining an understanding of where that edge is. Since the edge is always changing, ongoing intentional effort is needed to keep this

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understanding current. When formative assessment is used effectively, teachers can keep abreast of this ever-evolving target. Heritage and Heritage state, "[W]e might characterize the overall situation of teacher and learner within the ZPD as one in which both parties are, in their different ways, on the edge of understanding. The successful accomplishment of this 'edge work' by both teacher and learner constitutes the core objective and outcome of formative assessment practice."[11] For teachers, "the edge of understanding" refers to conceptualizing where students are currently in their learning.

Understanding where students are in their learning entails structuring experiences that make learning visible and audible. With this information, teachers can appropriately scaffold tasks, enabling students to engage meaningfully with learning experiences based on rigorous, grade-level content from wherever they are in their language learning. The table below shows various types of scaffolding practices and the related formative assessment evidence that could indicate their need.

Table 1: Scaffolding Practices and Reasons to Use Them

Scaffolding Practices	Formative Assessment Evidence *or* Why You Might Use This Practice
Enhance comprehension with visual aids	If a student has trouble connecting the meaning of various words with how they are spelled, using visual aids can support them in making this connection (e.g., using pictures of different mammals along with the written word "mammal").
Organize ideas and language with graphic organizers (e.g., K-W-L charts, anticipation guides, brainstorming webs)	If students demonstrate that they need assistance getting started on an activity, formulating language to communicate their thinking, or organizing their work, graphic organizers can support students to be successful in these efforts, particularly when they activate their prior knowledge. Graphic organizers also provide additional think-time for students before they get into a new activity that may push the boundary of their current learning. They also include a visual component, which can be especially helpful for English learners.
Express ideas in new ways with sentence stems or formulaic expressions	If students find it challenging to participate in small-group discussions or are learning new conversational moves that have different language demands than they are used to, sentence stems can help students to be successful immediately and provide them with practice using new language features that will support them in the future.
Use a model with partially completed examples	A partially completed example can support students who need to see how something is done before they understand how to complete it themselves. This also helps students who need additional alternate forms of direction instead of only verbal communication.
Use predictable spaces and routines alongside learning resources and graphics	Students who need varied types of input (e.g., not just verbal) to understand classroom practice also rely on the environment for clues. It is helpful to follow similar routines each day, do the same activities in designated spaces, and have visual reminders of the steps students need to take in each space.

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Scaffolding Practices	Formative Assessment Evidence *or* Why You Might Use This Practice
Expand language through paraphrasing	When students are sharing ideas with their teacher, they may be at the stage where they are able to use approximate vocabulary (e.g., saying yarn for floss) and sentence structures that mimic their first language (This is an expected stage of language development that draws on their linguistic assets.). By paraphrasing students' oral explanations, students can hear and practice how to incorporate English domain-specific vocabulary and sentence structures into their explanations.
Model processes and products	Teachers can provide demonstrations for further clarification of expectations. This is helpful when students need additional, non-linguistic step-by-step support. When teachers accompany this with think-alouds while they're modeling, it provides students with a window into their thinking. Teachers can also provide other models for students to emulate (e.g., written work) that show the standard of work expected of students. Modeling can support processes such as citing evidence from a text.
Co-construct ideas through structured partner and group work (e.g., think-pair-share, quick write with partner share, round robin)	Structured opportunities to engage in collaboration are supportive for students at all levels of language proficiency. Students at the beginning stages of learning English can often benefit from working with another student who is more advanced in their English language development. Peers can be selected who are able to provide first language support and provide further modeling. Students can also benefit from opportunities to jointly construct their understanding and practice their language use with a partner or small group.
Share thinking with whiteboards	To take the attention off of individual performance and still get input about student learning, students can use individual whiteboards to share their responses without being in the public eye. This approach is helpful when students need additional support to engage in whole-group settings or are not comfortable responding to direct questioning publicly and need a safer environment to share their thinking.
Retell a story	Asking students to retell events that they participated in or learned about in a book can activate student thinking, language, and reflection. This supports the development of both content and language learning and metacognition.
Access home language translations and other materials	Providing first-language support in the form of translations can help emergent English-speaking students stay abreast of content area learning, particularly if they demonstrate that they are not yet able to follow along with English-only input.

These scaffolds and related contexts demonstrate the instructional adjustments teachers can make in response to evidence of learning. The following lesson example provides a snapshot of these ideas in action.

> **Snapshot: Early Elementary Lesson Example[12]**
>
> In this classroom, 1st and 2nd grade English learners and monolingual English-speaking students are learning about poetic devices as part of their grade-level standards. Each student is provided with sets of poems of varying complexity to analyze. Students independently identify and describe the poetic devices they find in their set of poems, including rhyme and repeated line.
>
> The lesson is structured so that students have both teacher and peer support while engaged in this task. At the beginning of the lesson, the class works together with the teacher to

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identify poetic devices in a sample poem. This models the process that students will next do on their own. Students' learning and **autonomy** would not have been supported if the teacher had read the same poem aloud to the whole class and provided the analysis for them.[13]

During students' independent work time, they have opportunities to conference with the teacher and get feedback from peers. This enables all students to engage with the disciplinary concepts equally and interact with others to make meaning of the poems. This scaffolding supports students to work at the edge of their competencies.

Throughout this lesson, the teacher has three critical opportunities to review and make decisions based on evidence of learning. The first instance is during the planning phase when the teacher reviews evidence from past lessons to determine which poems students will be able to read and comprehend with support. Next, the teacher collects and reviews evidence while students are engaged in learning (e.g., by listening to student discussions, reviewing student annotations on their poems, and conferencing one-on-one with students to discuss their reasoning); this enables the teacher to give actionable feedback and make adjustments to the lesson as it is progressing. Lastly, the teacher reviews evidence after the lesson to support planning and refining the next lesson.

As seen in this lesson example, formative assessment influences lesson planning to ensure that lessons include rich, intentional opportunities for students and teachers to elicit, interpret, and respond to evidence of learning. These structures also create high-quality learning experiences for students. Formative assessment is not something teachers and students do as a layer on top of existing learning structures but is foundational to establishing and facilitating individual and collective learning experiences. In daily practice, formative assessment becomes integrated with the flow of learning.[14] In this lesson, the teacher is able to use formative assessment to scaffold English learners' language and content learning in several ways.

Differentiated materials: By providing sets of poems of varying complexity, the teacher provides an entry point for all students regardless of their proficiency levels. This differentiation ensures that English learners are not overwhelmed by texts that are too complex and not under-challenged by texts that are too simple. They can engage with material that is appropriate for their current language level.

Learner autonomy describes the capacity and willingness to act independently *and* in cooperation with others to support learning. Students with higher autonomy show greater control over how they plan and carry out learning tasks. Autonomy goes beyond how an individual learns to include how students choose to engage in learning with peers, the teacher, or those in their extended network (mentors, coaches, or other adults) to deepen expertise.

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Independent analysis*:* Allowing students to independently identify and describe poetic devices empowers them to think critically and apply their knowledge. For English learners, this is particularly important as it promotes language use in context and helps them develop linguistic skills and confidence.

Evidence-based planning*:* The teacher's use of evidence from past lessons to inform the current lesson plan means that the needs of English learners are being considered continuously. Adjustments are made based on actual student performance and understanding, which is essential for English learners who may progress at different rates.

Peer and teacher support*:* Collaboration with peers and teacher guidance provides English learners with models of language use and opportunities to practice language in a supportive environment. Interaction with peers can lower the affective filter and encourage more language use and risk-taking.

Related Briefs in This Series

- Accelerating Success for English Learners With Formative Assessment
- Formative Assessment Support for Integrated and Meaningful Language Learning
- Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning With Formative Assessment
- Students Participate in Collaborative Discussions

Endnotes

[1] [1] Over time, terms that we use to refer to students who speak multiple languages have evolved with many using the term "multilingual learner" in order to focus on the strengths these students bring to school. In many organizations, the term "multilingual learner" is used as an umbrella term for all students who use or are learning multiple languages, regardless of whether they are formally classified as English learners. In this document, we use the term "English learner" to describe the specific group of students who constitute a protected class, are entitled to specific supports and services by law, and whose achievements must be tracked and reported for federal accountability.

[2] Heritage, M., & Heritage, J. (2013). Teacher questioning: The epicenter of instruction and assessment. *Applied Measurement in Education*, *26*(3), 176–190. http://doi.org/10.1080/08957347.2013.793190

[3] Vygotsky, L. S. (2012). *Thought and language*. MIT Press; Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). Thinking and speech. In R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton (eds.)., The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky. Vol. 1. Problems of general psychology (pp. 39-285).. New York: Plenum.

[4] Wineburg, S. S. (1991). On the reading of historical texts: Notes on the breach between school and academy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *28*, 495–519; Wineburg, S. S. (1998). Reading Abraham Lincoln: An expert-expert study in the interpretation of historical texts. *Cognitive Science*, *22*, 319–346.

[5] Callahan, R. M. (2005). Tracking and high school English learners: Limiting opportunity to learn. *American Educational Research Journal*, *42*(2), 305–328. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312042002305; Umansky, I. M. (2018). According to plan? Examining the intended and unintended treatment effects of EL classification in early elementary and the transition to middle school. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, *11*(4), 588–621. https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2018.1490470

[6] Callahan, R. M., & Shifrer, D. (2016). Equitable access for secondary English learner students. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *52*(3), 463–496. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X16648190

[7] Walqui and van Lier. (2010). *Scaffolding the academic success of adolescent English Language Learners: A pedagogy of promise*. WestEd.

[8] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *English learners in STEM subjects: Transforming classrooms, schools, and lives*. Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/25182

[9] Disciplinary practices might take the form of conceptual practices (e.g., key and interconnected ideas), analytical practices (e.g., comparison of diverse points of views, argumentation, hypothesizing), and language practices (e.g., purpose and organization of texts, preferred language). Walqui, A., & Bunch, G. C. (Eds.). (2019). *Amplifying the curriculum: Designing quality learning opportunities for English learners*. Teachers College Press.

[10] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *English learners in STEM subjects: Transforming classrooms, schools, and lives*. Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/25182

[11] Heritage, M., & Heritage, J. (2013). Teacher questioning: The epicenter of instruction and assessment. *Applied Measurement in Education*, *26*(3), 176–190. http://doi.org/10.1080/08957347.2013.793190

[12] Example inspired by a 1st/2nd grade lesson for English learners and native English speakers taught by Olivia Lozano at the UCLA Lab School.

[13] Gibbons, P. (2009). *English learners, academic literacy, and thinking*. Heinemann.

[14] Heritage, M., & Wylie, E. (2018). Reaping the benefits of assessment for learning: achievement, identity, and equity. *ZDM Mathematics Education*, *50*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-018-0943-3