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Supporting

Multilingual Learners

50 STRATEGIES
for Language and Literacy Instruction

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CONTENTS

Introduction to Effective Literacy Scaffolds for Multilingual Learners

Why Do We Need This Book?

Over 50 percent of the world's population is now bilingual and using their bilingualism as an asset in the evolving global economy (Grosjean 2010). Students who are fortunate enough to speak English as an additional language are a quickly growing demographic in public schools in the United States. New and veteran teachers report being eager to learn new and effective strategies to support their students who speak languages other than English at home. Many multilingual learners find a great deal of academic success, but the data does suggest that as an educational community, we have room to improve when thinking about designing and implementing effective instruction specifically targeted for supporting multilingual learners (Correia 2020).

Unfortunately, multilingual learners have historically received instruction that has focused on decontextualized, rote-based acquisition of skills and content (Allington 1991; Darling-Hammond 1995).

Multilingual learners have also been frequently placed in lower-ability groups with an emphasis on language as a form, where they are unable to draw on background knowledge, topics of interest, and motivation (Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000; Bernhardt 2011). More recent research shows that multilingual learners benefit from instruction that involves meaningful, content-rich activities that encourage language growth through engagement, discussion, and cocreation of academic products (Hakuta and Santos 2012, iii). While many scholars have documented the institutional marginalization of multilingual learners, other recent research documents classroom practices that create opportunities for positive identity development and academic progress for multilingual learners (Moses and Kelly 2017, 2018).

In this book, I aim to share practical instructional scaffolds and strategies that focus on inclusive and supportive practices for multilingual learners, garnered from my research and collaboration with exemplary teachers. Multiple instructional strategies might be used in a single lesson to scaffold complex thinking and tasks, so this book is designed to share five instructional strategies for each research-based scaffold so that teachers have plenty of options when making instructional decisions based on their unique students' needs.

Language Learning

The reality is that learning another language is hard. As someone who has committed my work and research to learning about language acquisition and effective instructional strategies, I am constantly reflecting on my own second language learning. A couple of years ago, I began one-on-one video conference tutoring two to three times a week with Sindy Villamizar, a Spanish teacher in Colombia. While I am highly critical of my own progress, I am always inspired by her thoughtful instruction, which manages to help me celebrate successes and nudge me to think about the next linguistic nuance. Her instruction is purposeful, individualized, and always targeted to just what I seem to need in that context. This experience is humbling and yet exactly what I need as I explore more effective approaches to

supporting children who are learning an additional language. Unfortunately, not all instruction can take place in one-on-one settings, so I continue to ask myself, *How can we take individualized language scaffolds and supports and make them accessible to teachers working with a classroom full of students?*

As I work and learn alongside many schools and individual educators who are committed to supporting children as they learn English, I am constantly reminded that this work is challenging and messy, and it differs for every child. I have spent the last ten years researching, teaching, and consulting on this topic, and I believe we need to take a closer look at the scaffolds we use to support students who are learning an additional language. However, we can't talk abstractly about scaffolding for students. We need practical, classroom-tested, research-supported instructional scaffolds specifically designed to support students who speak multiple languages.

Who Are Multilingual Learners?

According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), nearly five million students were classified as English language learners (I refer to these students as *multilingual learners*) in US public schools in the fall of 2020. These numbers reflect students who had not yet reached English language proficiency according to the state assessments and made up 10.3 percent of US public school students. While Spanish remains the most common home language of multilingual learners (75.5 percent), there are over four hundred languages spoken at home by multilingual learners in the US (Bialik, Scheller, and Walker 2018).

While multilingual learners all have the process of learning another language in common, they are a unique group of individuals. Like any group of learners, they have different backgrounds, beliefs, preferences, personalities, knowledge bases, needs, and strengths. Teachers can support these strengths by providing culturally and linguistically sustaining instruction and assessment (Paris 2012). This involves teachers recognizing, responding to, and validating students'

cultural practices through multimodal and multilingual learning opportunities.

I want to take a brief moment to talk about terminology. Many terms and labels have been used to identify students in US schools who are learning English. I celebrate and support bilingualism, so I most frequently refer to students as *bilingual students* or *emerging bilinguals* in my research writing as a way to honor and celebrate the multiple languages children speak. However, this term is often criticized or confused in both research literature and practitioner literature because it is not always representative of the types and models of instruction that students receive. For example, if the instructional methodologies being suggested are specifically for helping students learn English (not promoting simultaneous bilingualism), then critics would argue that the terminology, like *multilingual learner,* should be aligned with the instructional model. While I fully support bilingual education when-ever possible, the purpose of this book is to support teachers who are providing instruction in English to multilingual learners learning English. *English learner (EL)* and *English language learner (ELL)* are the two most prominent terms used in federal, state, and local educational contexts and policies, but these terms fail to recognize the fact that students are often learning multiple languages. These terms also posi-tion English as more important than other languages, thus devaluing the many linguistic resources multilingual learners bring from other languages. For clarity and the aforementioned reasons, I have decided to use the term *multilingual learner* throughout the book.

Foundational Principles for This Book

All of my work is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978/1995; Wertsch 1998; Lave and Wenger 1991) and the belief that all learning (language, literacy, content) is situated in a social context. Children learn language with, from, and alongside other people. They are unique individuals, and teachers can support them best by making connections, building relationships, and getting to know them in a holistic way. There is no one perfect approach for all multilingual

learners—or any students for that matter. My goal with this book is to provide practical strategies you can use flexibly within a classroom context that puts multilingual learners' learning front and center, so the content of this book is guided by three principles: assets-based approaches to teaching and learning; language-oriented planning, instruction, and assessment; and meaningful interactive opportunities for authentic language use.

Assets-Based Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Historically, schools often viewed multilingual learners from a position of what they did not have: English proficiency or proficient performance on English assessments. I have heard teachers say things like, "They don't have background knowledge." I always reply that multilingual students have more background knowledge and experiences than we could ever imagine. All of our students come with many cultural and linguistic resources, and it is our job to build on those "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al. 1992) and simultaneously support their ability to communicate those resources in English when their teacher and peers do not speak their home language. I view and frame all second language learning stages and processes as assets. Multilingual learners bring so many assets from their home language and experiences, *and* they are also learning English and academic content in English in school. That is impressive! All assets-based instruction begins with identification of what multilingual learners know, and the goals of all instruction are situated in what students can and will be able to do.

In addition to educational settings, bilingualism has many documented benefits. People who speak multiple languages experience cognitive benefits such as increased attention span and ability to multitask, lessened cognitive decline with age, and delays in dementia and Alzheimer's onset (Bialystok 2011). People who speak multiple languages have the opportunity to participate as global citizens who can communicate in multiple contexts with a wider range of people than their monolingual peers. Being bilingual also increases workplace marketability in an increasingly global society.

Language-Oriented Planning, Instruction, and Assessment

If we want to support multilingual learners, we must be equipped with the tools to design and implement language-oriented instruction and assessment. This means we need to have an understanding of students' language proficiency levels and the stages of language acquisition. We must plan for supported authentic experiences to build on current strengths to develop their language in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This is so much more than thinking about adding extra vocabulary words. This means purposefully planning which scaffolds to utilize to help multilingual learners gain access to grade-level content and whole-group instruction, but it also means planning ways students, even at the beginning stages of English language proficiency, can participate and document what they know because they know a lot. I address considerations for scaffolds to support language-oriented whole-group, collaborative, independent, small-group, and conferring experiences throughout the book.

Meaningful Interactive Opportunities for Authentic Language Use

If we want students to learn a language, we have to plan time for them to use it. Whole-group instruction often involves the teacher speaking, modeling, and possibly asking for brief input from the students. This might include hand raising and one or two students giving responses, or it might include a brief think-pair-share. Then, teachers often send students off to work independently. For students learning English, particularly students who are more reluctant to speak, this means they rarely have opportunities to speak and further develop their oral language in English. It is essential to plan for and build in scaffolds that include wait time, supported oral language structures, and talk-equity considerations in every whole-group and small-group experience we design for multilingual learners.

What Are Scaffolds?

Most educators are familiar with the term *scaffolding*, though different scholars and resources define it in different ways. Outside educational contexts, people typically associate scaffolds with temporary structures used in the process of constructing a building. In relation to education, the term was originally used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) as a metaphor when studying parent-child talk in the early years, and they describe it as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skills she is in the process of acquiring" (19). However, many scholars are quick to note that it is not as simple as just helping a child complete a task (Maybin, Mercer, and Stierer 1992); rather, it is temporary and specific assistance from a teacher or mentor that will enable the student to complete similar tasks alone in the future (Gibbons 2002).

Scaffolding has long been discussed in relation to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) because he argued that learning takes place when the learner needs teacher, adult, or mentor support. It is in this zone that students learn and move toward independence, thanks to the assistance—or what Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) referred to as scaffolding—from knowledgeable others (typically adults). At the core of this work is the idea that instead of simplifying the task for the child, we should adjust the scaffold we're providing to support the learner in accomplishing this task, initially with the scaffolds and then eventually on their own without scaffolds. Originally, this work and research focused specifically on monolingual speakers but more recently has begun to focus on supporting multilingual learners as well (Cummins 2000; Gibbons 2002, 2009; Krashen 2003).

There are many ways to think about and categorize scaffolds. For example, Marsh (2018) categorizes scaffolds for meaning making into three categories: visual aids, modeling practices, and a wide range of presentation strategies. Diane Staehr Fenner (2019) also has three categories, but they are materials and resources, instruction, and student grouping. WIDA (2012) uses the terms *sensory supports*, *graphic supports*, and *interactive supports*. WIDA also differentiates between

macroscaffolding practices and microscaffolding practices. Macroscaffolding practices are preplanned scaffolds based on a long-term vision and sequence used in the instruction, and microscaffolding practices are provided during lessons through interactions between the teacher and student based on student need in the moment.

For the purposes of this book, I use the term *scaffold* to represent a broad category or type of scaffold (see the list of ten in the next section), but within each scaffold I include instructional strategies that fit within that category. For example, *Use visuals to support understanding* is a scaffold, and within that scaffold I might introduce the following instructional strategies: (1) Use pictures and realia to introduce vocabulary and build background about a new topic; (2) Provide emergent speakers with an image bank to respond to questions and participate in discussion; (3) Incorporate video with closed captioning to support and reinforce concepts; (4) Introduce complex concepts with graphic organizers to assist in broader understanding and connections across concepts; and (5) Use color-coding on presentations and documents (for example, to highlight vocabulary, draw attention to grammatical patterns, reinforce newly learned prefixes and suffixes, introduce and reinforce tenses, highlight cognates, or identify similar and different characteristics).

These instructional strategies are easy to implement but can make a large difference in helping your students have greater access to complex concepts and tools to help communicate their understanding in linguistically appropriate ways. Throughout the book I provide suggestions and share classroom examples of how I and other teachers used these instructional strategies.

Ten Research-Based, Easy-to-Use Scaffolds

Students are unique and need a wide range of scaffolds to support their learning. These might range from multiple and highly supportive scaffolds for beginning multilingual learners to one very light scaffold for nearly proficient English speakers. It is important to remember that

scaffolds are beneficial during instruction as a way to help students access the content, but they are equally as important in helping students document and share their learning. During any given lesson, I might use a variety of scaffolds depending on my instructional purpose and students' needs. Research has reported these scaffolds as being highly effective for multilingual students (August, Fenner, and Snyder 2014; Goldenberg 2013).

1. Connect new learning to prior learning and experiences.
2. Teach academic vocabulary.
3. Model skills, strategies, and procedures.
4. Use visuals to support understanding.
5. Adjust speech and time.
6. Provide repeated exposure and opportunities for practice.
7. Prepare resources to support student responses (sentence stems, word banks, etc.).
8. Prepare structured oral language opportunities with talk-equity considerations.
9. Connect to and build on students' home language skills and knowledge.
10. Draw attention to language and expanding grammatical complexity.

Stages of Language Proficiency

To get the biggest benefit from these scaffolds, we must know what our students can do and when and where they might need support to meet the challenges. There are many considerations, but language and literacy proficiency are two key areas that should inform our decisions about scaffolding and instructional strategies. Most schools require a great deal of data collection and assessments related to ongoing literacy development, but teachers often have far less training on thinking about second language proficiency and development. I find the WIDA website to be a wonderful free resource for educators working with multilingual students.

In Figure 1.1, you will see the general performance definitions for the levels of English language proficiency (WIDA Consortium 2007), but you can also find grade-level-specific "can-do descriptors," which are broken down into language domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), on the WIDA website. I find these to be particularly helpful as teachers are becoming more familiar with what students at their grade level and language proficiency level *can* do. This also helps teachers see what they will be working toward to move to the next level. Scaffolds play a crucial role in helping students access and move toward that next level.

Performance definitions for the levels of English language proficiency
At the given level of English language proficiency, English language learners will process, understand, produce, or use

6 Reaching	› specialized or technical language reflective of the content area at grade level; › a variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity in extended oral or written discourse as required by the specified grade level; › oral or written communication in English comparable to proficient English peers
5 Bridging	› the technical language of the content areas; › a variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity in extended oral or written discourse, including stories, essays, or reports; › oral or written language approaching comparability to that of English proficient peers when presented with grade level material
4 Expanding	› specific and some technical language of the content areas; › a variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity in oral discourse or multiple, related paragraphs; › oral or written language with minimal phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that do not impede the overall meaning of the communication when presented with oral or written connected discourse with occasional visual and graphic support
3 Developing	› general and some specific language of the content areas; › expanded sentences in oral interaction or written paragraphs; › oral or written language with phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that may impede the communication but retain much of its meaning when presented with oral or written, narrative or expository descriptions with occasional visual and graphic support
2 Beginning	› general language related to the content areas; › phrases or short sentences; › oral or written language with phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that often impede the meaning of the communication when presented with one to multiple-step commands, directions, questions, or a series of statements with visual and graphic support
1 Entering	› pictorial or graphic representation of the language of the content areas; › words, phrases, or chunks of language when presented with one-step commands, directions, WH-questions, or statements with visual and graphic support

FIGURE 1.1   *WIDA Performance Definitions*

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized by a series of ten primary scaffolds. Each chapter focuses on one of the ten research-based scaffolds and includes five easy-to-use instructional strategies that fit within that scaffold. The chapters begin with a glimpse into the classroom followed by a brief overview of the scaffold. Then you will find five strategies, each of which includes a brief and practical description along with suggestions for when and with whom you might use this strategy. The next section, "Strategies in Action," provides a classroom example of the strategy in use in either a primary or an intermediate grade. I share the reality of how the implementation of the instructional strategy went and also describe the on-the-spot, individualized instructional strategies we used during the lesson based on students' needs. The chapters end with reflection questions.

Instructional Goals Supported by the Strategies

The chapters are organized by research-based scaffolds with five instructional strategies. Figure 1.2 provides another way to navigate this book. You can identify instructional goals you want to address

	STRATEGY	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Supporting understanding and access to content and skills	Supporting ways students can document learning and knowledge	Building and retaining vocabulary	Building and connecting to background knowledge	Supporting oral language development	Expanding linguistic complexity
CHAPTER 2	S1	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		
	S2	•	•	•		•			•	•	
	S3	•	•			•			•		
	S4	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		
	S5	•	•	•	•		•	•	•		
CHAPTER 3	S1	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•
	S2	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	
	S3	•	•	•				•		•	
	S4	•	•	•		•			•	•	•
	S5	•	•	•			•		•		
CHAPTER 4	S1		•	•		•		•			
	S2		•	•		•				•	
	S3	•	•	•	•	•		•			
	S4	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	
	S5	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•
CHAPTER 5	S1		•			•		•	•		
	S2					•		•	•		
	S3			•	•	•	•	•			
	S4		•	•	•	•					
	S5	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
CHAPTER 6	S1		•			•					
	S2	•	•			•	•				
	S3	•	•	•	•		•				
	S4	•	•	•		•		•			
	S5	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	

FIGURE 1.2 *Instructional Goal Organization Chart*

and then see the list of applicable strategies throughout the book. Most strategies will address multiple or all of the goals, but the • delineates the focal goals.

Chapter	STRATEGY	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Supporting understanding and access to content and skills	Supporting ways students can document learning and knowledge	Building and retaining vocabulary	Building and connecting to background knowledge	Supporting oral language development	Expanding linguistic complexity
CHAPTER 7	S1	•	•	•		•		•			
	S2	•	•	•			•	•			
	S3	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
	S4	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	S5	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
CHAPTER 8	S1	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
	S2	•	•	•	•		•			•	•
	S3	•	•	•	•	•	•				
	S4			•	•	•	•		•		•
	S5		•	•	•	•	•		•	•	
CHAPTER 9	S1	•	•				•			•	•
	S2	•	•				•			•	•
	S3	•	•				•			•	•
	S4	•	•				•			•	•
	S5	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
CHAPTER 10	S1	•	•	•				•	•		
	S2	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		
	S3	•	•	•	•	•			•		
	S4	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•
	S5	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	
CHAPTER 11	S1	•	•	•	•	•	•				•
	S2	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
	S3	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•
	S4	•	•	•	•	•	•				•
	S5	•	•	•	•	•	•				•

FIGURE 1.2 *Instructional Goal Organization Chart*