The “Teaching and Learning Cycle:”
Scaffolding Academic Writing for English Learners
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The Need for Scaffolding

Many teachers will find the following scenario familiar: Ms. Lin is an 8th grade science teacher in a school composed of ethnically diverse students, about 50 percent of whom are learning English as an additional language, or English learners (ELs). She plans an integrated science unit on global climate change in which students will explore concepts in the earth sciences (atmosphere, weather, and climate), physics (heat and temperature), and life sciences (effects of climate change on ecosystems). The unit culminates in science reports that each student will write independently. Ms. Lin wants to help her students become critical thinkers and communicators, cultivate their curiosity about the natural world, and develop a sense of responsibility for protecting it. As is the case with all teachers, she wants her students to be able to express thoughtful, evidence-based, and coherent ideas in writing. Throughout the unit, the students participate in various engaging, interactive, and inquiry-based learning about the topic.

However, when Ms. Lin sits down to read and evaluate her students’ final reports, she finds that their writing falls flat. Most of the students’ reports are disorganized and do not reflect all the rich content learning that took place over the previous weeks. While a handful of students were able to write clearly and coherently, most of the reports are choppy and fragmented, and some are merely lists of facts. Ms. Lin is frustrated as she has set high expectations for her students and believes they are capable of achieving them. However, she realizes that she may have assumed that, by engaging in all of the rich science learning activities throughout the unit, her students would automatically “pick up” the skills they would need to write clear and robust science reports. Through the evidence of the student’s reports, she now sees that she did not spend enough time supporting her students with their writing skills.

Ms. Lin’s vision for her students is one that is shared by all teachers. She wants them to be critical thinkers and powerful communicators in her class, and she wants them to feel prepared for the more rigorous demands of high school so that they graduate with many options for college, careers, and civic engagement. She knows that when her students enter high school, they will be expected to produce high levels of academic writing across the disciplines, yet she is unsure about how to support them to prepare for these demands. She is a good teacher and wants to continue to improve her practice for her students. In her cross-departmental team meeting with other 8th grade teachers and the school’s language and literacy specialist, the team determines that their next step is to develop deeper understandings about how to scaffold learning and writing for their students, particularly their EL students. They know that scaffolding – intentional, specialized, and temporary support tailored to a learner’s needs and designed to support their future independence – can help them provide the support their students need to thrive, but they are unsure about where to start in their professional learning.

One teacher proposes that they explore a framework for scaffolding she recently learned about at a summer institute: the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC). The team decides to learn about the approach, try out some tangible instructional practices from it, and gather and reflect on student writing samples to see how it worked. This paper shares what the team learned in their action research project by introducing the TLC; explaining what scaffolding is; and providing concrete ideas for scaffolding writing through each stage of the TLC.

Overview of the Teaching and Learning Cycle

The teaching and learning cycle (TLC) is a pedagogical framework for scaffolding deeper thinking, extended discussions, and interactive reading as well as the development of academic oral and written language. The model was first developed in Australia in the 1980’s by teachers working with educational linguists drawing on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and has since spread globally as educators see how the quality of their students’ writing improves through the framework’s intentional, language-focused support.

The goal of the TLC is to support students’ autonomous writing skills in a specific genre, or text type, within a particular discipline. This approach is quite different from many other approaches to writing instruction and support that provide more general writing tips — such as the use of graphic organizers or sentence frames — in ways that are isolated from deeper, integrated content and language learning goals. Through the TLC, students have the opportunity to delve deeply into disciplinary learning, analyze and unpack discipline-specific writing, “rehearse” writing the same text type, and independently write using tools that support their reflection on (and self-evaluation of) both the content and language they are using. The TLC is especially powerful for longer (e.g., four to six weeks or more) units of study that focus on the concurrent development of language and literacy with content knowledge. However, it can also be adapted for use with a sequence of lessons that span only a week or two, and the pedagogical practices from any one stage can be used outside of the full TLC.

Five stages of learning

In the TLC, teachers guide their students through five stages of learning (as shown in Figure 1):

1. Building the field (i.e., building deep content knowledge through language-rich experiences).
2. Exploring the structure and language of text types.
4. Independently constructing texts.
5. Reflecting on one’s own written texts.

Most teachers are familiar with stages one and four of the TLC, but stages two, three, and even five are often absent from typical classroom instruction. Teachers may model writing or look at a “mentor text” (i.e., an example of good writing), but it is rare for teachers to explicitly analyze and discuss with students how language works in different text types and link these understandings to content learning goals. In the scenario at the beginning of this article, for instance, Ms. Lin delved deeply into stage one throughout the unit and then, at the end of the unit, asked her students to write about the topic (stage four). However, to help her students learn to write effectively about the content they have learned, she must also focus on stages two, three, and five, which contain rich opportunities for scaffolding language and writing development through deep content learning.

To read more about the TLC model, see: de Oliveira & Lan (2014); Derewianka & Jones (2012); Gibbons (2015); Klingelhofer & Schieppkegrell (2016); Rose & Martin (2012); Rothery & Stenglin (1995); Spycher (2007); Spycher & Linn-Nieves (2014); and Spycher & Spycher (2016).
Scaffolding: Temporary Support for Student Autonomy

Scaffolding is specialized and temporary support that is tailored to a learner’s needs and designed to support their future independence. Scaffolding requires meaningful interaction with other people. It is a social process in which communication – and language - is central. Consider the experience of a young child learning to tie her shoes. Around the age of four or five, parents and caregivers are typically still performing this task for the child. At some point, however, the child or the adult may notice that the child is ready to tie their own shoes and that this independence is a wonderful goal for all parties concerned. The parent does not merely tell the child how to tie their shoes or hand the child an instruction manual. Instead, the parent nurtures independence and cultivates agency in the child through scaffolded support, including demonstrating the process of tying a shoe and explaining how it is done in language that is understandable. This specialized support is focused on bridging the gap between what the child can do currently (perhaps starting a knot) and what the child will be able to do at some point in the future (completing a bow). As the child begins to learn how to tie her own shoes, the adult will have many suggestions, and the child may ask questions about technique. The child may, at times, become frustrated, and the adult may support them with comments such as, “You are trying so hard. Watch me do it again,” or “Could you try putting one lace over the other?!” or even “Wow, I didn’t even think about doing it that way.” As the child’s skills grow, less and less support is provided. Eventually, with ample assistance and encouragement, the child is able to tie her laces all on their own with ease, and a small celebration is in order.

Adults choose (either explicitly or implicitly) how they will support students’ learning in goal-directed activities such as these. They are the experts in this case, and their job is to guide students toward independence with the task. Aside from deep wells of patience and the ability to restrain from doing the task themselves, this task requires adults to have a specific goal in mind, know a lot about the child and where they are in their ever-changing development, and have a battery of approaches at hand that provide the balance of just enough support and autonomy. Essential to this task is an understanding of how to gradually diminish support until the learner’s full autonomy is achieved. Otherwise, the child may be ever dependent upon others for shoe tying or become frustrated and walk through the world with untied laces.

The ZPD: Working in the “Sweet Spot” of Learning

The portrait of scaffolding above represents a sociocultural theory of learning and development, founded by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), who believed that social interaction is fundamental to cognitive and linguistic development. Before his untimely death at the age of 37, Vygotsky developed the concept of the zone of proximal (or “next”) development (ZPD), which refers to the space - or cognitive gap - between what a learner currently can do independently and what they will be able to do — with support from a more knowledgeable other — in the future. He believed that it is not enough for teachers to only consider what students are capable of doing on their own (on a test, for example); it is critical to observe what they are capable of doing in a social setting, in collaboration with others. He noted that often, learners are able to successfully complete a task within a group before they are able to do the task independently as it is in these group settings where their minds and language abilities are being pushed and stretched by other students. Both careful observation of students as they interact with others on academic tasks and analysis of their independent work (writing samples, for example) allows teachers to teach students in their “sweet spot” of learning, or ZPD.

Building on Vygotsky’s work, Jerome Bruner (1915–2016) coined the term “scaffolding” to refer to a process in which teachers or peers offer support that assists learners to develop autonomy with new understandings or skills, essentially working in the learner’s ZPD and gradually tapering off this support as it becomes unnecessary. The metaphorical term is borrowed from architectural scaffolding in order to visually emphasize that the support is intended to be strategic, provided at just the right time and in just
the right place, and temporary, gradually removed as the learner has progressed to a level where the particular scaffolding is no longer needed. Bruner believed that a learner (even at a very young age) is capable of learning any material so long as the task is organized and facilitated appropriately. That is, with highly challenging learning, strategically designed support is provided at the points of need and gradually withdrawn as learners become increasingly independent. Bruner also believed that teaching is about opening up worlds of possibilities and that cognitive development can be sped up through scaffolding.

Gibbons (2015) has noted that scaffolding does not occur by accident. It is an intentional and strategic process that requires teachers to know students’ learning needs deeply and from a variety of angles so that appropriate support can be provided. She depicts scaffolding as a relationship between high challenge and high support and the effect these combinations have on students (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. High Challenge, High Support**

![High Challenge, High Support Diagram](https://source.com)

*Source: Gibbons (2009), adapted from Mariani (1997).*

Thoughtfully planned, appropriate scaffolding is necessary in order for all students to fully engage in and benefit from intellectually challenging, goal-oriented tasks. This sort of planned scaffolding is complemented by just-in-time scaffolding, or in-the-moment support provided during learning tasks as teachers are observing and listening to students carefully to determine when (and when not to) step in. Just-in-time scaffolding is an important part of the formative assessment process, which involves teachers making refinements and adjustments to what they are doing based on evidence of student learning (through observation of students while they are learning, for example) and providing relevant feedback and supports that helps them to advance in their learning (Heritage, 2011).

**Understanding How Writing Works**

In order to provide scaffolding for students to write various academic genres, teachers themselves need to understand what genre is and how different genres work. Broadly speaking, genres are socially recognized ways of using language that enable people to say things about the world, establish relationships, and accomplish things. In order to understand how different written genres do these things, it is important to consider the social purpose, overall organization and structure, and specific language features of each genre.

**Purpose.** Fundamentally, genres are distinguished by their social purposes — that is, what the text is intended to accomplish and the desired effect on the people who will be reading it (i.e., the audience).
Social purposes include recounting (e.g., an experience or an event), entertaining (e.g., through a fictional story or memoir), informing (e.g., about a historical event or science facts), explaining (e.g., about a political system or a science process), and persuading (e.g., to believe something or take action on an issue). These social purposes shape the genre, guide how it is structured and organized, and determine which language resources are most powerful to use in the text, given its intended effects on readers.

**Organization.** Each genre has evolved to be structured and organized in predictable ways and to leverage predictable language features. For example, a fictional story — the purpose of which is generally to entertain and to convey certain overarching messages or themes — tends to have a lot of action and is typically presented as a sequence of events in three major stages:

- **Orientation** — in which the author orients the reader by introducing the setting and characters and possibly foregrounding the plot.
- **Complication** — where things get complicated and the plot thickens.
- **Resolution** — where the problem is resolved and the reader comes away with a satisfied feeling, possibly having learned an important life lesson.

**Language features.** Students can learn to be “language detectives” or “sleuths” when exploring the language patterns, or features, of each genre, which helps them to understand how language works in the genre. For example, science descriptions and explanations tend to have long noun phrases (e.g., “The relative amount of energy released by an earthquake, its magnitude,”…) and nominalization (e.g., “destruction,” “evaporation”). Stories tend to use a lot of dialogue, so that the reader can get into the head of characters and understand what they are thinking and feeling, as well as to move the plot along in a way that “shows” and doesn’t merely “tell.” Stories also tend to have descriptive vocabulary, which helps readers imagine the world in which the characters live or evoke certain emotions. Of course, not all genre texts follow these predictable guidelines related to purpose, organization, and language features. However, it is helpful for students — and their teachers — to recognize the patterns of language that are in different genres, as this supports both their reading comprehension (since they will know what to look for) and writing (since they will be more aware of how to shape their writing to meet the conventions of the genre).

**Scaffolding Through the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC)**

Let’s take another look at Ms. Lin’s 8th grade climate change unit. The team has worked together to deepen their understanding of the TLC and try out some of the instructional approaches from the framework, and they’ve seen some promising evidence of student learning in the writing samples. As Ms. Lin revises her climate change unit for the following year, she embeds the existing activities into the TLC and adds additional ones that will scaffold students’ writing. Throughout the planning process, the teachers consider their learners: the cultural and linguistic assets and background knowledge each student brings to this new unit of study; where each student is in their cognitive, linguistic, and social development; how they interact with one another in team-based tasks; and what they are interested in and curious about. The team decides to work together to develop and implement an interdisciplinary unit titled “We Can Affect Our Future: Human Impact on Earth’s Climate” with the following big ideas, culminating tasks, and inquiry questions:

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2 Nominalization is the process of creating a noun or noun phrase from another part of speech (e.g., destroy -> destruction) or condensing larger processes or events into “things” (e.g., metamorphosis, evaporation, post-Civil War reconstruction). Nominalization can also collapse a clause or even multiple clauses at once. For example, in everyday language, a student might say, “People are destroying the places where bats live, and a lot of them are dying.” With nominalization, these two clauses can be collapsed into one clause: “The destruction of the bat’s habitat has led to the extinction of some species.” Note also how the more academic nominalized terms also add nuance and precision to the statement.
• **Big Idea:** Human activities are major factors in the current rise in Earth’s mean surface temperature (global warming). We can reduce the level of climate change if we understand climate science and how human behavior affects climate.

• **Inquiry Questions** (started by the teachers and refined/co-constructed throughout the unit with students):
  1. How does human behavior impact the earth’s climate?
  2. What are the effects of climate change, and how do they affect our planet and the people who live on it?
  3. How do scientists demonstrate the impacts of climate change and communicate them with various audiences?
  4. How can we be involved with political decisions that affect our climate and why should we?

• **Culminating Tasks:**
  - A small group infographic that displays and explains data analysis regarding CO₂ effects on temperature, temperature effects on the environment, and human impacts on both, along with an oral presentation about the infographic to the class
  - A choice-based group research project (e.g., webpage, video infomercial PSA, community outreach project, multi-media hip-hop video) that incorporates information about the causes of and possible solutions for our current climate crisis
  - An independently written science informational report (explanation) about global climate change
  - A letter written in pairs or triads to a local or state lawmakers arguing in favor or opposed to a particular legislative action (with claim, evidence, reasoning, and a call to action)

As the team selects high-interest, complex texts and multimedia resources (e.g., videos, websites, podcasts) for the unit, they analyze them to identify challenges their students may have with some of the ideas and language as well as opportunities the resources afford for rich discussions and language development. Some of the specific tasks the teachers plan for the unit are provided below, presented through the five stages of the TLC framework.

**Stage 1: Building the Field**

The first stage of the TLC focuses on building deep content knowledge through language-rich experiences that involve a lot of discussion and exploration (this stage is called “building the field” for short). In truth, “building the field” occurs throughout the unit, but it is placed as the first stage to emphasize the foundational importance of meaning-making and to provide a context within which students can develop their literacy skills and knowledge about language. Some of the tasks the teachers include in their unit are provided below.

• **Kick-off Tasks:**
  - **K-C-L chart:** At the beginning of the unit, students chart what they already know (K) about the topic to help leverage their prior learning or existing knowledge; they also chart what they are curious about (C). Over the course of the unit, the class adds to the chart the important things they are learning (L), as well additional things they are curious about. This charting process provides valuable information to teachers (and to students themselves) about where students are in their understandings about the topic at various

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3 K-C-L charts document the following about a topic: What we know already, what we are curious about, and what we are learning.
Inquiry Activator: The students engage in an “image analysis gallery walk” in which they roam the room in triads to a) view and discuss various images related to global warming and b) add “I notice…” and “I wonder…” post-its to make their thinking visible and see that of their peers.

Collaborative Group Tasks: Efficiency and success are supported through established protocols and norms for group work, success criteria for the project, and other tools and procedures.

- **Science experiments:** Students collaborate in small groups to engage in hands-on exploration tasks to investigate their inquiry questions.
- **Research groups:** Students work in small, choice-based groups to research their sub-topic and create their projects.
- **Expert group jigsaw:** Students form “expert groups” where each group reads a different text on the same topic and becomes experts on the information in that particular text. “Jigsaw groups” are then formed where members of each expert group come together to share their particular area of expertise.

Integrated Academic Reading, Discussion, and Writing:

- **Paired reading tasks:** Students read and discuss many different complex science informational texts about the topic, using structured note-takers, well-designed prompts, and other supportive methods to promote deeper thinking and extended conversations.
- **Teachers modeling effective reading:** Teachers model fluent and active reading behaviors by reading aloud several different text excerpts, strategically stopping to summarize what was read, make predictions, posing reflection questions, and exploring discussion questions with the class.
- **Science reflection logs:** Students write in their science logs daily, responding to open-ended questions from collaborative reading tasks, adding information on their research projects, or taking field notes during field trips or science labs.
- **Academic vocabulary development:** Students learn general academic vocabulary and domain-specific vocabulary, in context. A “young scholars” word wall displays high-leverage general academic words to be used in discussion and writing tasks.

Multimedia and Community Integration:

- **Video and podcast discussions:** Students view or listen to short, engaging videos/podcasts on the topic using focus questions and structured note-takers to guide their subsequent discussions. These notes, taken in their science journals, are also used in their culminating projects.
- **Ask an expert:** Local scientists, activists, or other experts are invited to be interviewed by the class. Local experts who can speak about culturally and community relevant
aspects of the topic are particularly desired. Small groups prepare interview questions in advance and nominate those questions to be asked first. The notes from the interview will be used as evidence for the culminating tasks.

Stage 2: Exploring the Language of Text Types

This stage is often left out of curriculum and instruction and is likely new to many teachers. When students have built up some content knowledge — and language — about the topic, they can use this knowledge to delve deeper into discussions about language itself and how it works in particular genres that students will encounter in the unit. This stage is an opportunity for teachers to highlight and amplify the purpose, overall structure, and particular language features of the texts students are reading and will be writing on their own by the end of the unit. It is also an opportunity for students to explore and discuss what they find interesting, intriguing, and important about the language of the genres they are encountering. Exploring language is enhanced when students have a language with which to talk about it (i.e., metalinguistic terms). Metalanguage can include terms that are already familiar to many students, such as verbs or nouns. It can also include new terms that allow students to discuss specific language features that make up effective texts, such as “text connectives” (e.g., additionally, therefore). When discussing argument texts, for instance, students might discuss language that authors use to “turn up” or “turn down” the intensity of claims or evidence (e.g., “extremely unlikely” versus “unlikely”).

Expanding students’ metalinguistic repertoire empowers them to talk about language, which helps them to better understand both language and content (Schleppegrell, 2004). Examples of stage-two learning tasks used by the 8th grade team to support students to write in the genres of the culminating tasks include the following:

- **Text Level Analysis**:
  - **Identifying purpose**: The students discuss who they think the intended audiences for particular pieces of writing are, as well as what they think the author’s intended purpose was for writing the text. Students could also discuss particular purposes for larger sections or even paragraphs of certain texts to see how an author’s purpose might be different in different parts of the text.
  - **Analyzing text structure and organization**: The class explores the meaningful stages, or big sections of different texts. They might do this by simply drawing lines around each stage of the photocopied text. Or, they could work together to reconstruct the “chunks” of text that have been cut apart and “jumbled” ahead of time by the teacher.
  - **Analyzing cohesion**: Students explore how texts “hang together” through cohesive devices, such as openers (e.g., how an author begins a text or a paragraph), text connectives (e.g., however, consequently); and pronoun references (e.g., this, it, them).
  - **Collaborative text reconstruction**: Students “rehearse” how to write effective texts by listening to the teacher read aloud a short (e.g., one paragraph) “mentor text” several times, taking notes on key words and phrases, and then working together in pairs or small groups to reconstruct the text as closely as they can to the original. The class can then analyze some of the language features in the text (either features pre-determined by the teacher or features that proved challenging during the text-reconstruction task).
  - **Analyzing texts**: Students analyze specific sections of mentor texts to dig deeper into the language patterns in them. For example, after students have engaged in a collaborative text reconstruction task, they might analyze the text for its long noun phrases, persuasive
• **Sentence and Word Level Analysis:**
  o **Sentence unpacking:** Students “unpack” the meaning of sentences that are important to understanding the meaning of the text and overall learning goals. This is done by breaking up the different “chunks” of the sentence (e.g., dissecting a particularly long noun phrase into smaller parts), translating the meanings into in more familiar language, and discussing the meanings. This is what proficient readers do when they come to particularly challenging sentences.
  o **Sentence expanding:** Students start with a basic sentence and build onto the sentence by adding academic vocabulary or phrases, which expands its meaning and adds precision. Teachers might display a photo for students to use to spark ideas.
  o **Exploring evaluative language:** Students explore how authors use language to “turn up” or “turn down” the intensity of their claims or arguments. For example, in a letter to the editor about ecosystems, the author might use strong adjectives, such as “this critical issue,” or modal verbs, such as “we must do something.” This analysis supports students’ ability to be critical consumers of media and other messages that may be persuasive but may or may not be factual.

**Stage 3: Jointly Constructing Texts**

Once students have built up content knowledge and have explored how the language in particular genres works, they are well prepared to engage in teacher-facilitated writing tasks in which they will collectively write a text (or part of a text) that is in the same genre as one they will later write independently. This stage can be thought of as rehearsal for writing, through talk. It should feel like a comfortable, and even informal, conversation about how to create a text. In this stage, the teacher is responsible for the writing and for drawing out content understanding and language from the students. Meanwhile, through ongoing discussion facilitated by the teacher, the students negotiate which language to include in the text.

In the co-construction of text, the teacher’s role is to be a facilitator of learning and to use her expertise to stretch students’ thinking and language. This stage of the TLC provides many opportunities for “in-the-moment” scaffolding, as the teacher can only anticipate so much. She must be ready to rephrase and recast statements, ask follow-up questions, and so on, where needed. This requires teachers to know where students are in their learning; have an idea of what the final text might look like; be ready with techniques for navigating the class toward the expected outcome; and be open to new and unexpected ideas that students may have. Here are some tips that the 8th grade team decided to use when they jointly construct texts with their students:

*Preparing students for the activity*

- Set the purpose of the activity by telling the students what type of text they will be co-constructing and the social purpose of the text (e.g., to persuade, inform, explain, entertain, recount an experience)
- Briefly review the information on charts (from stages 1 and 2 of the TLC) with students first so they have a lot of ideas to contribute.
- Prompt the students to discuss with a partner how to start the text so they all have an opportunity discuss their ideas before coming together as a whole class to discuss and co-construct the text.
Writing on the chart
• Act as a scribe, draw attention to relevant language features (e.g., vocabulary, phrasing, organization), and provide sentence starters, as needed. You are modeling and they are rehearsing the writing process that they will soon do on their own.
• Cross out, add, and/or rearrange words and phrases, and generally model that writing is an iterative process that involves multiple drafts — writing is messy.
• As you are writing the text on the chart, don’t put a period at the end of the sentence right away, so students can expand and enrich the ideas that are already there.
• Leave spaces between each row of sentences so that more information can be added, if needed.

Drawing out students’ ideas
• Coach the students by thinking aloud and asking them to think aloud about how to expand and enrich sentences, edit sentences, and include appropriate general academic or domain-specific vocabulary.
• Be open to students’ ideas, even if they are different from your own and what you were expecting. After they share their ideas, there will be opportunities to go back and discuss other ways to express the idea, if needed.
• Recast ideas students offer to model how to use language more proficiently or in another, more academic way.
• Introduce metalanguage where appropriate (e.g., “Who can think of a good conjunction to join these ideas?” “What’s a more precise action verb to describe the movement of the gases?” “How could we expand this noun phrase to describe this layer of the atmosphere?”)

Possible questions to ask
• How should we start our text?
• What word could we use here?
• Is there another way to say that?
• Could you say more?
• How could we expand that idea to ___?
• How could we condense that idea?
• How could we connect those ideas?
• Why is that information important for this text?
• Is that the order we want?

The activities in this stage also provide an opportunity for teachers to observe how students are “taking up” the content ideas and language they’ve been learning. It’s also a way for teachers to model how real writers write. Writing is messy. There’s a lot of thinking and talking and editing happening while writing. (When students go to write their own texts, it should also be messy, and students should be encouraged to seek guidance from their peers as they are trying on new writing skills and working through their ideas.) Once the text has been co-constructed, if it is too messy, it can be recopied onto another chart, annotated with the stages of the genre and any significant language features. Finally, the jointly constructed text can serve as a mentor text to which the students can refer.
Stage 4: Independently Constructing Texts

By this stage, the students are now well prepared to write texts independently, meaning they could be writing by themselves, with a peer, or with a small group, as is the case of the 8th graders who are working in various small groups to create several of the unit’s culminating tasks. In this stage, differentiation is important. As students are writing independently, the teacher can provide assistance or extension support to individuals or small groups (this type of responsive support is sometimes referred to as “just-in-time scaffolding”). The goal of this stage is not to formally assess students, but to continue to support them in becoming autonomous writers.

An important part of this stage is to help students be very intentional and deliberate about what they are writing and the language resources they will use in their writing. Success criteria provide an anchor for students as they are writing. These criteria can be posted on a chart or provided to individual students so that the expectations teachers have for their writing are transparent. Students should be involved in creating and/or refining success criteria. This way, they build ownership with the criteria and also begin to recognize layers or nuances of writing that they might want to address. In addition, while first using success criteria, students can focus on just a few indicators and the criteria for success can be general. Soon, though, success criteria for writing should match genre expectations since different types of texts (e.g., argument, story, science explanation) are structured differently and draw on different language resources, of which students need to be made aware.

Another way to help students take a more focused approach to writing is to use what are known as “student framing questions,” which are grounded in how particular genres work. These questions support effective, focused writing because they make teachers’ expectations for writing transparent and they focus on criteria for success within the specific genre, which helps students to keep their writing on track. Figure 4 presents examples of student framing questions for middle school students who are writing an argument; students would use these questions to examine the quality of their writing, choosing one or two areas to focus on in a writing conference with the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of focus</th>
<th>Student framing questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting meaning across</td>
<td>• Are my ideas clear to me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are they clear to my peers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does my writing match my audience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did I make several arguments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did I support each argument with evidence and reasoning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing ideas</td>
<td>• Did I state my point of view clearly in the introduction?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did I acknowledge that there may be other points of view?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are my arguments organized logically?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did I use text connectives (such as <em>first of all, therefore, however, consequently</em>) in ways that help the text flow?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does my conclusion flow from and support the rest of my writing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting and expanding ideas</td>
<td>• Did I use connecting words (examples: <em>such as, because, so, although, if/then</em>) to connect ideas within sentences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did I expand my ideas within sentences in order to provide more information and detail?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using powerful vocabulary</td>
<td>• Did I use language to “turn up” or “turn down” ideas? (example: an <em>extremely serious problem</em>)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Did I use modal words to suggest what I think should happen or what is possible? (examples: <em>we should do this, she might do that, it’s possible that</em>)</td>
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Stage 5: Reflecting on Own Texts

Self-reflection is an important part of the writing process, particularly since writing is often an iterative process that involves multiple rounds of review, reflection, and revision. Once students have written a solid draft of their texts, they can conference with a peer or with the teacher, using the same student framing questions for writing as a guide to focus their reflection and self-evaluation. They can also convene in pairs or small groups to critique one another’s writing, using norms and agreed-upon processes, such as designated roles and the use of structured feedback protocols. Regardless of the format, students should have the opportunity to reflect on their own writing and to receive feedback on it, as well as to provide feedback to other writers, as this is how all writers grow. By this stage, students may be polishing their writing as part of the process, but the writing in this stage is not always a perfectly polished product.

Having Students Evaluate Writing, Including Their Own

One way to provide students an opportunity to evaluate writing — either their own or others — is through what we call “bump-it-up” tasks. One example of a bump-it-up task is to provide students with four different short texts of the same type and on the same topic and then ask students to work together to rank the texts in order from strongest to weakest. Students should justify their decisions with evidence from the text that reflects the content and language focus (or cluster of focus areas) that students are currently working on. They might focus on the accuracy of the content and the use of nominalization or expanded noun phrases in the first paragraph of a science explanation, for example. They might note their evaluation of the writing and their reasoning for ranking the writing as they did on post-it notes, as shown in the photo.

After agreeing as a class on how the examples should be ranked, students could then identify where their own draft writing falls and how they could “bump it up” to the next level of writing.

The students in Ms. Lin’s class also provided feedback to one another on their draft letters to local or state lawmakers, using the same framing questions they used in stage 4 and a protocol for providing respectful feedback. This structured peer feedback supported students to improve the quality of their letters and make them more persuasive.

Making Writing Public

Making writing public is another way for students to get feedback and reflect on their own writing. Publishing student writing projects on a website, in class or school newsletters (online or in print), or
simply in the classroom acknowledges students as writers and gives them a voice that others can hear and interact with. At the end of their unit, Ms. Lin and her colleagues asked students to post their infographics in the room and facilitated a gallery walk where each group visited the various posters and discussed what they noticed or had questions about (leaving “We noticed…” and “We wondered…” post-it notes on each poster), which the authoring group then reflected on. The teachers also conducted a “global café” where each research group had an opportunity to share their projects across the 8th grade classes, with half of the groups presenting their projects at different tables while the other groups visited them, and then switching to allow the other groups to present their projects.

**Improving Students’ Writing Promotes Educational Equity**

Schools play a pivotal role in fostering educational equity. Ultimately, scaffolding support for students’ writing skills through the TLC is an important way to provide effective, equitable learning opportunities for all students. By helping students develop and hone their writing skills in a number of different genres and disciplines, educators give students the tools to succeed in school and career and to become informed and engaged citizens. As students become more confident in their ability to communicate their ideas, they can participate in civil discourse about important topics that they have learned about through analytical reading, careful listening, extended discussions, and deep thinking.

Educators are responsible for providing daily opportunities for all students to engage meaningfully with texts and with others, to express and discuss their ideas about worthy topics, develop deep and nuanced understandings about the world, and realize the critical role they play in their communities and society. Teachers, therefore, need to support students’ abilities to:

- Make meaning while reading and listening.
- Develop a discerning eye and critical stance toward texts and information.
- Effectively express their own interpretations and thoughts about complex topics, both orally and in writing.
- Recognize and seek to understand multiple perspectives, even when they diverge from their own ideas.
- Engage in dialogue with others to gain even deeper understandings about complex texts and ideas.
- Take a stand and advocate for things that are important to them and be able to support their opinions with sounds arguments and credible evidence.

Providing learning opportunities to foster these types of abilities opens up numerous possibilities for students. By providing equitable access to an intellectually rich curriculum, educators can promote curiosity, reflection, mutual respect, understanding, and empathy, as well as foster global competence. Some students will grow up to write stories as entertaining and enticing as J.K. Rowling. Others will grow up to be great orators and deliver speeches as generation-defining and persuasive as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Still others will become scientists or engineers who are able to communicate their critical findings through writing both to their peers and the general public. If students are provided with the kind of sustained, targeted support described in the TLC, they will have the opportunity to develop the language and writing skills necessary to be able to succeed in a wide range of endeavors.

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Ready to Explore More?

The vignettes in the California ELA-ELD Framework provide examples of the TLC in action. These free resources can be found at the following link:

*Teaching Language in Context (2nd Edition)* by Beverly Derewianka and Pauline Jones is a master class in the teaching and learning cycle and how to support students in writing a variety of genres.

*Language support in EAL contexts: Why systemic functional linguistics?* (edited by Caroline Coffin) provides a deep dive into pedagogical approaches, including the TLC, derived from systemic functional linguistics. This paper is available for free at the following link:
https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/18758.pdf
References


