

Supporting English Language Learners

Scaffolding Classroom Discussions for ELLs and MLLs

Scaffolding Classroom Discussions

Scaffolding classroom discussions is an important strategy for supporting English Language Learners (ELLs) and Multilingual Learners (MLLs) as they develop language proficiency and academic understanding. Providing sentence starters, visual aids, partner discussions, teacher modeling, and guided questions helps students participate in classroom conversations with greater confidence. These strategies allow students to practice speaking and listening while developing their vocabulary and comprehension skills. For example, providing sentence frames such as “I think ____ because ____” or “The main idea is ____” helps students organize their thoughts and communicate their understanding. Collett and Dubetz (2022) explain that explicit academic language instruction, visuals, and frequent opportunities for oral and written practice can help multilingual learners access grade-level content and develop academic language.

Home Languages as Classroom Resources

Using students’ native or home languages as classroom resources can also support learning and create an inclusive environment. When students are encouraged to use their home languages, they can connect new information to concepts they already understand, activate prior knowledge, and build confidence in their abilities. Students may use bilingual dictionaries, translated vocabulary lists, or discussions with classmates who share their language to clarify unfamiliar concepts. Cummins (2007) explains that students’ knowledge and skills developed in their first language can support their learning of an additional language. Teachers can encourage students to make connections between their home language and English and then guide them in expressing their understanding in English. This approach recognizes multilingualism as a strength and supports content learning while students continue developing

English proficiency.

Explicit Academic Vocabulary Instruction

When introducing academic vocabulary and content to ELLs and MLLs, teachers should use explicit instruction, visuals, real-world examples, gestures, modeling, and repeated opportunities to practice new words in meaningful contexts. Before reading a text, teachers can introduce essential vocabulary, explain student-friendly definitions, show pictures, and connect unfamiliar concepts to students' experiences. Graphic organizers, interactive activities, collaborative learning, and frequent comprehension checks can further support understanding. Collett and Dubetz (2022) recommend identifying the academic language demands of a lesson and providing appropriate language scaffolds, visuals, and opportunities for students to practice communicating their learning. By combining language scaffolds, home-language resources, and explicit vocabulary instruction, educators can make grade-level content more accessible while maintaining high expectations. These practices help multilingual learners develop academic language, strengthen comprehension, and become more confident and independent learners.

References

- Collett, J., & Dubetz, N. (2022). Instruction to engage multilingual learners with grade-level content. *The Reading Teacher*, 75(5), 593–602. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2065>
- Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 221–240.