Proficiency and Language Learners

In this section, we'll consider issues and explore techniques related to using content-based instruction with students at various proficiency levels. Different principles of scaffolding will be discussed along with various techniques teachers can use to support students' language and subject-matter learning.

The concept of proficiency combines **fluency** and **accuracy**. Proficient second language learners are able to speak, listen, read, and write confidently in the new language over a range of topics, with native-like speed and pauses and using native-like rules of correctness.

Proficient language learners may have developed their skills through formal instruction. Others may have acquired them through living in the target culture, being raised bilingually, or some combination of these.

The SIOP Model of Language Proficiency

Five stages of language proficiency are described in the SIOP model (the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) by Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004). These authors build on ideas from Krashen and Terrell (1983) and describe proficiency as follows:

- **Preproduction.** Students at this stage are not ready to produce much language. They primarily communicate with gestures and actions. They are absorbing the new language and developing receptive vocabulary.
- **Early production.** Students at this level speak using one or two words or short phrases. Their receptive vocabulary is developing; they understand

approximately 1,000 words. Students can answer "who," "what," and "where" questions with limited expression.

- **Speech emergence.** Students speak in longer phrases and complete sentences. However, they may experience frustration at not being able to express completely what they know. Although the number of errors they make increases, they can communicate ideas and the quantity of speech they produce increases.

- **Intermediate fluency.** Students may appear to be fluent; they engage in conversation and produce connected narrative. Errors are usually of style or usage. Lessons continue to expand receptive vocabulary and activities develop higher levels of language use in content areas. Students at this level are able to communicate effectively.

- **Advanced fluency.** Students communicate very effectively, orally and in writing, in social and academic settings. (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004, p. 224)

The American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages Guidelines

Another widely used description of various proficiency levels comes from the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), a professional organization for language teachers. The guidelines are available for speaking and writing.

For both of these skills, there are descriptors for learners at the following levels:

- Novice (Low, Mid, and High)

- Intermediate (Low, Mid, and High)

- Advanced (Low, Mid, and High)

- Superior

The Council of Europe Levels

Another way of describing language proficiency is found in the Common European Framework for Reference used by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE). The descriptors (Association of Language Testers in Europe, 2008), say what learners should be able to do in the four skills at each level:

Council of Europe Levels	Description
C2 (ALTE 5)	The capacity to deal with material which is academic or cognitively demanding, and to use language to good effect at a level of performance which may in certain respects be more advanced than that of a native speaker.
C1 (ALTE 4)	The ability to communicate with the emphasis on how well it is done, in terms of appropriacy, sensitivity and the capacity to deal with unfamiliar topics.
B2 (ALTE 3)	The capacity to achieve most goals and express oneself on a range of topics.
B1 (ALTE 2)	The ability to express oneself in a limited way in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with non-routine information.
A2 (ALTE 1)	An ability to deal with simple, straightforward information and begin to express oneself in familiar contexts.
A1 (ALTE Breakthrough)	A basic ability to communicate and exchange information in a simple way.

Retrieved from http://www.alte.org/further_info/framework_english.pdf on November 28, 2006. Also published in Appendix D of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment pp 249-50. Cambridge University Press (c) 2001 ALTE.

As you see, there are various ways to describe learners' proficiency. Keep in mind that these statements about what learners can do will help you develop appropriate materials and activities for students in content-based courses.

Understanding Scaffolding in Content-Based Instruction

In this section, we will consider two important concepts from sociocultural theory: the zone of proximal development and scaffolding. Both are related to providing appropriate lessons and activities for students at various proficiency levels.

The Zone of Proximal Development

When learners have mastered a skill and can use it confidently and independently, their use of that skill becomes self-regulated. According to van Lier (1996), "beyond that there is a range of knowledge and skills which the person can only access with someone's assistance" (p.190). The skills and knowledge that have not yet been fully learned but are within reach constitute the **zone of proximal development** (ZPD) (van Lier, 1996, pp. 190–191).

Working in the ZPD

There are actually multiple layers of ability in the ZPD in any given learner at one time. For instance, a learner may be quite fluent in conversational English but more limited in academic English. Or a learner may have good pronunciation but have limited listening comprehension. At a more micro-level, a learner may be mastering English negation but still be struggling with question formation.

The challenge for a teacher is to be aware of a student's current level of development on any particular issue and start there. In fact, van Lier (1996) cautions, "anything outside the circle of proximal development is simply beyond reach and not (yet) available for learning" (pp. 190–191).

The help learners need when they are working within the ZPD does not necessarily have to come from the teacher alone. Learners can also work productively by

- Getting help from more capable peers,

- Interacting with peers,
- Helping less capable peers, and
- Tapping their own inner resources. (van Lier, 1996, p. 193)

In this framework, "a learner's zone of self-regulated action can be expanded in a number of different ways, not only through the assistance of teachers or other experts" (van Lier, 1996, p. 193).

Revisiting the Concept of Scaffolding

In an earlier lesson, we learned that scaffolding consists of processes in which "assistance is provided from person to person such that an interlocutor is enabled to do something she or he might not have been able to do otherwise" (Ohta, 2000, p. 52).

The scaffolding image is useful because a scaffold is intentionally temporary: when the building has been constructed, painted, or repaired, the scaffold is removed. This idea is key. Scaffolding is not doing a task for learners. Instead, it is helping them to do the task themselves, withdrawing the support as they gradually gain more independent mastery.

Scaffolding Strategies for Language Teachers

The central challenge (and benefit) of content-based instruction is making sure that students learn both the language and the subject matter. Doing so involves adjusting how we talk to learners, how we prepare listening and reading materials, and how we support subject-matter learning through a range of techniques.

Several authors have discussed scaffolding, but Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004) do so in the context of content-based instruction with a focus on learning strategies.

According to these authors, teachers can use three types of scaffolding strategies to help language learners:

- Verbal scaffolding.
- Procedural scaffolding.
- Instructional scaffolding.

Strategies for Verbal Scaffolding

Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004) say that with verbal scaffolding, teachers who are sensitive to learners' current language proficiency level can "use prompting, questioning, and elaboration to facilitate students' movement to higher levels of language proficiency, comprehension, and thinking" (p. 86). They add that "effective teacher-student interaction promotes confidence when it is geared to a student's language competence" (p. 86).

These authors discuss three strategies for verbal scaffolding:

- **Recasts.** With this strategy, the teacher restates the learner's utterance but in the process provides a corrected version of what the student apparently wished to say (Lyster, 1998).
- **Think-alouds.** With this strategy, teachers give examples of ways capable learners think about doing a task and monitoring their own activities.
- **Reinforcing contextual definitions.** Using this strategy, teachers rephrase key concepts in context. For instance, I might say, "Recasts, or repetitions of learners' utterances with corrections incorporated, are important in language learning."

Strategies for Procedural Scaffolding

Teachers can also use **procedural scaffolding techniques** (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004, p. 86). One example of procedural scaffolding is to follow the pattern of explicitly teaching a point, modeling the activity, giving students an opportunity to practice the activity with others, and then finally having students do the activity on their own. These procedures are depicted in figure 1a.

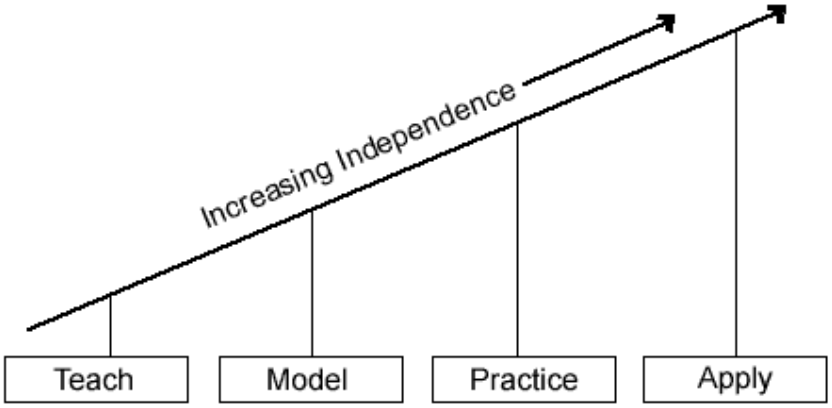


Fig. 1a. Procedural scaffolding (adapted from Echevarria et al., 2004, p. 87)

Another strategy for procedural scaffolding, according to these authors, is to start with a whole-class activity and then use group and pair work to scaffold learners' participation in a recently learned skill or task.

The groups and pairs can include one learner who has more experience or is more adept with the task or skill. Soon the learners will be able to perform the task on their own. This progression is shown figure 1b.

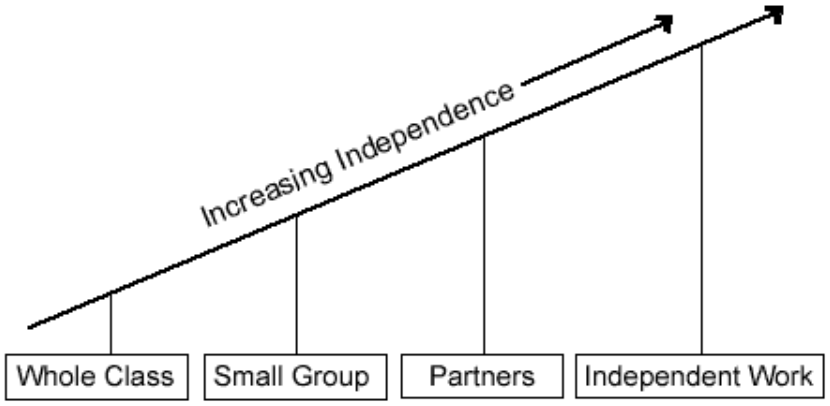
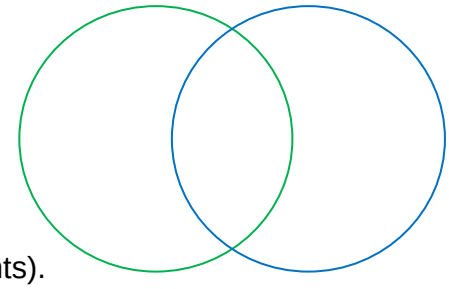


Fig. 1b. Procedural scaffolding (adapted from Echevarria et al., 2004, p. 87)

Other procedural scaffolding strategies include doing one-on-one teaching (whether it is by the teacher, a teacher's aide, or a tutor), using coaching, and modeling (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004, p. 86).

Strategies for Instructional Scaffolding

Finally, Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004) say that "teachers can use instructional scaffolding to enhance student learning" (p. 86). These authors give the example of using graphic organizers as prereading tools (p. 87).



You will recall from an earlier lesson that graphic organizers can focus on the content of a reading passage or on its structure (for instance, using a Venn diagram with a chapter that compares and contrasts two concepts, or using a tree diagram or outline format to reinforce an author's four main points).

An Instructional Scaffolding Technique: Self-Quizzes

An example of an instructional scaffolding technique is the self-quiz. In lessons where the content is factual (i.e., where there are right and wrong answers), create

brief review quizzes, either in the form of a partial outline or a cloze passage (a paragraph with blanks in it where some key terms have been removed).

Students first take the quiz individually, and then they compare with a partner. Finally, they turn over the quiz and check their answers (where the teacher has listed the correct answers or a completed version of the cloze passage or outline). This procedure helps students realize what they do not know or are not sure about. Also, do not grade or collect these periodic quizzes, so that students can use them to review later.

Modifying Communication with Learners

In this section, we'll review additional techniques that can be used in content-based lessons to make language and subject matter more accessible for learners.

Making Language and Content Accessible

Discussing sheltered instruction, Schneider and Freidenberg (2002) list a number of ways to make language and content accessible for students. These authors are a sociology professor and a linguistics professor who collaborated on delivering a sociology course at Southern Illinois University. Their ideas are very helpful to CBI teachers in higher education contexts:

- **Adjust speech for learners.** These authors note that several processes are involved in adjusting speech for language learners. These include "speaking more slowly; pronouncing more carefully; pausing more often; replacing pronouns with nouns; making sure to face the class and not the chalkboard when speaking; avoiding unnecessarily esoteric words and explanations; and avoiding long, heavily embedded sentences" (Schneider & Freidenberg, 2002, p. 158).

- **Simplify written texts.** Text simplification has been discussed by Schneider and Freidenberg as well. In their collaboration, the linguist "turned narratives into lists;

highlighted key terms; eliminated pronouns and replaced them with nouns; provided parenthetical, simplified explanations for complex terms; broke the text down by adding headings; and turned long, embedded sentences into shorter, linguistically simpler ones" (Schneider & Freidenberg, 2002, p. 161).

- **Provide guided notes.** These authors also describe a simplified lecture activity called "**guided** notes" in which the professor's lecture was an adapted copy of the chapter that he read aloud (instead of delivering his lecture extemporaneously).

Guided notes "can take a variety of forms, from basic topic headings with space to fill in with explanatory notes (low structure) to a copy of the sheltered chapter with key words omitted and replaced with a blank line (high structure)" (Schneider & Freidenberg, 2002, p. 162).

Using Appropriate Speech with Language Learners

Earlier we learned about the SIOP model. In this model, appropriate speech involves attending to "(1) rate and enunciation and (2) complexity of speech. The first aspect addresses how the teacher speaks and the second aspect refers to what is said, such as level of vocabulary used, complexity of sentence structure, and use of idioms" (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004, p. 67).

CBI teachers should be aware of both what they say and how they speak (for instance, by using recasts, as described above). Some specific ideas about how to adjust your speech for language learners are given below:

1. **Adapt speech rate for the level:** These authors note that effective teachers adjust their rate of speaking depending on the learners' English proficiency levels.

2. **Monitor vocabulary:** CBI teachers must carefully monitor their vocabulary in order to match their speech to the students' proficiency. This practice is especially important with beginning students and false beginners, but even more advanced learners can benefit from vocabulary assistance.

   For example, in earlier lessons we considered discipline specific vocabulary and general English academic vocabulary. Typically teachers explain the former but they may (incorrectly) assume the students know the latter.

3. **Use cognates:** Echevarria et al. state that using English cognates can help students whose first language is based on Latin. For example, "using 'calculate the mass/volume ratio' (calcular in Spanish) may be easier for some students to understand than 'figure out the mass/volume ratio'" (Echevarria et al., 2004, p. 67).

   Even though we might think of "calculate" as a more sophisticated term, the fact that there is an equivalent term in Spanish may make it easier for Hispanic learners to understand than the two-word verb "figure out." This technique will probably work better if you have a group of learners who speak the same native language.

4. **Avoid or explain idioms:** *Idioms* can cause problems for language learners, especially beginners. Echevarria et al. say, "English learners are better served when teachers use language that is straightforward and clear, and is accompanied by a visual representation" (Echevarria et al., 2004, p. 67). Teachers should either avoid using idioms or be aware of using them and explain such expressions when they arise.

5. **Adjust sentence structure:** In discussing sentence structure, Echevarria et al. say that teachers "should use simple sentence structures like subject-verb-object with beginning students and reduce or eliminate embedded clauses" (2004, p. 67). Imperative statements are also syntactically simple. Saying, "Please open

your books." is more straightforward than saying, "Why don't you all please open your books?"

6. **Alter questioning pattern:** Effective teachers in sheltered content courses alter their questioning patterns by "modifying difficult, open-ended questions to elicit one-word answers or yes/no responses as needed to assess the demarcation lines between conceptual understanding, misunderstanding, and lack of comprehension" (Rosen and Sasser, 1997, p. 44).

   It can also be helpful to break down WH-questions to a yes/no question followed by a WH-question. For example, instead of asking, "Why should people recycle aluminum and glass?" we can ask, "Should people recycle aluminum and glass?" Whether students respond positively or negatively, we can then ask, "Why?"

There are many things that teachers can do to make both language and content more accessible to learners' proficiency levels. Next, we will consider how we can apply some of these ideas in sample content-based lessons.

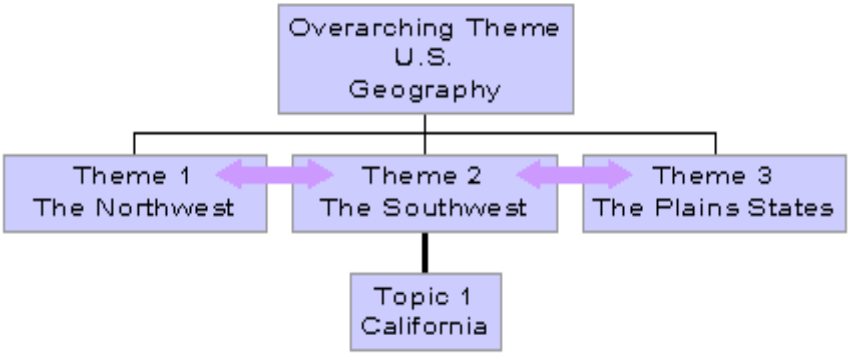
Scaffolding CBI Lessons

In previous sections, we reviewed different techniques that can be used in content-based lessons to scaffold instruction and help students learn both the language and subject matter. In this section, we will study a lesson in which some of these techniques are applied.

We will also consider some principles of scaffolding that teachers can use in content-based classrooms (regardless of the CBI model used) to help students at various proficiency levels master the content while improving their language skills.

A Return to the Six T's Approach

To discuss procedures for working with students at different proficiency levels, we can once again turn to the Six T's Approach (Stoller & Grabe, 1997). Earlier we discussed a course that used the macro-theme of U.S. geography. The themes were the regions of the United States. A thread that connected the various themes was agriculture and industry, and one of the topics in this course was California.



Altering Tasks for Different Proficiency Levels

Imagine using the thread of agriculture and industry to create tasks for language learners at different levels of proficiency who are studying California.

Below are some different ways to pose a task about this thread for advanced, intermediate, and lower-level students (beginners or false beginners). Notice that the task for the beginners is scaffolded with pictures and students are asked to name rather than to predict.

- **Advanced:** Consider California's location, its natural resources, geography, and climate. Based on the map and your own knowledge, predict the six main industries for this state.
- **Intermediate:** Think about California's location. Think also about its geography, its climate, and its natural resources. Guess what the six most important industries (kinds of jobs) in California are.
- **Lower level:** These pictures show some important kinds of work in California. Name the six kinds of work in these pictures.

These pictures represent the following six industries: farming, mining, manufacturing, computers, film-making, and tourism. As next steps, students can:

- Do research (using the Internet, encyclopedias, or interviews of Californians) to find out where these industries predominate.
- Plot the locations of these industries on a map of California.
- Find out what jobs there are in these industries, and talk about the desirability of particular jobs.
- Use newspaper want ads to find out what qualifications are needed and what the pay range may be for those positions.

Scaffolding CBI lessons: Six Principles

Here we will consider six principles of scaffolded activity described by van Lier (2004, p. 151). We will examine these guidelines in the context of a lesson with the theme of ecology, focusing on the topic of recycling. In this unit, students will find out about the following:

- What recycling opportunities there are in the school or the surrounding community.
- What people believe about recycling.
- What people actually do.

The tasks used to accomplish these goals illustrate van Lier's six principles of scaffolded activity. These ideas could be used even with students at the advanced-beginner level (i.e., those having an understanding of the verb *to be* in the present and simple past tense and some basic communication strategies).

1 & 2. Contextual Support and Intersubjectivity Principles

The **contextual support principle** states that "exploration is encouraged in a safe, supportive environment; access to means and goals is promoted in a variety of ways" (van Lier, 2004, p. 151).

The **intersubjectivity principle** promotes "mutual engagement, encouragement, non-threatening participation" (van Lier, 2004a, p. 151). This means that the participants (the "subjects" in this action) are involved together in seeking and sharing information.

Both of these principles can be addressed in group and pair work. Learners can do a search for local recycling stations (by using the telephone book, by asking people, etc.). This search could then result in the students marking the recycling stations on a city or campus map.

3. The Contingency Principle

The contingency principle states that "task procedures depend on actions of learners; contributions are oriented towards each other" (van Lier, 2004, p. 151). That is, the conversations and procedures are contingent upon the learners themselves.

What they discover as they seek out local recycling stations will influence how they investigate what people believe and do about recycling. For example, having located a recycling station near the school, pairs of students might observe activity there for a half an hour on two different days and report on their findings.

4. The Flow Principle

The flow principle is the idea that "skills and challenges are in balance; participants are focused on the task and are 'in tune' with each other" (van Lier, 2004a, p. 151). If the texts associated with certain tasks are too difficult, students may get

overwhelmed and discouraged; but if they are not challenging or interesting, students may become unmotivated.

To prepare for an interview assignment on recycling, students could brainstorm questions in pairs and then write them on the board. In the process, appropriate vocabulary is discussed and selected. The teacher and the learners then correct the grammar and spelling in the questions on the board. Finally, they reach a consensus about which questions to include on a brief questionnaire that all students could use to structure their interviews.

5. The Handover/Takeover Principle

The handover/takeover principle proposes "an increasing role for the learner as skills and confidence grow; careful watching of learners' readiness to take over increasing parts of the action" (van Lier, 2004, p. 151).

To return to our recycling example, after the class composes the questionnaire, students can practice interviewing peers and the teacher in class before they go out to interview people on campus or in the wider community. The teacher hands over the task, and the students take over the responsibility for carrying it out.

6. The Continuity Principle

According to the continuity principle, "tasks are repeated with variations, and connected to one another (e.g., as parts of projects)" (van Lier, 2004, p. 151). So for instance, after the class has drafted the brief questionnaire about recycling and has practiced interviewing, pairs of students will interview several different people about recycling, using the questionnaire as a guide for their interview questions.

Students either write down the responses or audio-record them and later write them down. In the process of repeatedly interviewing new people, learners practice questioning and gain a great deal of experience talking with strangers.