Catering for students with special needs

In preparing students for the assessment tasks, teachers need to be aware of the specific learning needs of individual students in their classes. These could include ESL learners with varying levels of language, literacy and conceptual understanding, and students with disabilities and impairments who will have a range of special needs.

There are a number of scaffolding strategies that can be adapted for different learners and which are particularly applicable in the pre-teaching stage.

Analysing the support needed to complete the tasks

In determining the level and type of support needed for completing the preliminary activities and the tasks, the following questions may be helpful:

What general background or cultural knowledge is assumed? Might any elements of this cause difficulties for ESL learners or special needs students?

What knowledge and skills does this activity or task build on that some students may not have been exposed to or may not have mastered?

What specific topic knowledge is assumed?

What specialised vocabulary is used in the texts provided?

Is the language used in the task and student worksheets colloquial or idiomatic and therefore likely to cause difficulties for an ESL learner or student with special needs? For example, newspaper headlines.

What is the level of complexity of the structure of the text? Look at sentence length and grammatical complexity such as frequency of embedded clauses and the number of subordinate clauses.

Will students be able to access the text with support in the pre reading and during reading stages, or is there a simpler text that could be used with some students?

Will students be able to complete the task in the requested mode or will alternative arrangements need to be made for them to demonstrate their knowledge, eg use of a scribe or computer?

Classroom organisation

Classroom organisation that allows for a balance between small groups and the whole class is the most effective model for meeting special needs.

All students will benefit from a whole class focus on the language requirements of the task and the stimulation of sharing of ideas by the class. Working in small groups allows the teacher to work intensively with a small group on explicit teaching of aspects of the task, for example pre-teaching of vocabulary, deconstructing a sample text or a joint construction. It provides support for students who may be reluctant to contribute in a larger group.

Working in groups

Some ESL learners may not be familiar with Australian learning styles so it is useful to revisit the purpose for working in groups and review class rules/procedures for group work. These can be listed on a chart and displayed. Group roles can be taught and practised in a small group of students with similar needs, using a simple task to begin with.

For some activities, ESL and special needs learners may work best in a similar needs group with the support of the teacher or a teacher aide if one is available.

At other times they can benefit by being placed in small groups or pairs with students who provide strong English language models. The kind of collaborative and exploratory talk that occurs in small groups has been shown to be beneficial for students acquiring a second language. Groups of no more than four students seem to work best. There needs to be a clear role for each student and an expectation that all students have some information that the others will need. Information gap and problem solving activities work well.

For ESL learners and special needs students, it can be useful to model a group activity using a fish-bowl technique. The activity is demonstrated with a small group of students that you have prepared beforehand. You then ask the class to comment on how well the group worked together, what kind of language was used and what would have helped the group to work even more effectively. It helps to focus on the actual language used to express different functions, eg how to get your turn, how to disagree politely, how to make a suggestion and offer a hypothesis. This language can be listed on a chart for display.

Strategies to scaffold learning

The following strategies can be used to scaffold learning in any learning area and can be adapted to suit different learning needs and preferred learning styles.

Teaching of vocabulary

ESL learners will need specific vocabulary teaching in order to understand a topic or text. Activities to assist vocabulary acquisition can include the following:

Use a visual to introduce the topic, eg a model, flow chart, diagram, cartoon or photograph. Elicit or teach vocabulary and develop a word bank. Display on a chart or have students label their own copy of the visual.

Group vocabulary into teacher-assigned categories or allow students to determine their own categories. In the follow-up discussion students explain their choices.

Match a word to its definition, or identify a correct definition from several choices.

Where appropriate, put words on a continuum, eg egg, lava, pupa, caterpillar, butterfly.

Develop word webs using associated words.

Use a cloze passage with new content words deleted.

Make bi-lingual or multi lingual word charts.

Encourage students to keep their own personalised dictionaries. These can be very useful, particularly for the learning of terminology specific to one learning area.

Reading

Pre-reading strategies

Pre-reading strategies aid prediction. Teachers could consider selecting from the following activities to use during the scaffolding part of the task:

Teach skimming and scanning skills. (Use a text on an overhead projector to make this clear to students.) Skim the text to get an idea of content and style. Show students how to use headings, sub-headings and specific text features, eg brochure format, to predict the type of text and the content. Teach the style and function of parts of a text, eg headlines, captions. Teach skim reading for general gist and scanning for the location of specific information. Ask students to read the first and last paragraph and the first line of each paragraph and to predict content.

Build or extend content knowledge. Use visuals and class discussion to build content knowledge and to make the connection with prior knowledge. Use opportunities to bring in students' experiences.

Do a word splash. List 6–10 key content words on the board, check understanding and ask students to anticipate the content of the text by writing possible sentences. They check the accuracy of their predictions after reading the text.

Do a class or group brainstorm on the topic. The brainstorm can be presented as a list or as a concept or mind map.

Prepare an anticipation guide. Write four to six statements of opinion that relate to the concepts and opinions expressed in the text. Students read the statements and agree or disagree. After reading the text, they can answer the same questions as though they were the author.

Do a KWL chart. List what you know about a topic, and questions you would like answered. At the conclusion of the reading, list what you learnt from the text.

Help students to understand how texts are organised. A text is chopped up into sections and students work together to reconstruct it. This activity is best used with texts that have an identifiable structure or organisation such as procedures or newspaper articles.

Use a graphic outline. Present students with a graphic outline of the text that shows the hierarchy of ideas and the relationship between ideas

Use concept maps. Students make their own concept maps in groups using vocabulary cards and linking words. This kind of activity could follow a science experiment, a shared experience or a visual presentation of a topic prior to reading a related text.

While reading strategies

While reading strategies concentrate on helping students gain meaning from the text and on teaching specific reading strategies used by competent readers. Teachers could select from the following activities for use during the scaffolding part of the task:

Read the text aloud to the whole class or to a small group of special needs students to assist understanding and demonstrate fluent reading. Bring the text to life. With lower level learners, their comprehension will increase on subsequent readings.

Demonstrate and practise a particular meaning-making strategy using an enlarged version of the text for shared reading, such as questioning the text: 'What does the writer mean by …?;

making connections 'That reminds me of …'; visualising 'I can just see those stress hormones racing around the body'; synthesising 'I think the writer means that …'.

Make the function of specific language features explicit, eg '*On the other hand* means the writer is going to talk about an opposing view.'

Think and jot. Following a prompt, students stop reading and write down a question, an idea or a connection they made with the text.

Think pair share. Rather than ask a class question which one person answers, each student writes a response to the question and shares it with his/her neighbour.

After reading activities

After reading activities will depend on the nature of the text and the purpose of the reading. Teachers can choose from the following activities, all of which are designed to help comprehension:

Students retell the gist of a text to a partner.

Students generate questions about the texts in pairs or groups and then give them to another group or pair to answer.

Students complete True/False statements about a text – which could be dictated orally by the teacher.

Where a text has a definite sequence, eg a procedure text such as a science experiment, students complete sequencing exercises.

Specific language activities that help students understand how texts are constructed, eg cloze activities that focus on logical connectives such as *however*, *although*, *moreover*, *whereas*, or a pronoun referral activity where students draw a box around the pronoun and draw a line showing to whom or what the pronoun refers.

Ask students to identify the main idea and supporting detail by drawing a box around the main idea and underlining supporting detail.

Use cloze activities to check content understanding.

Information transfer activities, eg make a mind map of the topic, showing connections between various aspects. Construct a timeline of events.

Writing

Many assessment tasks are dependent on writing skills in a range of genres. Special needs students and ESL learners, particularly those who have limited literacy in their first language, will benefit from support at each stage of the writing process.

Make explicit:

the purpose of the writing

the audience for the writing

the kind of text they are writing. Consider providing models for discussion

the kind of language they will use. Again, provide and discuss models.

For many ESL and special needs learners the differences between spoken and written English and appropriate registers needs to be specifically taught.

All writing, including the planning and revising stages, should be modelled first on the board or an overhead so that students see what thinking processes you go through as a writer and how language choices are made.

For extended pieces of writing a suggested strategy is:

Build up the field knowledge and vocabulary needed for the writing task through various classroom activities, eg an experiment, a problem-solving activity, an excursion, reading a text, research activities, viewing a film.

Brainstorm ideas and language generated by these activities.

Present an example of the kind of writing you are looking for, eg a brochure, a letter to a newspaper, a report, a PowerPoint presentation.

Deconstruct the model. Look at how the content is organised and what kind of language is used, eg *This is a recipe, therefore you use the imperative of the verb.* Use an overhead transparency of the text, making certain there is room to write in annotations.

Model each stage of the writing process including the planning process.

Do a joint construction of a sample text.

Allow students time to draft and revise their writing and provide a focus for the revision. Ideally, the focus (spelling, paragraphing, sentence structure) should be one which is relevant for the individual.

Other writing scaffolds

Allow ESL learners to do prewriting and planning in their first language.

Use writing frames. The following URLs might be useful:

http://www.warwick.ac.uk/staff/D.J.Wray/Ideas/frames.html

Provide a graphic organiser to help planning, eg an expository essay planner would have a wide box for the central thesis, two columns for supporting arguments or evidence to support, and a box for the conclusion.

Model using other graphic organisers as planning tools, eg Venn diagram, concept map. An Internet search for 'graphic organisers' will yield many examples.

Students dictate to the teacher or another student or onto a tape recorder.

Allow students to write in pairs or groups.

Practise correct word order by unjumbling sentences.

Use a variety of cloze exercises to focus on specific language items, eg use the correct form of the verb.

Use a computer for all stages of the writing process.

Self assessment checklists also provide scaffolding, eg *Have I included _____?*

Wording of writing tasks

ESL learners in particular, but also many native speakers, have difficulty understanding the wording of writing tasks. Instruction words may not be clearly understood by the learner. For example, *discuss* means different things to different subject teachers. To a biology teacher it means to *describe* or *explain*, but to a SOSE teacher it can mean *look at an issue from different points of view and come to a conclusion*. Students benefit from clear explanation of tasks and being taught the range of question forms that are used to request different kinds of writing.

Research skills

Students with low levels of literacy can be taught to research a topic using a data chart to guide their research and note taking, provided the text sources are simple. A data chart is a table with research questions heading the vertical columns and two or more sources of information heading the horizontal columns. The first column lists what the student knows already about the research questions. The advantages of data charts are that they build on what students already know, they help organise information, they prevent large amounts of copying and they provide a framework for the final written task. (See the SOSE Years 5 and 6 task on this site for another example of a data chart.)

Note taking needs to be modelled. Don't just assume that students will know how to do it. Use an overhead projector.

Graphic organisers can be used to scaffold note taking.

Roleplay

In participating in role plays, students are learning and practising language in a realistic and supportive context as well as developing decision-making, communication and assertiveness skills. They are confidence building and help prepare students for the performance demands of oral presentations. They can be used across the curriculum, eg to present different sides of an issue or the effects of an environmental problem.

Suggestions for special needs students and ESL learners

Pre-teach the language of making suggestions and negotiation, eg:

> *Why don't we ...*
> *How about we ...*
> *I think we should ...*
> *We could ...*
> *I could ...*
> *You could ...*
> *This would be better*
> *That's a great idea*
> *Good thinking.*

Pre-teach language of appreciation and criticism, eg:

> *I liked the way X did Y*
> *You could hear everything clearly*
> *They were really listening to each other*
> *X's body language was very good*
> *I thought X was funny when ...*

Group size depends on the task but should be no bigger than four students.

Provide clear instructions for the task and support in the planning stage.

Allow time for preparation and practice. Monitor participation.

Role plays can be presented simultaneously if you feel that students will be less inhibited by not performing to the whole class.

Allow time for whole class appreciation and discussion of the role plays and for time to debrief with the players. Discuss feelings and attitudes. You can ask questions like, '*How did it feel to be the bully/the mother?*' Give them time to talk about their responses and reactions to other players.

Oral presentations

ESL learners and special needs students need considerable scaffolding to prepare for oral presentations. The notion of purpose, audience and context need explanation and practice. Students will need assistance in planning and practice in presentation. ESL learners may have pronunciation difficulties that will inhibit their presentation.

Strategies for scaffolding oral presentations

The notion of audience can be illustrated by giving a short boring talk with lots of detail and jargon on a topic that no-one is likely to be interested in.

The importance of appropriate register can be illustrated by giving a talk filled with informal and inappropriate colloquial expressions. (The students will love it!)

Brainstorm the criteria for a good talk. Draw up a criteria sheet. Model a poor talk by breaking all the rules – mumble, read from notes, avoid eye contact, use minute visual aids, don't have an introduction or a conclusion. Students use the criteria sheet to comment on the presentation. Be careful to emphasise that grammatical accuracy and clear pronunciation are not part of the criteria for a successful talk.

Provide sample talk scenarios. Students decide the purpose of the talk (to inform, to explain, to persuade, etc), the audience, and suggest ideas and aids that would be useful.

If possible, use a video of a past talk (a good one) as a sample text to deconstruct. A past student might oblige as a guest speaker.

Students prepare and present 30-second talks on themselves as preparation. Provide pronunciation practice for ESL students focusing on clear articulation of consonants, particularly final consonants.

Consider collaborative presentations where students plan together and present different aspects of the topic.

Provide practice time with a buddy or small group.

Present to a small group rather than the whole class.

Visual aids to learning

Visual learning is a preferred learning style for many students; for ESL and special needs learners, visual aids such as pictures, diagrams, flow charts, timelines, graphs, charts and graphic organisers provide invaluable support for conceptual and linguistic development.

Concept maps and mind maps

Concept and mind mapping are suggested as a means of presenting information visually so that relationships between ideas can be clearly seen.

Concept mapping organises ideas in a hierarchy from the most general to the most specific. Concepts are written in boxes or circles which are joined with lines or arrows. Linking words are written on or near the line linking the concepts and show the meaning relationship between concepts.

Uses:

Organise information after brainstorming.

Present ideas found in a text.

As a prompt for spoken language on a topic.

A mind map consists of a central word or picture with five or more associated ideas branching off from the central word/concept. Each one of these ideas can then have its own branches.

Uses:

It is a useful tool for brainstorming as it encourages students to make associations and helps to organise ideas for an oral or written presentation.

It can be used to plan writing.

It can be used to present ideas found in a reading, listening or viewed text.