

Top 10

instructional strategies for struggling students

These tools can help schools leverage familiar instructional strategies in new ways that support all students and become habits within the school culture.

Given new, more rigorous content standards and expanding student diversity, how can school leaders leverage limited resources to guide teachers to effectively teach standards-aligned lessons to all learners? We propose that leaders leverage familiar instructional strategies but in a new way to support all students – English learners, students with learning disabilities, gifted students, and the mythical “average” student.

We will start by describing a balance of teacher-led and student-led instruction within an inquiry-based approach to learning. Then we will present a specific set of “doable” instructional strategies that form an integrated approach to “good first teaching” and scaffold learning for a variety of students. We end by identifying major strategies that district and school leaders can use to ensure that these practices do not fall by the wayside, but become habits within the school culture. These suggestions highlight some key information in our guidebook, *Teaching English Learners and Students with*

Learning Difficulties in an Inclusive Classroom: A Guidebook for Teachers (WestEd, 2012).

Tools for all teachers

Imagine a set of research- or evidence-based instructional strategies and tools that all teachers could use to help struggling students learn vocabulary and discourse, content and skills in science classes, or comprehend complex text in all academic content areas (Carr & Bertrando, 2012).

Envision two students with learning disabilities who are learning English in two secondary schools. The student at one school struggles to learn and adapt each hour to the different ways the different teachers teach, as well as the different content. The student in the other school focuses only on the different content, because one set of strategies is known and habitually used by all teachers.

The Top 10 set of strategies and tools presented here were selected through a rigorous analysis of research, are purposefully few in number and have demonstrated a record of

success for improving student outcomes, especially for English learners and students with learning disabilities. It was critically important that the strategies and tools could be integrated to make them easier for teachers to use and likely see a synergistic impact on students. These strategies could be called Tier I effective first instruction in the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework.

While many of these strategies have been introduced before, teachers have commented that they had not understood how and why a strategy works for different kinds of minds, and no connections among strategies were made when they were initially exposed to the strategies in pre-service courses or in-service workshops.

Framework for a lesson plan

Before presenting the strategies and tools, it is necessary to briefly describe the framework of a lesson plan that is effective for teaching a diversified classroom and can

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be applied to all content areas and grade levels. The framework is a balance of teacher-led, whole class instruction and student-led, small group activities involving investigation or experimentation, critical thinking, and a large dose of structured, student-to-student discussion.

A lesson contains cycles of teacher-led instruction followed by student-led instruction to avoid language overload for English learners. It also embeds comprehension supports or scaffolds for students with learning disabilities. Only two or three students are assigned to each group so all are engaged, but there are options for cooperative groups of four with assigned roles/tasks, or for a pair or trio to discuss an idea and then join another pair or trio to compare and combine their ideas.

The student-led activities give students opportunity to practice using language skills and social discourse, and reinforce a teacher's initial instruction. It is the student-led activities that enable students to become proficient in the new standards that address collaboration and communicating information.

The cycles of instruction by teachers and within student groups can be made more concrete and purposeful by focusing on inquiry-based lessons and using the five Es model of engage, explore, explain, elaborate and evaluate (Bybee, 1997; Carr & Bertando, 2012).

During the engage stage, the teacher introduces the content and language objectives, presents the purpose of the lesson, and activates students' prior knowledge about and interest in the topic. That is followed by the explore stage, in which the teacher guides student groups as they engage an inquiry such as reading, researching and testing strategies. Student groups then discuss what they learned during the explain stage.

When misconceptions or missing concepts are apparent, the teacher might adjust and return to the explore stage, or switch to a direct instruction mode for struggling students. When students can explain key concepts they move to the elaboration stage, which involves more applications, generalizations, or deeper explorations. The evaluation stage occurs during the other four

stages; the teacher frequently checks for understanding and adjusts the lesson accordingly for certain students.

How can a teacher support students who learn in diverse ways or need extra guidance so they are successful in inquiry-based learning? The following top 10 strategies



and tools scaffold the learning experience for these students.

Recommended strategies and tools

While the top 10 recommended strategies and tools listed here will look familiar, teachers may be unaware of how the strategies can be integrated as a unique approach that is highly effective for English learners and students with learning disabilities. Included are six strategies to scaffold content learning; two tools to build academic vocabulary; and two academic discourse tools to embed new vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Top six scaffolding strategies

The top six scaffolding strategies should be used frequently, if not daily. The first two are quintessential and support the other four strategies.

■ **Visuals.** A teacher breaks down traditional “teacher talk” into smaller chunks that are supported by visuals (Hall & Strangeman, 2002). Visuals can include graphic organizers, real objects, pictures,

manipulatives, illustrations, media clips, or projections on an interactive whiteboard. For example, a graphic organizer can be used as an advance organizer to start a lesson; as a way to summarize important, connected facts during the lesson; and as alternative notes to prepare for the summative assessment. Visuals are critical to support learning and provide concreteness to transient oral discourse, especially for students with learning disabilities and English learners.

■ **Think-Pair-Share.** Each student is directed to individually think for perhaps 15 seconds to a minute about a question, information or a direction posed by the teacher. Then students come together to exchange ideas in pairs or trios. That can be followed by group representatives sharing their group's ideas with the whole class (Frey, Fisher & Everlove, 2009). The sequence can last from a few to perhaps 20 minutes, depending on the topic and age group. Instead of one or two students frequently answering a teacher's oral questions with or without wait time, all students are engaged in discussing ideas in a nonthreatening context. It is critical that a teacher strategically assigns students to groups to achieve optimal success for each student.

■ **Cues.** Advance organizers, hints and questions are types of cues to guide students in the right learning trajectory (Dean *et al.*, 2012). A teacher starts a lesson with an advance organizer, a brief activity that introduces the lesson's objectives and links what students will learn to what was learned in prior lessons, and relates the topic to students' cultures, interests and personal lives. A teacher might pose questions to identify any students who are confused, and then use additional scaffolding to make the lesson objectives clear to all students. A teacher may at times link the content to be learned to explicit examples from students' background knowledge.

■ **Think Aloud.** Teachers can use Think Alouds by verbalizing their thoughts while reading to model the thought processes that take place in comprehending the text. A teacher can use a Think Aloud coupled with

visual cues (Barrera *et al.*, 2006) to model how to think through a process or problem and then have students demonstrate their own thinking through Think Alouds with a partner or the teacher. This research-validated strategy has been shown to improve cognition because it teaches students to re-read text, read ahead to clarify understanding, and look for content clues to make sense of what was read as students monitor their own understanding of the text. Looking for content clues is a skill explicitly addressed in the Common Core State Standards for reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

■ **KWL.** A KWL chart is a visual, three-column graphic organizer for note-taking or summarizing information during different phases of a lesson. It is a linguistic tool, whereas other visuals such as pictures are nonlinguistic. The three columns capture students' ideas: what students know already, want to learn, and what was learned (Albus *et al.*, 2007). The three parts fit into the en-

gage, explore and explain stages in inquiry-based learning, and a teacher can elicit ideas from more students by prefacing each "what" question with Think-Pair-Share. The KWL can help the teacher gain insights into the students' background knowledge. It also strategically plans how to connect the new knowledge to the prior knowledge of students, check for understanding of the end of the lesson and clarify any misconceptions offered in the "K" stage that were proven false.

■ **Summarization.** Teachers and students summarize chunks of information often during a lesson, not just at the end (Thurlow *et al.*, 2008). Students who need more intensive guidance in the skill of summarization learn a step-by-step procedure, such as deleting unimportant text, deleting words that repeat information, replacing unknown with known words, and then finding or creating a topic sentence (Dean *et al.*, 2012). Some students might be supported with highlighted, bolded or annotated text, non-

linguistic illustrations, sentence frames or a graphic organizer as a note-taking template.

Top two academic vocabulary tools

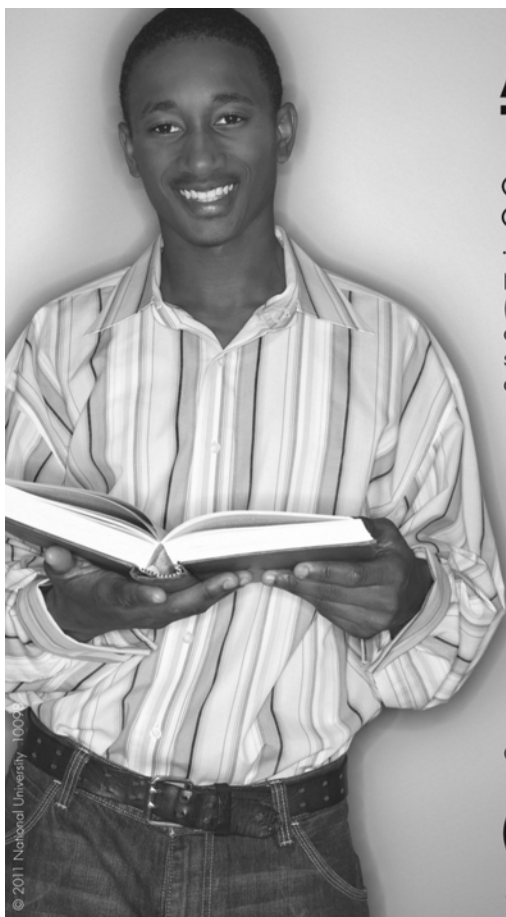
■ **Enhanced Word Walls** and the **Frayer Concept Organizer** are the top two tools that help students build academic vocabulary. A Concept Organizer allows multiple ways to define a key word so individual students can use one or a combination to understand the word's meaning. The template can be a large rectangle divided into four adjoining rectangles, and the key word or term is in a small oval at the center. In each box, students define the key word/term in a different way. An example of four ways is a formal definition, characteristics, examples, and a "show what it means" sentence.

A traditional Word Wall contains organized (e.g., alphabetical, word forms) or unorganized lists of words. An enhanced Word Wall contains a much briefer list of key words, often for a unit lesson, with brief, informal definitions and/or illustrations or pictures that serve as cues about a word's meaning in the context of the lesson. Word walls should leverage cross-curricular vocabulary. This requires collaboration among teachers to identify the words and make explicit how each word has a similar or different meaning in different disciplines or contexts.

Top two discourse tools

■ **Sentence Frames** and **Discussion Sentence Starters** scaffold students to communicate ideas orally or in writing. Useful, challenging Sentence Frames require more than writing one word in the blank space in a sentence, and the sentences form paragraphs of complete ideas with details and examples. English learners at the more novice language development levels likely need more text provided in simple sentences. Students at more proficient levels might only need the beginning of a sentence and a few function words as cues to include details or examples, or to demonstrate a skill such as compare and contrast. The verbs in the Common Core State Standards indicate the level of critical thinking expected of students.

Often an English learner or a student
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with an expressive language processing disability or weakness in social language skills (Asperger's Syndrome/autism) is unsure how to start a question or declarative sentence appropriately in a small group discussion. Discussion Sentence Starters (Kinsella, 2007; Carr & Bertrando, 2012) as placards on the wall or in older students' notebooks can help those students express their ideas. Some examples are: "My idea is that..." and "What I hear you saying is..." The Common Core State Standards in English-language arts for speaking and listening target student conversations through multiple exchanges within formal and informal settings.

How school leaders can create habits

Following are three major leadership strategies for making these Top 10 strategies and tools become school-wide habits and an integral part of the school culture. When this happens, the need for individualized instruction may be dramatically decreased as more students "get it" during good first teaching that addresses the diversity of students.

- Utilize continuous, job-embedded professional development to improve instructional practices. Provide professional development to train teachers how to teach a diversified classroom targeting the new, more rigorous content standards. It takes a long time for teachers to incrementally reach proficiency and a variety of supports along the way. Job-embedded supports such as coaching and professional learning communities must follow any "outside" workshops and institutes.

- Use data to assist with targeted professional learning. Plan formal accountability to start as teachers learn and experiment with the top 10. Make one goal focus on implementation, such as increasing use of more strategies more frequently, with greater fidelity and integration of strategies, and seeking help from a support system when problems arise. Make a second goal focus on impact, such as improving all stu-

dents' academic achievement as measured by local assessments at key times during the school year. District and school leaders conduct classroom observations (walk throughs) regularly. Leaders use this data to plan how to better support teachers as learners. Leaders and teachers use student achievement data to plan how to better support students to become proficient on standards.

- Practice and reflect. Remember that new practices take time and many repetitions to perfect, progress to routines or habits, and



become deeply ingrained in the school culture. Remember that there are reasons why teachers once learned and tried some of the top 10 strategies but reverted back to old habits over time; identify why and avoid those landmines. ■

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