What is contingent scaffolding?

Classroom practices that support EAL/D students' learning at point of need

Rationale

The [Multicultural Education Policy](#) commits schools to providing opportunities that enable all students to achieve equitable education and social outcomes, and participate successfully in our culturally diverse society. Almost 25% of students in NSW public schools are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). These students require support to develop their academic English language skills so they can access the curriculum, successfully participate in learning alongside their peers in mainstream classes and engage confidently in the broader Australian community. This document aims to develop teachers' knowledge of contingent scaffolding and its significance for EAL/D learners. It also aims to assist teachers to plan effective English language learning support that aligns with system priorities in literacy and numeracy and meets the commitments of the Multicultural Education Policy.

Intended audience

EAL/D specialist teachers, classroom teachers, SLSOs, Assistant Principals Curriculum and Instruction, Lead specialists, School leaders

Timeframe for use

The document should be read in planning the implementation of intensive English programs and by teachers planning support for EAL/D learners.

Instructions for use

The document can be used to professionally develop teachers on key precepts in English language acquisition and EAL/D pedagogy. It can assist school leaders to plan professional learning, lead professional discussion and guide programming for EAL/D learners. Another advice sheet explores [designed-in scaffolding (PDF 154 KB)](#), which should be read in conjunction with this teacher advice.

Concept overview

Scaffolding is a metaphor to describe educational practices which help students go from where they are now to where they need to be to achieve learning outcomes. Scaffolding is educational practices which support students to learn in what education theorist, Vygotsky, called the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the learning space just beyond what students can achieve independently. Students can learn in the ZPD when given appropriate support, known as scaffolding (Hammond and Gibbons, 2005). Contingent or interactional scaffolding refers to the multiple classroom practices supplied at point of need which support students' learning in the ZPD. Contingent scaffolding can support both EAL/D students' language and curriculum concepts learning needs.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is the 'temporary, future-oriented, targeted help' that supports learners in developing new knowledge, skills and understanding (Gibbons 2009). Scaffolding has three characteristics:

- temporary help that assists learners to move towards new concepts, levels of understanding and new language
- enables learners to understand how to do something – not just what to do – so that they will be better able to complete a similar task alone
- is future-oriented, so that in the future, students will be able to complete the task independently (Gibbons 2009).

Contingent and designed-in scaffolding

To indicate the efficacy of scaffolding in developing students' learning, Gibbons (2015:16) cites Vygotsky's adage, 'what a child can do with support today, she or he can do alone tomorrow.' Hammond and Gibbons (2005) define two types of scaffolding: designed-in and contingent. Designed-in scaffolding is planned during programming and planning, while contingent scaffolding arises in the spontaneous interaction between teacher and students, or between students.

Inherent in this model of teaching and learning – good learning is that which is ahead of actual development (Hammond 2021) – is high challenge/high support classroom practice. The teacher challenges students in the next steps of learning, building on what they can already do. This challenge must be accompanied by planned, appropriate and timely support, which is scaffolding. High challenge/high support in practice is explored in Classrooms of possibility and Curriculum planning for every student in every classroom – Curriculum planning support for EAL/D learners, particularly lesson 2: Engaging EAL/D learners, and lesson 3: Learning English, through English and about English.

Hammond and Gibbons (2005) stress the importance of both types of scaffolding to create optimal learning opportunities for EAL/D students. Contingent scaffolding responds to point of need assisted learning which has not been anticipated in the programming and planning. However, contingent scaffolding cannot replace designed-in scaffolding; Hammond and Gibbons (2005) observe that without designed-in scaffolding, contingent scaffolding 'may become simply hit and miss' and not assist students achieve learning goals.

How does contingent scaffolding support EAL/D learners' language learning and curriculum knowledge?

Contingent scaffolding is key to effective explicit teaching. It occurs at point of need, helping students shift from where they are in their knowledge and skills to the next step closer to where they need to be. It is about recognising and pursuing the teachable moment in an exchange with a student, a group of students or the whole class. It requires teachers to be responsive to the students, listening and responding to their learning needs, and be flexible in the design and delivery of a lesson. It is mirrored in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: 'know students and how they learn' and 'know the content and how to teach it' and in the Teaching and learning cycle, which is a series of reflective questions which can be asked during the delivery of a lesson. The [EAL/D enhanced teaching and learning cycle](#) assists teachers to consider the learning needs of EAL/D students. Contingent scaffolding is spontaneous and timely, and a hallmark of effective teachers, who are continuously observing and monitoring student learning. It is a skill that can be learned.

Contingent scaffolding can be effective in building English language knowledge, curriculum content, or both simultaneously, depending on the context and the type of scaffolding implemented. Hammond (2021) identifies some of the outcomes of contingent scaffolding. It can:

- recap prior learning and create connections to current learning
- appropriate and recast student contributions
- probe students' response to seek further clarification.

Teachers as contingent scaffolders

Teachers can offer contingent scaffolding to the entire class, groups of students, or individual students.

Contingent scaffolding occurs through:

Teacher talk

- using extended IRF (initiation, response, feedback) to extend students' oral explanations and conceptual understanding

- asking students to repeat back instructions, procedural explanations and so forth, and verbally prompting them at point of need:

  Teacher: Sahar, what are the three steps in the science experiment?
  Good, you have told me two. What is the third step? It has something to do with heat.

- appropriating and recasting student talk into more appropriate academic or KLA language:
  Biyam: Straw is hot. Water is hot. Straw is hot because of water hot.

  Teacher: That's right, Biyam. Yes, the metal straw does get hot because the water is hot. In science, we call this **conducting** heat – it is absorbing the heat from the hot water – and we call the metal straw a **conductor**.

- supplying background information, definitions, visuals at point of need in the flow of a lesson

- slowing down a lesson to allow time for students' responses

- referencing previously taught information, vocabulary or language features and including this information in the current learning at point of need

- referencing students' prior experiences as part of the current learning to connect with background and cultural knowledge.

Students as contingent scaffolders

Students can contingently scaffold one another, such as when a student skilled in a learning task is paired with a less skilled student and supports them through the use of home language, or when a student with a higher level of English language proficiency is paired with a student with a lower level of English language proficiency. By implementing appropriate participant structures in the flow of a lesson, teachers allow students to support each other's learning.

Contingent scaffolding occurs through:

Student talk

- using home language and/or dialect in the class to discuss ideas, lesson content, or next steps with peers who speak the same language or dialect

- joint constructions of writing in which student contributions develop the understanding of the class

- pair and group work when students support one another with both the activity and content of the tasks

- communicative activities in which students provide verbal clues to support their peers' understanding and communication.

Glossary

Appropriating and recasting – a teacher talking strategy in which the teacher models Standard Australian English and KLA-specific language by 'borrowing and reformulating' the EAL/D learner's language (Gibbons 2009).

Extended IRF – also known as the 'fourth move', extended IRF is a pattern of teacher questioning-student response which gives EAL/D learners the opportunity to be 'worthy participants' in an academic conversation as well as probing both their content and language knowledge of the topic (Gibbons 2009). IRF (initiation, response, feedback) is the conventional classroom questioning in which the teacher initiates an exchange by asking a question, a student responds, and then the teacher offers feedback, usually with an evaluative comment such as 'good', 'yes' or 'that's right'. To extend the verbal exchange, the teacher refrains from evaluative feedback and asks the student to explain, expand or justify their response. Dependent on the question and situation, a teacher could say, 'tell me more why about you think that' or 'remember what we learned about yesterday, what language did we learn which you could use now?' to develop the EAL/D learner's understanding of both content and language.

Participant structures - refers to different organisational structures within lessons. These include whole class; group; pair and individual tasks. Decisions about participant structures are made in response to the specific learning purpose of a task. Participant structures are a feature of designed-in scaffolding, but once in groupings, students can contingently scaffold each other's learning.

Evidence base (reference list)

Dufficy, P (2005) Designing learning for diverse classrooms, PETAA, Newtown.

Gibbons, P (2009) English learners, academic literacy and thinking: learning in the challenge zone, Heinemann, Portsmouth.

Gibbons, P (2015) Scaffolding language scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom. 2nd ed Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Hammond, J (2021) 'Scaffolding in EAL/D education' in Harper, H and Feez, S, An EAL/D handbook, Newtown, PETAA, pp 16-18.

Hammond, J and Gibbons, P (2005) 'Putting scaffolding to work: the contribution of scaffolding in articulating ESL education' Prospect 20 1 pp 6-25.

NSW Department of Education (2018) Classrooms of Possibility: high challenge and high support

Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: Aligns with strategic priority to improve literacy and numeracy, aligns with What works best – EAL/D, aligns with Multicultural Education policy statements and Multicultural Plan 2019-2022 (PDF 1804 KB) targets.

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain: Curriculum

Alignment to Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: 1.3, 1.5, 2.2, 3.2

Consulted with: Aboriginal Partnerships and Outcomes, Literacy and Numeracy

Feedback and comments: Please email suggestions and feedback to

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Reviewed by: Leader, Multicultural Education

Created/last updated: January 2024

Anticipated resource review date: January 2025