

Scaffold Up to Grade-Level Content:

Supporting Literacy Development for All Students



Introduction

Learning to read is critical to prepare students for academic success, as well as college and career readiness. Twenty-first century skills reflect the importance of literacy development to help students acquire literacy skills across multiple subjects while processing various types of texts in ways that enable them to communicate with others. Communicating and synthesizing information across multiple subjects requires students to think critically, and to use reason and evidence to evaluate sources of information. Students utilize academic language as they make arguments and justify their positions to others.

For students in upper-elementary and middle-school grades, the development of these skills is essential as texts become increasingly more complex across disciplines. Providing instructional support is particularly important for students who have yet to master grade-level reading standards. Assessment results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) indicate that only 35% of fourthgrade and 34% of eighth-grade students are at or above the NAEP Proficient level in reading performance. Without scaffolded support, these students are likely to encounter difficulty in processing grade-level texts.

Instructional scaffolding refers to temporary structures that teachers create to assist students and enables them to better complete tasks with less stress, in less time, and to learn more thoroughly than they would without the support (Graves & Graves, 2003; Graves, Watts, & Graves, 1994). Providing scaffolding for learning is an effective strategy for enabling students to access and gain the skills needed to comprehend complex, grade-level text, and scaffolding can be used to accelerate learning for all students.

When applied in lessons, instructional scaffolding is a process by which teachers gradually release responsibility to students by moving from modeling and instruction, to guiding and supporting learning, and then to independent practice and application.



Scaffolded, Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction includes segmenting of complex skills, modeling of new skills, supporting successful engagement with learning through faded supports or prompts, opportunities for students to respond with feedback, and purposeful practice opportunities (Hughes, Morris, Therrien, & Benson, 2017).

Imagine Reading lessons are designed to support deep comprehension of rigorous grade-level texts—both informational and literary. As students read increasingly complex texts, they need explicit instruction to understand more advanced language and sentence structures associated with various academic disciplines such as social studies and science. The lesson structure for Imagine Reading lessons begins with teacher-directed, whole-class activities and gradually releases responsibility to students as they move to engaging with grade-level, scaffolded texts on their own. Independent-practice activities are purposeful in supporting students in applying learning to real-world situations.

Segmenting Complex Skills and Modeling

Breaking complex skills into smaller, manageable chunks that are taught separately reduces cognitive complexity and load and facilitates learning (Archer & Hughes, 2011). To teach new skills that are appropriately chunked, modeling provides students with clear descriptions and demonstrations of skills to show them how to complete specific tasks (Hughes et al., 2017).

Each Imagine Reading unit begins with a Focus Question that provides an opportunity for teachers to engage in discussions with students to activate prior knowledge related to specific subjects. Activating prior knowledge is a recommended strategy for beginning lessons (Hughes et al., 2017). For example, for the Icy Antarctica (Grade 3) unit, the Focus Question is: How do living things adapt to extreme cold? Asking this question prepares students for learning, and allows them to discuss what they already know about extremely cold environments.

Then, as teachers introduce each text, they explicitly model for students how to comprehend and analyze a complex sentence from the text with a Power Sentence Lesson. Within these lessons, teachers ask guiding questions and provide feedback as students unpack linguistically complex, academic sentences (see Icy Antarctica Power Sentence in text box). Students then read articles independently in the online student program, where each article opens with an engaging instructional video that introduces the lesson by previewing academic vocabulary and concepts addressed in the lesson. For example, in Icy Antarctica (Grade 3) the video introduces explores as an academic vocabulary word and contextualizes the unit by illustrating conditions in Antarctica.

Icy Antarctica. Growing Up in Antarctica (Grade 3)

To withstand the subfreezing temperatures and protect their chicks, emperor penguins rely on a combination of teamwork and unique characteristics.

Successful Engagement with Faded Supports

After teachers have modeled new skills and strategies, students are prepared to practice new skills. Providing guidance or scaffolding during practices promotes accuracy and confidence in students. As students demonstrate mastery of new skills, scaffolding can be faded as teachers continue to monitor student performance (Hughes et al., 2017).

Within Imagine Reading, teachers introduce units and lessons with whole-class activities that utilize both online and offline materials. Once students are prepared to analyze sentences and apply comprehension strategies for specific lessons, students use the digital Imagine Reading platform to read grade-level texts on their own. Texts are highly interesting to students in grades 3–8 and leverage personal and cultural relevance.

Texts are available in a variety of genres, with an appropriate mix of literary and informational text selections. Classic literature includes adventure, mystery, coming of age, and fantasy selections. Grade-level texts address science and social-studies topics.

As students engage with grade-level texts, they can access scaffolded support that facilitates comprehension and enables them to acquire skills necessary for understanding a wide range of texts.

Imagine Reading includes a variety of instructional scaffolds, including multimedia and audio supports. Grade-level texts include maps, videos, audio clips, photos, and graphics that provide background knowledge and visually represent content. If students encounter new vocabulary, words are defined with student-friendly definitions that are easily accessed by clicking on the words that need defining. Finally, all texts include audio playback. Audio playback allows students to hear texts read fluently, and supports comprehension by enabling students to both read and hear passages if needed.

Imagine Reading is designed to facilitate the development of engaged, critical thinking with rigorous grade-level texts. As students read texts, they can highlight sentences and annotate texts with comments and questions, helping them organize their thinking for written responses and classroom discussions.

The instructional scaffolds and interactive reading tools in Imagine Reading support engaged, deep learning across all grades. As students acquire new skills and progress in comprehending a wide variety of material, they can determine for themselves, which supports are most needed for reading success, and can gradually fade the use of program scaffolds.

Practice with Feedback

One of the most powerful instructional methods is providing feedback on student performance. Immediate feedback about the accuracy of performance is important to ensure students experience successful learning, and to reduce the likelihood that students practice errors (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Siewert, 2011; Bursuck & Damer, 2007). Performance feedback should occur immediately following students' responses.

Reading informational texts and literary passages can be strenuous if the information is complex. While online learning provides access to rich educational experiences with embedded videos, multimedia scaffolds, and other interactive supports, students need to learn to monitor comprehension and to develop stamina for reading academic material.

Imagine Reading texts are intentionally organized in chunks to minimize cognitive load and to support engaged self-monitoring of comprehension. Reading passages have questions interspersed to encourage students to monitor comprehension. Questions ask students to identify main ideas, supporting details, and author purpose, and to cite evidence and critically analyze information. Additionally, immediate feedback allows students to check and correct their answers and actively monitor comprehension.

Purposeful Practice

Lessons are not complete without independent practice. Independent practice is critical for solidifying learning and generalizing new skills. Independent practice is most effective when practice is intentional and purposeful in relation to learning goals (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Kame'enui et al., 2002).

Each Imagine Reading article concludes with a teacher-led Synthesis Discussion, while each unit ends with a collaborative Synthesis Project. The purpose of the synthesis discussion is to engage students in academic discourse. Discussion helps students learn academic communications such as clarifying, elaborating, identifying common ground, and respecting others' opinions. These robust discussions support the development of academic language for all participants.

The purpose of the Synthesis Project is to provide an opportunity for students to plan, develop, and present a project that effectively communicates the group's shared response to the unit Focus Question. This type of project allows students to creatively apply the knowledge that they have learned throughout the unit to a real-world application—while working collaborative and cooperatively with peers. Synthesis Projects should include adequate explanation, examples, or evidence to logically defend the group's shared response. Peer collaboration allows for students to apply learning and generalize comprehension and discourse skills to new activities.

Conclusion

Reading proficiency and 21st-century skills are necessary for academic success and college and career readiness. As students in upper-elementary and middle-school grades are expected to comprehend and engage with increasingly complex texts across content areas, educators must be prepared to support them with appropriate instructional scaffolding. Research-based instructional methodologies such as scaffolded, explicit instruction; segmenting and modeling complex skills; [scaffolding independent practice]; practice with feedback; and purposeful practice assist students in Grades 3–8 in developing the skills needed to read complex, grade-level texts.



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