scaffolding language
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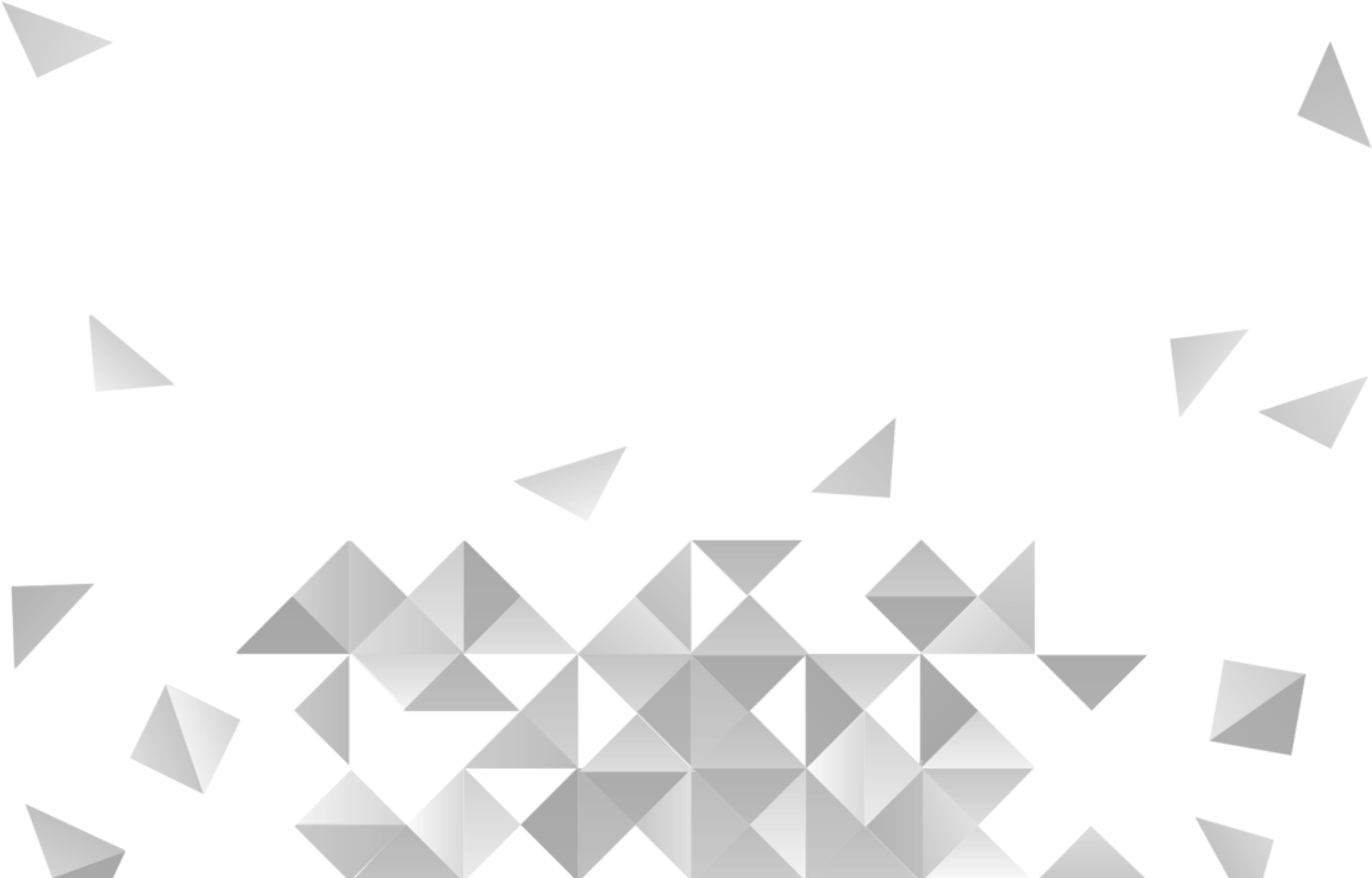

PAULINE GIBBONS

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scaffolding language scaffolding learning

Teaching English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom

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SECOND EDITION

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This book is dedicated to the loved ones who enrich my life:
Mark, Ben, Nadia, Safiya, and Laurie,
and in memory of my dear friend and colleague Glynis Jones

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One

Scaffolding Language and Learning

I can say what I want, but not for school work and strangers.

—English language learner quoted in
The Bilingual Interface Project Report (McKay et al. 1997)

AN INTRODUCTORY STORY—AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

In the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia there are increasing numbers of English language (EL) learners in all schools. Usually children who are at the beginning stages of learning English are supported in their learning by specialist English language or bilingual teachers. But generally this support decreases after the learner is past the initial stages of language learning, and so EL learners spend most of their school lives in regular classrooms where the classroom teacher carries the dual responsibility for the students' subject learning and for their ongoing language development. It is to these teachers, as well as to specialist English language teachers, that this book is addressed. The book is about the many ways in which teachers can provide support for EL learners through the learning contexts they provide in the day-to-day life of the classroom—contexts where students are engaged in challenging tasks and have multiple opportunities for developing English-for-learning across the curriculum.

However, this chapter begins with a story that is not directly connected to the classroom. But it is a success story that educators can learn from, because it is an example of a learning context where great things were expected, great support was offered, and great outcomes achieved.

It is the story of a choir (Hawkins 2007). It was formed in 2006 in Melbourne, Australia, by Jonathon Welch, a singer with Opera Australia. It was no ordinary choir, since most of its members had no previous experience in public singing or formal music training. But more unusual was the fact that its members were a diverse group of people on the margins of society. They were there for many reasons: homelessness, drug or alcohol addiction, mental health issues, abuse, or physical disabilities such as blindness or brain injury. Not surprisingly, some people were initially skeptical about whether such a project could be achieved, expressing fears that the choir members could not be depended on to attend rehearsals regularly, or that they would simply lose interest. They were proved wrong! Less than a year after the choir was formed, they sang to more than 6,000 people at the iconic Sydney Opera House and received a standing ovation at the end of their performance. They have since recorded a platinum-selling album and have been featured on nearly every major television and radio program in the country, including a television series about the choir.

It is a success story that educators can learn from.

The choir has been a life-changing experience for its members and for all those connected with its development. Some choir members have talked about how much they learned about singing. But even more spoke about their experience of being part of the choir community and how it had impacted the way they now saw themselves. Here are a few of their comments (Hawkins 2007).

> No-one has ever thought I'd achieve something, or inspire anyone, and I'm able to through the choir. (116)
>
> Jonathon unconditionally accepts each and every one of us. His belief in us means that each of us can sing. (47)

> The choir changed my life. I haven't missed one show. And singing to the audience, it makes me proud when they are happy. (107)
>
> The choir gives everyone the chance to show something of himself. (125)

As I watched the series over six weeks on television, it seemed to me that in working with the choir there was one principle that Jonathon Welch followed, unfailingly. He saw and treated the choir members as the people they *could become*, not as homeless people or as people with problems. From their first meeting they were treated, talked to, and trained as members of a choir. That night at the Opera House showed how they had grown into that expectation and into that new identity.

The analogies with classrooms are clear. Treating EL learners as the people they can become means that we see students not in terms of what they lack—in their case, full control of academic English—but as capable and intelligent learners who, with the right kind of support, are as able to participate in learning and achieve academically as their English-speaking peers. Today we know far more than we have ever known about the nature of language and second language development, how language can be integrated with subject learning, and what works for EL learners. There is no longer an excuse for low expectations! One of the choir members described Jonathon as a "good director who drives us to the sky and gives us courage." Another, reflecting on his life outside the choir, commented that every time he had fallen, it had reinforced what he felt about himself. Good teachers also drive their students to the sky and help them gain confidence, but through the scaffolding they provide, set them up for success rather than allowing them to fall. And as the comments from the choir members illustrate, an important part of that process lies in the relationship between teachers and students. Part of this relationship rests on how teachers talk to, and about, their students, and how students interact with each other. As the next chapter shows, every time we speak or respond to a student, we are not just talking about the particular "content" of the lesson; we are also, perhaps without being aware of it, constructing the student as a competent learner who is worth listening to, or the reverse.

EL LEARNERS IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM: SOME KEY ISSUES

The comment in the epigraph that begins this chapter was made by an eleven-year-old girl, an EL learner who was asked, "How good do you think your English is?" Her response suggests that while she feels able to communicate in general terms, she is less confident when it comes to using English at school, or with people with whom she is not on familiar terms. This may not seem surprising—it requires more linguistic skills to use language for academic purposes than it does to use it in everyday conversation. Similarly, if we are trying to use a language that we don't know very well, it is usually easier to talk to people we know well and with whom we are at ease than to converse more formally with a stranger. What some might find surprising about this comment is that this student—let's call her Julianna—was born in Australia and had been exposed to English throughout her primary education. She began school at age five, as fluent as any other five-year-old in her mother tongue but speaking little English. Yet, six years later, she felt that her English was still inadequate for certain purposes.

Why should this be? Surely, many might argue, six years is sufficient time to learn a new language given that Julianna had been living in an English-speaking country and attending an English-medium school in that time. And like many EL learners, she spoke English fluently when she played and talked informally with friends, yet had academic or literacy-related difficulties in class. To understand why this might be, we need to understand the nature of language, and in particular how it varies according to the context in which it is used.

Language and context

The theory of language on which this book draws is based on the work of Michael Halliday and other linguists working within systemic functional linguistics. These linguists argue that language is involved in almost everything we do, and whenever we use language there is a context, or, to be more precise, two kinds of context. There is, first, a *context of culture*: speakers within a culture share particular assumptions and expectations so that they are able to take for granted the ways in which things are done. Knowing how to greet someone, how to order a meal in a restaurant, how to participate in a class, or how to write a business letter are examples of this kind of cultural knowledge. While cultures may share many common purposes for using language, how these things actually get done varies from culture to culture.

A second kind of context is the *context of situation*, the particular occasion on which the language is being used. One of the most fundamental features of language is that *it varies according to the context of situation*. This context is characterized by three features: (1) what is being talked (or written) about, (2) the relationship between the speakers (or writer and reader), and (3) whether the language is spoken or written. How we use language is determined largely by these contextual features. Here are some examples of each of these three features.

Language varies according to the context of situation.

- *What is being talked or written about*. Think of the differences between a conversation about teaching and another about gardening, or between a social studies text and a biology text.
- *The relationship between the speakers*. Imagine yourself chatting to a friend at a party and compare that with how you might respond to questions at a job interview.
- *Whether the language is spoken or written*. Imagine yourself watching a cooking demonstration where the cook is describing what he or she is doing. Then think about how the language would change if it were written in a cookbook.

Halliday and Hasan (1985) refer to these contextual features as *field*, *tenor*, and *mode*.

- *Field* refers to the topic of the text—what it is that is being talked or written about.
- *Tenor* refers to the relationship between speaker and listener (or writer and reader), such as the level of formality required.
- *Mode* refers to the channel of communication, for example, whether it is spoken or written.

Together these three variables constitute what is referred to as the *register* of a text. As children learn their first language, they gradually learn not only the syntax or grammar of the language, but also how to vary the language they use according to the context they are in. In other words, they learn to vary the register of the language so that it is appropriate for the context. While Juliana, and many EL learners like her, learned quickly how to talk informally with her peers, she had yet to learn to use the more formal registers required in school learning, that is, the more academic subject-related language associated with school learning and literacy across the curriculum, what Julianna called "school work."

Learning to make language explicit

The ability to handle register is a both a developmental and a social process for children learning their mother tongue. One of the first things a young child learns to do is to talk about the "here and now"—to refer to the objects and goings-on in their immediate environment. Here-and-now language occurs in contexts where both speakers can see each other, and where there are visual clues, gestures, and facial expressions to help communication. What is being talked about is embedded in the visual context, such as "Put it there." The words *it* and *there* would be perfectly understandable to speakers who could see what was being referred to. But if we were speaking on the phone, we would have to express this differently. It would need to be more explicit, with more details provided: "Put the television in the corner."

If you talk with very young children you'll be aware that they do not always provide enough information for you to understand them, especially if you did not share the experience they are referring to. Last year while talking by phone to my then eighteen-month-old granddaughter, I asked her what she was doing. She replied, "I'm playing with this." Of course I had no idea what "this" was, until her father intervened and told me what it was (a toy train). What at this stage she was not able to do is what Halliday (1993) refers to as the ability to "impart meanings which are not already known" (102). He writes:

> When children are first using language . . . the particular experience that is being construed in any utterance is one that the

> addressee is known to have shared. When the child says green bus, the context is “that’s a green bus; you saw it too.” . . . What the child cannot do at this stage is to impart the experience to someone who has not shared it. [At a later stage] children learn to tell people things they do not already know.

As children get older, they gradually become able to use language in a more explicit or abstract way to refer to things that aren’t in their immediate surroundings, such as to tell someone about what happened at school that day, to explain what they learned in science, or write a factual information text. As we will see below, the ability to use language in these more explicit ways is one of the major differences between informal face-to-face conversation and written language. Both mother tongue speakers of English and EL learners face these increasingly complex language demands in school, but EL learners are learning to do this in a language that is not their mother tongue.

Moving toward academic language

Martin (1984) suggests that “the more speakers are doing things together and engaging in dialogue, the more they can take for granted. As language moves away from the events it describes, and the possibility of feedback is removed, more and more of the meanings must be made explicit in the text” (27). In other words, the language itself must contain more information because it cannot depend on the addressee knowing exactly what occurred. Consider the differences between these four texts, which were each produced in a different context. (Note that the term *text* refers to a piece of complete meaningful language, both spoken and written.)

Text 1. Look, it’s making them move. Those didn’t stick.

Text 2. We found out the pins stuck on the magnet.

Text 3. Our experiment showed that magnets attract some metals.

Text 4. Magnetic attraction occurs only between ferrous metals.

Here we can see how the register of each text changes because the context in which it was produced is different: Each text is more explicit than the one that precedes it. Text 1 was spoken by a child talking in a small group as they were experimenting with a magnet to find out which objects it attracted. Without knowing this, it's hard to work out what's being talked about—we don't know what *them* and *those* are referring to, and the words *move* and *stick* could occur in a number of different contexts. Text 1 demonstrates how dependent "here-and-now" language is on the immediate situational context. Text 2 is the same child telling the teacher what she had learned, and is in the form of a recount in which *the pins* and *the magnet* refer to specific objects. These words make the text more explicit and therefore easier to understand. Text 3 is from her written report and contains a generalization: *magnets attract some metals.* The text is starting to sound more scientific. For example, *stick* is replaced by *attract.* Text 4, by way of comparison, is from a child's encyclopedia. The language is much denser, and the process to which the child was referring in Texts 1, 2, and 3 is now summarized in the abstract notion of *magnetic attraction.*

While the *field* of all four texts is the same (i.e., they are on the same topic), there are considerable differences in the way in which the language is used. The vocabulary becomes more technical as well as subject or *field* specific, the *tenor* of the texts becomes more impersonal (notice how the personal reference to *we* and *our* disappear), and the *mode* varies (they become increasingly more explicit and more like written language). Of course, we could continue this continuum; a tertiary text may say something like "Some well-known ferromagnetic materials that exhibit easily detectable magnetic properties are nickel, iron, cobalt gadolinium, and their alloys."

In many ways, this set of texts reflects the process of formal education: As children move through school, they are expected to progress from talking only about their here-and-now personal experiences toward using the particular registers of different curriculum areas, and be able to express increasingly more abstract ideas.

Language learning is not a simple linear process.

The four texts demonstrate that it is problematic to talk about overall "proficiency" in a language without taking into account the context in which the language will be used. As Baynham (1993) suggests, language learning is not a simple linear process but a "functional diversification, an extension of a learner's communicative range" (5). Even a fluent mother tongue speaker of English will not be proficient in every possible context: there will always be some subjects that they know very little about, so they can't talk about them. Or, perhaps there is a particular form of writing, such as a PhD proposal, that even highly educated people might not be familiar with and would need guidance in producing. So it is not simply a matter of getting the basic "grammar" correct, but of knowing the most *appropriate* language to use in a particular context, or, in other words, to know how to use the appropriate register. In the context of school the need to develop academic registers is a strong argument for *all* learners to learn through programs that integrate subject teaching with its associated language. This has implications for both program planning and for assessment.

EL learners and language learning in school

In line with this view of language, the book is based upon the assumption that language development involves a continuing process of meaning making. While the more formal and traditional aspects of language learning, such as grammar and vocabulary, cannot—and should not—be ignored, the assumption in the book is that these aspects of language are best focused on in the context of authentic meaning making, and that learning *about* language is most meaningful when it occurs in the context of actual language use.

Let's return now to Julianna, the student quoted at the beginning of the chapter. It is obvious that a second language learner is likely to have far fewer difficulties in producing something like Text 1, where the visual context provides a support for meaning making, and where fewer linguistic resources are required, than with subsequent texts that require increasingly more control over grammar and vocabulary. Cummins (2000) uses the terms *context-embedded* and *context-reduced* to refer to the distinction between the registers of everyday language and the more academic registers of school, and has suggested that whereas a second language learner is likely to develop conversational language quite rapidly—usually taking between one and two years—the registers associated with academic learning may take up to seven years for the learner to develop at a level equivalent to a competent native speaker of the same age. (A caveat to this is that students who have literacy and academic development in their first language often progress much faster.) These school-related registers, as the text examples illustrate, are more explicit, more abstract, and less personal, and they contain more subject-specific language. Julianna's comment implies she still has difficulties with this more academic language, even though she has no difficulty expressing herself in more everyday contexts.

This model of language and language development should not suggest a negative or deficit view of learners like Julianna, or of their English skills. Nor should it suggest that the development of academic language is simply a matter of time and that it will be "picked up" eventually. On the contrary, viewing language development as a process of learning to control an increasing range of registers suggests that while all children are predisposed in a biological sense to learn language, whether they actually do, how well they learn to control it, and the range of registers and purposes for which they are able to use it are a matter of the social contexts in which they find themselves.

Second language learners will have experienced a wide range of contexts in which they have learned to use their mother tongue, but probably a much more restricted range of contexts *in English*. If these children's previous language experience is not taken into account when they start school, and if they are expected not only to learn a second language but to learn *in it* as well, it is hardly surprising that without focused English language support in all subjects they may start to fall behind their peers who are operating in a language they have been familiar with since birth.

It is clear that English speakers have a head start in learning to use the academic registers of school. While the language and literacy-related demands of the curriculum—the registers of school—are unfamiliar to a greater or lesser extent to all children when they start school, and English-speaking children are also learning new concepts and new registers, they are doing so through the medium of their mother tongue. EL learners are not. In an English-medium school, English speakers have largely already acquired the core grammar of the language they are learning in and the ability to use it in a range of familiar social situations. EL learners have not. But as Cummins (2000) points out, we cannot put EL students' academic development on hold while they are learning the language of instruction. Ultimately, if second language learners are not to be disadvantaged in their long-term learning, and are to have the time and opportunity to learn the subject-specific registers of school, they need ongoing language development across the whole curriculum and the recognition by all teachers that they are teachers of English, not simply of subject "content." Only in this way will EL students have access to, models of, and practice in using the range of academic language they need for learning.

Merely exposing EL learners to content classrooms, however, is not an adequate response: Simply placing them in an English-medium classroom in itself "cannot be assumed to provide optimal language learning opportunities as a matter of course" (Mohan 2001, 108). But the integration of language, subject content, and thinking skills suggested in this chapter is not a straightforward task. It requires systematic planning and monitoring. The following chapters suggest some of the ways that teachers can respond to the language-learning needs of EL students within the context of the regular school curriculum.

VIEWS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The "lone" learner

Since public education began, there have been two major and competing ideologies about the goals of education and the means by which it is to be accomplished (Wells 2000). The first of these can be described as the "empty vessel" model of teaching and learning, whereby teachers "transmit" skills or knowledge into the "empty" minds of their students. The teaching–learning relationship is one of transmission and reception. Language, if it is thought about at all, is seen simply as a conduit or carrier of knowledge. The second ideology, sometimes referred to as "progressive," appears at one level to be very different. The learner is placed at the center of the educational process and education is seen not as a matter of receiving information but of intelligent inquiry and thought. In the way that this has been interpreted in some classrooms, the major organizing principle is seen to be the individual child's active construction of knowledge, with the teacher's role being to stage-manage appropriate learning experiences. In this model of learning, a child's language abilities are seen as largely the result of more general and cognitive abilities.

Both orientations have been critiqued from the standpoint of minority students and second language learners (Cummins 2000). Transmission models tend to work against what is now accepted as one of the central principles of language learning—namely, that using the new language in interaction with others is an essential process by which it is learned (Swain 2000). Transmission pedagogies are also criticized as presenting a curriculum sited solely within the dominant culture, providing little or no opportunity for minority students to express their particular experiences and nonmainstream view of the world. Unfortunately, transmission-based approaches have tended to dominate the education of so-called disadvantaged students. Many compensatory programs have focused on drilling students in low-level language and reading skills that are excised from any meaningful context, at the expense of any authentic intellectual challenge involving higher-level thinking and literacy development. The ongoing effect of such programs is that further disadvantage may become structured into the curriculum of the school. As Carrasquillo and colleagues suggest: "ELLs' lack of oral [English] language proficiency has often hindered their opportunity to receive cognitively stimulating and content-level appropriate instruction in school" (Carrasquillo, Kucer, and Adams 2004, 30).

Progressive pedagogy has also been criticized, in particular for its lack of explicit language teaching, which, it has been argued, places a disadvantage on those who are least familiar with the language and assumptions of a middle-class, English-medium school curriculum. In relation to the teaching of writing, such approaches have been criticized in particular for their focus on the *processes* of language learning, at the expense of focusing sufficiently on the actual production of written texts, especially nonnarrative texts that will allow learners to participate in the dominant society. This is a powerful argument and is taken up again in Chapter 5.

Though very different in the way that they view learning and the role of the teacher, both ideologies have an individualistic notion of learning: the child as a lone learner. Whether you view the learner as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with appropriate knowledge, or as an unfolding intellect that will eventually reach its potential given the right environment, both views see the learner as "self-contained" and learning as occurring *within* an individual.

There is an alternative model, however, one that is increasingly influential in classroom practice and with which most teachers are now familiar. Based on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), this pedagogical approach emphasizes the social and collaborative nature of learning and language development. It sees learning as occurring *between* individuals. The roles of teacher and learner are interrelated, with both taking active roles in the learning process. The next section discusses this approach.

A social view of learning

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky lived at the beginning of the twentieth century but his work was not widely translated until the 1960s. Since the 1980s, his work has exerted a major influence on Western education in Europe, North America, and Australia, and it is increasingly influential in today's classrooms. Together with the work of other Soviet cognitive researchers—including Luria, Leont'ev, and the literary theorist Bakhtin—and interpretations of this work by scholars and educationists such as Wertsch, Mercer, and Wells, Vygotsky's perspective on human development and learning, broadly termed *sociocultural*, offers a very different perspective from that offered by earlier Western psychological theories. Sociocultural theory sees human development as social rather than individualistic. An individual's development is thus to a significant extent a product, not a prerequisite, of education—the result of his or her social, historical, and cultural experiences. Thus, as suggested earlier in this chapter, while we are all biologically able to acquire language, what language we learn, how adept we are at using it, and the purposes for which we are able to use it are a matter of the social contexts and situations we have experienced. In a very real sense, what and how we learn depends very much on the company we keep!

The zone of proximal development

The educational basis for a child's development is encapsulated in what Vygotsky terms the *zone of proximal development*, by which he refers to the distance or the cognitive gap between what a child can do unaided and what the child can do jointly and in coordination with a more skilled expert. Anyone who has been involved with young children is familiar with what this looks like in practice. When children are learning to feed or dress themselves, the adult at first has to perform the whole activity. Then the child gradually performs parts of the activity, with the parent still assisting with the more difficult parts. Finally, the child is able to do the whole thing unaided. In other words, successful coordination with a partner—or assisted performance—leads learners to reach beyond what they are able to achieve alone, to participate in new situations and to tackle new tasks, or, in the case of second language learners, to learn new ways of using language.

Vygotsky sees the development of cognition itself also as the result of participation with others in goal-directed activity. A child initially engages in joint thinking with others through the talk that accompanies problem solving and social participation in everyday activity. Imagine, for example, a child doing a jigsaw puzzle with a parent or caregiver. They will probably talk about the shapes of the pieces, what piece might go where, how to match up colors and images, and so on. Vygotsky would argue that this external, social dialogue is gradually internalized to become a resource for individual thinking, or what he refers to as "inner speech." The child's external dialogues with others later become an inner personal resource for the development of thinking and problem solving; eventually the child will do jigsaw puzzles without the need for external dialogue. The child doing the puzzle with the adult is, of course, not only learning how to do that particular puzzle but is also becoming familiar with the kind of processes to go through for completing subsequent puzzles. The goal of this kind of learning is to go beyond simply learning items of knowledge to being able to use that knowledge in other contexts—in other words, to learn *how* to think, not simply *what* to think.

As pointed out earlier, second language learners are both learning a new language and learning other things through the medium of the language. If we accept the premise that external dialogue is a major resource for the development of thinking, and that interaction is also integral to language learning, then it follows that we must consider very seriously the nature of the talk in which learners are engaged in the classroom. (This topic is the focus of Chapters 2, 3, and 4 but is a continuing theme throughout the book.)

This social view of teaching and learning moves us away from the often polarized (and not very helpful) debate about teacher-centered versus student-centered learning. It suggests a more unified theory of "teaching-and-learning," in which both teachers and students are seen as active participants, and learning is seen as a collaborative endeavor. In line with these collaborative principles, the achievements of second language learners cannot be seen as simply the result of aptitude, background, or individual motivation. They are also dependent on the social and linguistic frameworks within which their learning takes place: language learning is a socially embedded, not simply a psychologically driven, process. Thus what teachers choose to do in classrooms, and in particular the kinds of support they provide, is of crucial importance in the educational success of their students. It is to the nature of this support, or *scaffolding*, that we now turn.

What is scaffolding?

Here is an example of scaffolding in action: The father and mother are talking with their son Nigel, who at the time was around fourteen months (taken from Halliday 1975, 112). Earlier Nigel had been to the zoo, and while he was looking at a goat it had attempted to eat a plastic lid that Nigel was holding. The keeper had explained that he shouldn't let the goat eat the lid because it wasn't good for it. As you read this dialogue, look particularly at what the parents are doing and the effect this has on Nigel's language.

Nigel try eat lid

Father what tried to eat the lid?

Nigel try eat lid

Father what tried to eat the lid?

Nigel goat, man said no, goat try eat lid, man said no

Later

Nigel goat try eat lid, man said no

Mother why did the man say no?

Nigel goat shouldn't eat lid, (*Shaking head*) good for it

Mother the goat shouldn't eat the lid, it's not good for it

Nigel goat try eat lid, man said no, goat shouldn't eat lid, (*Shaking head*) good for it.

Notice the kind of scaffolding that the parents provide. Nigel's initial utterance is far from explicit—no one who had not shared the experience with him would be able to understand the significance of what he is saying. At first it is not clear what or who Nigel is referring to, and the father's question *what* shows Nigel what information he needs to provide. Having extended the initial three-word utterance to something significantly more complete, Nigel relates this more extended version to his mother, who pushes the dialogue forward with the question *why*. While Nigel does not take up his mother's use of *it's not* (using instead the strategy of indicating a negative by shaking his head), he does provide the reason his mother is seeking (*it's not good for it*), and by the end of these two small conversations he has elaborated on and made more explicit his original short utterance. Most important, what Nigel achieves—the final story he tells—has not simply come from him and his own linguistic resources, nor has it been "provided" by the parents. Rather, this story is a collaborative endeavor, and it has been *jointly* constructed.

The term *scaffolding* was first used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) in their examination of parent–child talk in the early years. It is a useful metaphor that we will employ throughout the book. Scaffolding—in its more usual sense—is a temporary structure that is put up in the process of constructing or repairing a building. As each bit of the new building is finished, the scaffolding is taken down. The scaffolding is temporary, but essential for the successful construction of the building. Bruner (1978) describes scaffolding in the metaphorical sense in which we are using it here, as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring" (19). In the classroom it portrays the "temporary, but essential, nature of the mentor's assistance" in supporting learners to carry out tasks successfully (Maybin, Mercer, and Stierer 1992, 186). *Scaffolding*, however, is not simply another word for *help*. It is a special kind of help that assists learners in moving toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding. Scaffolding is thus the temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone. It is future-oriented and aimed at increasing a learner's autonomy. As Vygotsky has said, what a child can do with support today, she or he can do alone tomorrow.

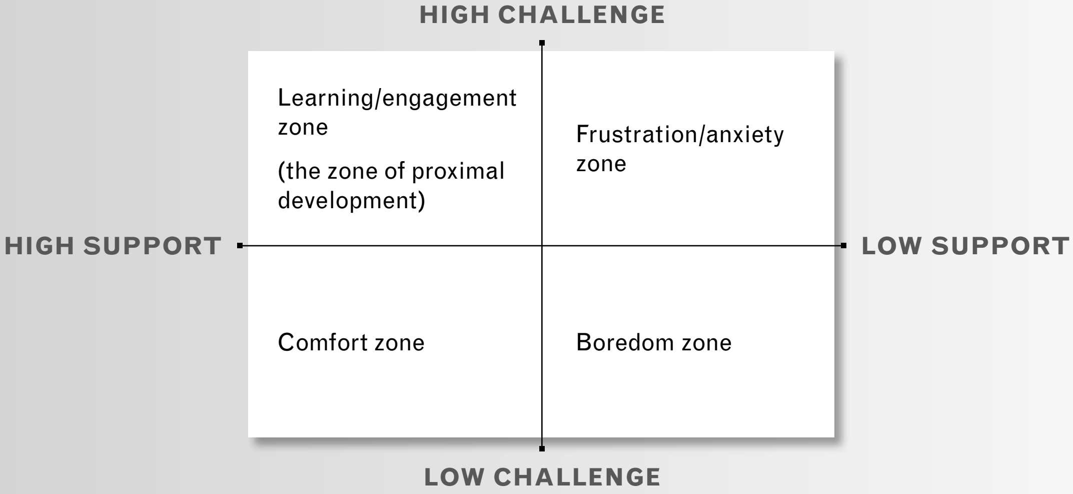
It can be argued that it is only *when* teacher support—or scaffolding—is needed that learning will take place, since the learner is then likely to be working within his or her zone of proximal development; Vygotsky's work

(1978) suggests that learning leads development. While this idea does not ignore the notion that teaching experiences should not be completely beyond the capacity of the learner, it does challenge the notion of learner "readiness" by suggesting that it is the teacher who is largely responsible for initiating each new step of learning, building on what a learner is currently able to do alone. It challenges teachers to maintain high expectations of all students as well as provide adequate scaffolding for tasks to be completed successfully.

A high-challenge, high-support classroom

Mariani (1997) has provided a useful diagram (Figure 1–1) to illustrate these ideas. It is particularly useful because it relates scaffolding to the degree of intellectual challenge of the task that the student is carrying out. In the diagram the vertical "challenge" axis refers to what the students are doing. They may be engaged in a high-challenge classroom, where they regularly participate in intellectually challenging tasks and higher-order thinking, or in a low-challenge classroom, where the tasks involve simple, low-level tasks and drills, or the tasks may lie somewhere along this continuum. The horizontal

Figure 1–1 Four Zones of Teaching and Learning (adapted from Mariani 1997)


HIGH CHALLENGE
Learning/engagement zone
(the zone of proximal development)
Frustration/anxiety zone
HIGH SUPPORT
LOW SUPPORT
Comfort zone
Boredom zone
LOW CHALLENGE

"support" axis refers to what the teacher is doing. He or she may be providing high or low levels of scaffolding. The four quadrants illustrate four kinds of classroom environments: (1) high challenge, low support; (2) low challenge, low support; (3) low challenge, high support; and (4) high challenge, high support. Pause in your reading at this point to consider how you might feel in each of these four zones as a learner. Which one is most likely to engage you and provide you with the most productive learning environment?

Considerable research over a number of years suggests that a high-challenge, high-support classroom benefits all children. Thomas and Collier's research (1999) has shown that where the teachers' expectations of their students were high, EL learners' achievement was also high. Other studies have also found that in a high-challenge/high-support curriculum equity gaps diminish and all learners, regardless of background, achieve at higher levels (Newmann and Associates 1996; Gibbons 2008; Hammond 2008; Walqui 2007). And as Chapter 2 points out, research on second language development would suggest that the inquiry-based and dialogic orientation that such a curriculum provides also provides a context that fosters the language development of EL learners.

For EL students, a high-challenge, high-support classroom suggests a very different orientation to learning tasks than has often been the case in the past. As far as possible, all learners, including EL learners, need to be engaged with authentic and cognitively challenging learning tasks. This means that rather than simplifying the *task* (and ultimately risking a reductionist curriculum), we should instead reflect on the nature of the *scaffolding* that is being provided for learners to carry out that task. It is the nature of the support—support that is responsive to the particular demands made on children learning through the medium of a new language—that is critical for success. For example, all learners might be expected at some point to write a persuasive text. Some, though, may write part or all of this in their mother tongue. For others the teacher may provide a scaffold that provides the connectives that start each section: *first*, *my second point*, *on the other hand*. For a student who as yet has very little English, the teacher might also provide the first sentence (or more) of each part of the text. Or they may provide, in addition to all these, and by talking with the student, a list of words or phrases that the student will need to use. Or perhaps some students might do the task in pairs, others individually.

In this way, the outcomes (here, the type of text) are similar for all students; what differs is the nature and amount of scaffolding provided, and the route by which the outcomes are achieved.

This book offers many suggestions for scaffolding learning for EL learners in the regular classroom. However, it is worth remembering that the presence of EL children in a school, while posing a challenge for many mainstream teachers, can be at the same time a catalyst for the kind of language-focused curriculum that will benefit all children. As a result of poverty or social background or nonstandard dialect, native speakers of English may also have difficulty with the specialized registers of curriculum subjects. Recognizing that the language of these subjects cannot be taken for granted but has to be taught, finding stimulating and effective ways to do so, and critically examining how language is currently being used in one's own classroom will assist not only EL learners but also many of their monolingual-English peers.

All learners need to be engaged with cognitively challenging tasks

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In the past fifty years there has been much research in what is most often referred to as "second language *acquisition*," or SLA. In this book, along with others who view the development of language and learning as social in origin, I have used the term "second language *development*" to better suggest that, for the learner, learning a language is an active and collaborative process. I have also retained, for ease of reference, the use of the traditional term "second language," but I acknowledge that in reality English may be a third or subsequent language for some students. "Mother tongue" is also a problematic term for those children who regularly operate in several languages. I have retained the use of this, however, to refer to the learner's most dominant or strongest home language. I have also used the term *EL* (English language) *learner*, since at the time of writing it is a commonly used term for those students who are learning *through* a language of instruction (English) in which they are not yet fully familiar, or that is new to them. *EAL* (English as an additional language) is another term used when referring to the multilingual skills that some children possess. While I acknowledge, and agree with, those researchers who are wary of the use of such "labels," arguing that we should not think of learners in terms of deficit, I have retained them for ease of reference to talk about the heterogeneous group of learners that are the subject of this book.

Many of the teaching activities discussed in the book involve the integration of all four areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. However, they have been separated in the chapters so that the implications for EL learners can be more fully discussed. The layout of the chapters is not intended to suggest that the four skills should be regularly taught discretely or in isolation!

- **Chapter 2** begins with a brief summary of some of the central ideas from research about second language learning that are most relevant for classroom talk, and it introduces the idea of "dialogic talk." The chapter goes on to give examples of teacher-talk that is supportive of EL students' language development.
- **Chapter 3** also draws on the research discussed in Chapter 2, this time with a focus on student-centered pair and group work, and it includes a number of strategies and activities that can be used across the curriculum.
- **Chapter 4** discusses in more detail the spoken-written continuum introduced briefly in this chapter, and it shows how talk can be a "bridge" into literacy.
- **Chapter 5** discusses the teaching of writing. It describes the major linguistic features of a range of writing forms common in primary schools, and it suggests a teaching model by which specific forms of writing—text types or genres—can be developed across the curriculum.
- **Chapter 6** focuses on the teaching of reading, and it includes examples of a range of activities that help students access the meaning of texts and model what effective teachers do.
- **Chapter 7** focuses on listening and discusses what kind of listening demands are made on listeners in different contexts, and it offers a range of activities aimed to improve effective listening.
- **Chapter 8** draws together the theories and practical activities of the previous chapters to focus on language learning across the curriculum. It provides a rationale for integration and guidance about how to

plan and implement an integrated program. Assessment is presented as "assessment-for-learning," which can be used to inform future program planning and feedback to students, parents, and other teachers.
- **The Glossary of Teaching Activities** is included at the end of the book. Activities that are included in the glossary are designated in bold type in the text.

In Summary

This chapter has foreshadowed the major themes of the book.

- Language varies according to the context in which it occurs.
- Second language learning in the school context requires learners to develop more "academic" language in an increasing range of subject contexts.
- This academic language development requires planned English language support across the whole curriculum and throughout the school.
- Learning is essentially collaborative and social, and it is a partnership between teacher and students.
- EL learners need the same access to intellectually challenging work as all other students.
- A high-challenge classroom requires high levels of language support (scaffolding).

To Think About

1. In your own school context, are there students like Julianna? How are they viewed by their teachers? What kind of support do you think is most important for learners like her?
2. The chapter suggests that simply exposing EL learners to English is insufficient by itself to lead to effective language learning. Do you agree? What happens to some EL learners when they are immersed in content classrooms and taught as if they are fluent in English?

3. Do you agree that it is problematic to talk about overall "proficiency" in a language without taking into account the context in which the language will be used?
4. Look at the four quadrants in Figure 1–1. Where do you think *most* of your own teaching is concentrated?
5. What points in the chapter affirm or challenge your current practice? What represents the most important learning in the chapter for you?
6. Tell a success story! In your own classroom, think about when you could have said, "Great things were expected, great support was offered, and great outcomes were achieved."

Suggestions for Further Reading

Cummins, J. 2000. Chapter 3, "Language Proficiency in Academic Contexts." In *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, ed. J. Cummins. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

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