Abstract

Many English language learners in Ontario’s English-language schools receive support from a specialist English as a Second Language teacher. They also spend at least part of the school day in the mainstream classroom. This means that every teacher shares the responsibility for helping these students acquire English to the level required for academic success. According to Cummins and others, it takes five or more years for English language learners to catch up to English speaking age peers in academic language proficiency. Teachers therefore need an understanding of the language acquisition process and the difference between everyday and academic language. Teachers also need to plan differentiated instruction for learners at various stages in the language acquisition process. This paper suggests a framework for planning instruction based on the Cummins four-quadrant model.

The Context: English Language Learners in Ontario Schools

In Ontario’s English-language schools, English language learners (ELLs) are students whose first language is other than English. They may be Canadian-born, or newcomers from other countries. About 20% of Ontario’s students in English-language elementary schools are ELLs, and 58% of them were born in Canada. However, the percentage of newcomers is higher in secondary schools because of continued immigration.

These students enter a new linguistic and cultural environment when they start school in Ontario. Since literacy instruction in Ontario’s English-language schools is in English, these children require particular attention, consideration, and support in order to overcome the mis-
match between their first language (L1) and the language of instruction. However, they do not all receive support from a specialist English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. In schools where there is specialist language teacher, support is usually provided only for the first year or two, and mostly to newcomers rather than Canadian-born children.

Whether they receive support from an ESL teacher or not, ELLs are integrated into mainstream classrooms alongside their English-speaking peers for at least part of the school day. We recognize that it would be counter-productive to keep these students in a separate class until they have learned English: the best place to learn English is among English speakers, and the best way to learn a language is through involvement in meaningful age-appropriate activities that promote both linguistic and cognitive development. Therefore it is essential to ensure that every classroom is a supportive environment for those students who are learning the language of instruction.

Teachers need specific knowledge and skills in order to provide the kind of instruction that will enable language learners to participate in the academic program while they continue learning the language of the school (usually referred to as the second language, or L2, although it may actually be the third or fourth language for some students). For example, we need some understanding of the language acquisition process and the difference between everyday and academic language. To apply this knowledge in the classroom, we can use a framework based on Jim Cummins’ model of second language acquisition to plan differentiated instruction for learners at various stages in the language acquisition process.

How Long Does It Take to Become Academically Proficient in English?
Most English language learners are able to function effectively and confidently in everyday language situations within a year or two. For example, they can follow simple classroom directions and maintain simple conversations about familiar topics and routines. During this time they also acquire a basic vocabulary of high-frequency words (such as old, food, or tired).

Research studies in the United States and in Canada, as well as data from provincial literacy assessments in Ontario, show that it takes much longer for most English language learners to catch up to their age peers in academic language (Cummins, 2000; Garcia, 2000; Klesmer,
This seems very encouraging. If we just keep on doing what we are doing, immigrant students will do very well! Unfortunately, when we disaggregate the results according to country of origin or home language, we see that there is great variability among different groups of students, and while some groups of students are doing astonishingly well, students from some countries and from some language groups are experiencing more difficulty (Brown, 2006; Brown and Sinhay, 2008; Canadian Council on Learning, 2008).

While various other factors must be considered, including socio-economic status, the data suggest that some immigrant groups are not receiving sufficient sup-

### How long does it take ELLs to acquire academic English?

«In contrast to their relatively rapid acquisition of conversational fluency and decoding skills in English, English language learners typically require at least five years to catch up to their English-speaking peers in literacy-related language skills (e.g., reading, writing, and vocabulary). These trajectories reflect (a) the linguistic differences between academic and conversational language, and (b) the fact that English language learners are attempting to catch up to a moving target; native speakers of English are not standing still waiting for ELLs to catch up.»

«It is not surprising, then, that newcomer English language learners in secondary schools are faced with formidable challenges in gaining access to the curriculum and catching up academically. Many of these students will run out of time, or become discouraged and drop out before they have caught up in academic English.»

port as they learn English and adapt to schooling in Ontario. It seems we need to accelerate second language acquisition among some groups of students so that they can reach the same high standards that Ontario expects of all students. In order to do that, teachers need to be aware of the nature of academic language and the ways it is used in various subject areas. Then we need to adapt instruction so that students at all stages of learning English can be successful and continue learning the language to a high level of proficiency.

What Is Academic Language?
Jim Cummins distinguishes between two important aspects of second language development (1979, 2000):

- **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)**, which we will term «everyday language». Most students develop proficiency in using everyday language within the first two years of immersion in the L2 environment, and can function well in social situation and in relatively undemanding classroom activities.

- **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)**, which we will term simply «academic language». This is the kind of language required for understanding and communicating complex academic concepts. It takes much longer for students to catch up to age peers in this aspect of second language acquisition. This does not mean that students must complete their acquisition of everyday language before beginning to acquire some academic language. In fact, even during their first week, students must acquire some academic vocabulary such as «multiply» or «equation» in order to participate in the Mathematics program.

Unfortunately, because they are often perceived to be «fluent» within their first one or two years, most students are fully integrated into the mainstream classroom once they have demonstrated proficiency in everyday language use, without any support from an ESL teacher and with limited consideration from the classroom teacher for their ongoing language-learning needs.

This chart shows some examples of the key differences between these two types of language:
### Everyday Language includes:  
Ability to maintain a face-to-face conversation with peers and with a variety of school personnel in various settings, inside and outside the classroom  
Ability to talk, read, or write about familiar content or about what is happening here and now  
Knowledge of basic vocabulary/high-frequency words such as *old, food, tired, cars, or trucks.*  
Ability to use simple sentences and grammatical structures in sentences such as *We heated the water until it boiled. We used a thermometer to measure the temperature.*

### Academic Language includes:  
Ability to understand when there is less opportunity for interaction: for example, when listening to a presentation or reading a textbook  
Ability to talk, read, and write about content that has fewer connections to prior learning or personal experience, is more abstract, and is more distant in time or space: for example, learning about the water cycle, studying the earth’s crust, or learning about the Second World War.  
Knowledge of more sophisticated, low-frequency vocabulary such as *ancient, nutrition, fatigued, or vehicles.*  
Ability to use more complex sentences and grammatical structures, as in *When the water was heated to boiling point, a thermometer was used to measure the temperature.*

Adapted from Coelho, E. (2007) [2004]: p. 152

### Scaffolding in the quadrants: A framework for instruction in multilingual classrooms

«Scaffolding» is a metaphor for the kind of support that teachers provide to enable learners to reach for a higher level of performance than they would be able to do unaideed. For example, when teachers modify their linguistic output they enable language learners to focus on a restricted repertoire of language. This enables learners to recognize repeated sounds and words, and begin to understand language. As the learners’ level of comprehension and production increases, teachers move their output level slightly higher—just as construction workers build the scaffolding of a building higher and higher until the building is finished and can stand alone.
In the scaffold model of teaching and learning, the teacher’s job is to make success attainable for all students. The teacher is an expert and guide, providing the support that enables students to achieve levels of performance beyond their independent level and gradually moving them towards independence. The scaffold model is very helpful in implementing Cummins’ model for second language teaching and learning.

The Cummins model
Students at different stages of development in L2 require different levels of support in order to benefit from instruction. Jim Cummins suggests a model for planning instruction and assessment for second language learners at different stages of development. The model consists of four quadrants created by the intersection of two continua:

- **Context Embedded/Context Reduced** continuum indicates the degree of contextual support that is provided. For example, at the context-embedded end of the continuum, the language is embedded in a meaningful and familiar context, and is supported by direct face-to-face interaction, visual cues, hands-on experiences, simplified language, and other aids to comprehension. At the other end of this continuum, the meaning is carried in the language alone.

- **Cognitively Undemanding/Cognitively Demanding** continuum indicates the demands that are placed on the learner’s thinking processes. At the cognitively undemanding end of the continuum, the language is simple and the task is cognitively undemanding: for example, under-
standing and providing factual information about a familiar topic. At the other end of this continuum, the language is complex and the learning tasks require the student to learn new and challenging content and to use a variety of thinking processes to handle a larger volume of information: for example, comparing, contrasting, and evaluating diverse sources or points of view.

This diagram is an adaptation of the Cummins model. The context embedded/reduced continuum has been re-labelled as maximum/reduced scaffolding because most teachers are familiar with the concept of scaffolding. The arrow shows a student’s progression from one quadrant to the next. As well, the quadrants have been re-labelled in order to better match this progression, and to be consistent with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Instruction for beginners needs to be designed in Quadrant A, with maximum support or «scaffolding» for tasks that are engaging but not academically challenging. Instruction is focused on the development of everyday language plus essential academic vocabulary in various subject areas. Gradually, over a period of a year or two, instruction should begin moving into Quadrant B. Students continue to receive maximum support for comprehension and language production, but the tasks become more academically challenging, so that students begin to accelerate their acquisition of academic language. In Quadrant C, students continue to work on academically challenging tasks. Gradually, over a period of several years, less scaffolding is required, until by the end of this stage students have caught up to their native-speaker age peers in academic language skills.

Note that Quadrant D is not part of this progression, for reasons that are explained in the chart «Scaffolding in the Quadrants: a framework for teaching and learning academic language for school success» on the next page.
Scaffolding in the Quadrants: a framework for teaching and learning academic language for school success

Adapted from Coelho, E. (2007) [2004]: pp. 258-259

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVELY UNDEMANDING TASKS</th>
<th>COGNITIVELY DEMANDING TASKS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Quadrant A: Beginner (A1, A2):</strong> At first, most of the curriculum objectives are unattainable and need to be modified or replaced in order to focus on the acquisition of everyday language. The following instructional strategies are essential in Quadrant A, and some remain important in B and C:</td>
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<td>- Make connections to students' knowledge and experience</td>
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<td>- Start with functional language, related to students' immediate needs</td>
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<td>- Use physical objects, actions and activities to teach basic vocabulary</td>
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<td>- Provide comprehensible input (e.g., modified language, visual &amp; contextual support)</td>
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<td>- Provide models: e.g., think aloud while modelling a piece of writing on the board</td>
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<td>- Provide supportive feedback to students' oral and written language production</td>
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<td>- Encourage interaction through the use of structured co-operative learning activities</td>
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<td>- Encourage strategic use of first languages: e.g., substituting words from L1 for words not yet learned in English, or writing notes and first drafts in L1</td>
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<td>- Provide word banks for students to choose from in order to label objects, pictures, and diagrams, or to complete sentences and graphic organizers</td>
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<td>- Use choral repetition, songs, rhymes, games, puzzles, and role play to practise new words &amp; phrases</td>
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<td>- Provide illustrated, engaging reading material within each student's present level of comprehension for extensive independent reading</td>
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<td>- Read aloud to students so they can listen while following the text</td>
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<td><strong>Quadrant B: Intermediate (B1, B2):</strong> Continued strong scaffolding enables students to achieve many of the regular curriculum objectives, except in linguistically and culturally demanding subjects such as history or literature. Many students who received some L2 instruction in their own countries are ready for tasks in Quadrant B. Many of the strategies described for Quadrant A continue to be important in Quadrant B. In addition, the following strategies provide the scaffolding that enables learners to understand and produce language and complete academic tasks that would be impossible without this support:</td>
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<td>- Teach new vocabulary as it arises in a lesson, focussing on words that will be useful in various academic contexts (e.g., observe/observation)</td>
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<td>- Identify common grammatical structures that occur during a lesson and are required for certain tasks (e.g., the use of passive verbs to write about a process)</td>
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<td>- Provide models of writing and writing scaffolds or frameworks for specific forms of writing, such as journal entries, narratives, or expositions</td>
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<td>- Model the writing process: for example, think aloud while demonstrating how to brainstorm ideas, write a first draft, seek feedback, and revise.</td>
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<td>- Guide students step-by-step through projects and research assignments.</td>
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<td>- Provide alternative resource material that is comprehensible to the learners</td>
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<td><strong>Quadrant C: Advanced (C1, C2):</strong> Students who have achieved “high intermediate” proficiency in L2 are ready to be challenged by Quadrant C tasks, which are both cognitively and linguistically demanding. Keep in mind that:</td>
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<td>- By this time the first language has often fallen far behind, and students must rely totally on L2 for further learning.</td>
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<td>- Students in Quadrant C are able to work with grade level curriculum expectations and resources, without the direct support of an ESL teacher, as long as their classroom teachers continue to provide assistance with vocabulary, sentence structure, and cultural content.</td>
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<td>- They also need modelling and support for the development of effective language learning strategies so that they can take more control over their own language learning.</td>
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<td>- The amount of scaffolding is gradually reduced, over several years, but should <strong>never be entirely discontinued</strong>: all students, including native speakers, can benefit from scaffolded instruction.</td>
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**Quadrant D: Don’t go there!** Tasks in Quadrant D are cognitively undemanding but may also be incomprehensible for many L2 learners because of a lack of background knowledge or contextual support, or because the language level is too far above the students' present level of comprehension. Examples of Quadrant D activities include tasks such as copying or memorizing material that the students do not understand. Even activities that are intended to be student-centred and academically challenging, such as research projects, can become Quadrant D tasks if students do not receive the necessary guidance and support. Many second language learners end up “completing” their projects by copying or memorizing whole chunks of text from reference books, with little comprehension of the material. These kinds of activities are unlikely to advance academic learning, while incomprehensible or decontextualized activities are not likely to promote and language acquisition.
The chart on the previous page, «Scaffolding in the Quadrants: a framework for teaching and learning academic language for school success» summarizes key instructional approaches for Quadrants A, B, and C. It is also important to be flexible and responsive to students’ needs: for example, students who may need Quadrant B instruction in some areas of the curriculum, such as Social Studies, which are culturally difficult as well as linguistically demanding, may be able to benefit from Quadrant C instruction in subjects in which they may have considerable background, such as mathematics or music.

It is important to continue to provide support through Quadrant C, even though most students may be fully integrated into mainstream classrooms by this stage—and often much earlier. Only in this way can we ensure that all students who are recent newcomers and/or are learning the language of instruction receive the support they need in order be successful in school. This means that mainstream classroom or subject teachers, who most likely have received limited training for teaching students who are learning the language of instructions, need to integrate language instruction and support into all aspects of the curriculum. This is a challenge that now faces most teachers in Ontario. Therefore specialist language teachers need to collaborate with their colleagues, sharing strategies and resources that can be used to adapt the curriculum in the mainstream classroom. «Scaffolding in the Quadrants» is offered as a framework for that collaboration.
Teaching in the Quadrants

References


Elizabeth Coelho


