

Building Background

Overview of the Building Background Component

Cognitive psychologists have described how learners develop understandings through connections they make among those things they know and have experienced, and those things they are learning. Research supports teachers' explicit activation of students' prior knowledge, and the building of background for those students who may lack prior knowledge of a particular content topic. These linkages of "schemata" help us all learn new information by helping us connect what we know and experience to what we are learning.

All English learners come to school with varied experiences, but not all of their background knowledge matches what they need to know to be successful in U.S. schools. This



mismatch in schemata, in what students have learned and/or experienced, may prevent them from making necessary connections between past and present learning.

It is important therefore, that teachers not only activate students' prior knowledge, but also build background for those who have these gaps in their understandings and background knowledge. This requires teachers to make very explicit connections between what has been taught in the past ("past learning"). Teachers also must include the explicit and purposeful development of vocabulary to foster comprehension.

To enable students to meet grade level content standards, some SIOP[®] teachers find it beneficial to offer a mini-lesson, or "jump start," to help fill in gaps. It is critical that teachers systematically and purposefully activate students' prior knowledge (determining what they already know and can do related to the topic), and systematically and purposefully develop background information when there is a mismatch or gap.

The Building Background component includes these features:

7. Concepts explicitly linked to students' background experiences.
8. Links explicitly made between past learning and new concepts.
9. Key vocabulary emphasized (e.g., introduced, written, repeated, and highlighted for students to see).

Sample pages



The Insert Method



COMPONENT: Building Background

(RWCT Project of the International Reading Association)

Grade Levels: 3–12

Subject Levels: All

Grouping Configuration: Partners, Small Groups, Whole Class, Individual

Materials: Informational or expository text duplicated on paper students can write on

Description:

In partners, students read a nonfiction article using the following coding system, inserting the codes directly into the text they are reading:

- A check (✓) mark indicates a concept or fact that is already known by the students.
- A question (?) mark indicates a concept or fact that is confusing or not understood.
- An exclamation mark (!) indicates something that is new, unusual or surprising.
- A (+) indicates an idea or concept that is new to the reader.

When the partners have concluded reading and marking the text, they share their markings with another set of partners. As misconceptions or misunderstandings are cleared up, the question mark is replaced with an asterisk (*). Following this small group work, the text is discussed with the teacher and the whole class.

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Content Objectives:

Students will be able to (SWBAT) . . .

- Use a coding system while reading a nonfiction text to identify concepts or facts that are familiar, those that are confusing, and those that are new, unusual, or surprising.
- Clarify misconceptions and misunderstandings about a text while working with group members.

Language Objectives:

Students will be able to (SWBAT) . . .

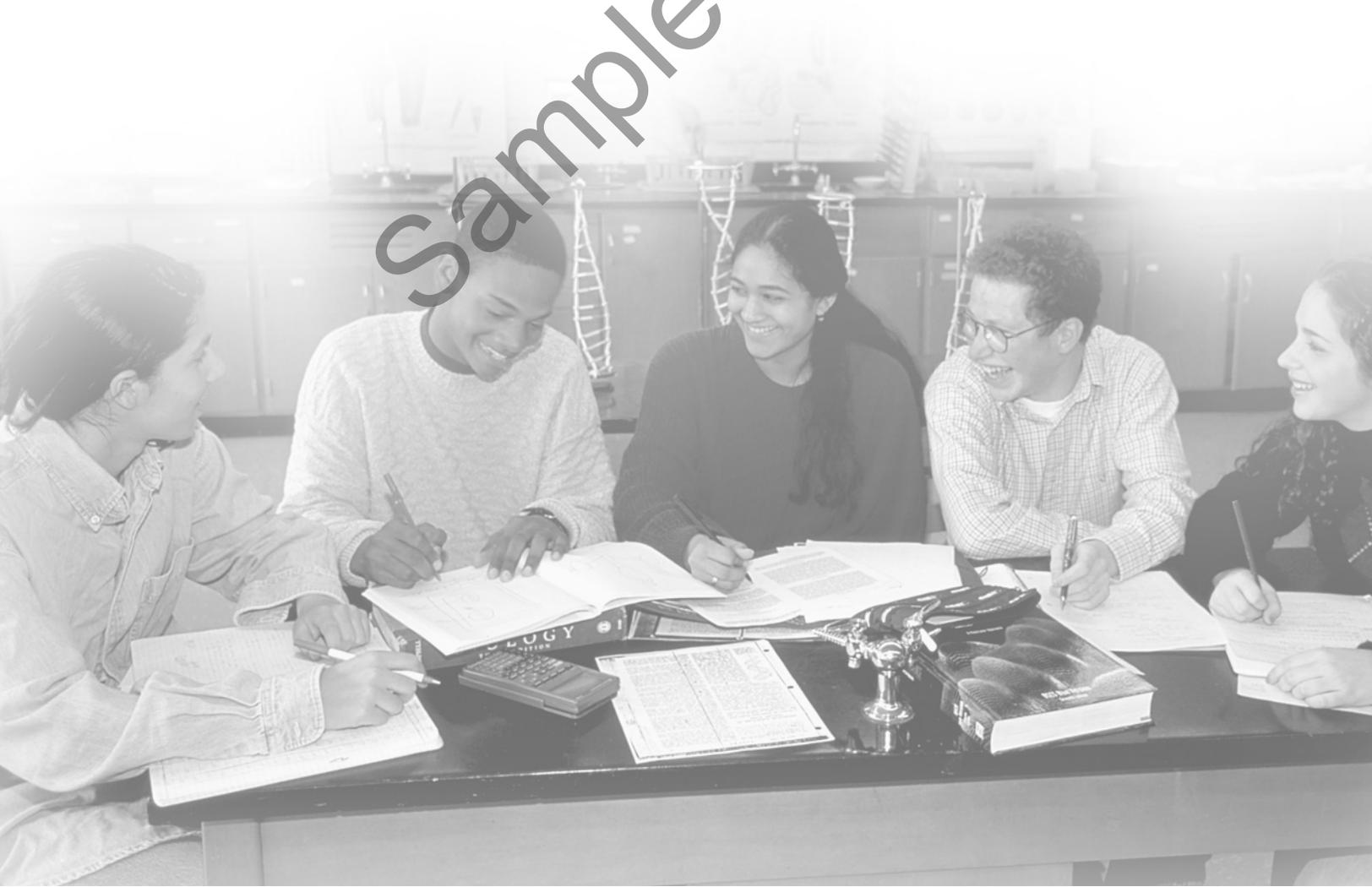
- Ask questions about concepts and facts that are confusing.
- Read and discuss with group members a piece of nonfiction text.

Strategies

Overview of the Strategies Component

English learners in the past were often misplaced in remedial and/or special education classes because their lack of English proficiency prevented them from demonstrating content knowledge and literacy skills. At this time, the prevailing thought was also that academic instruction was not possible until ELs had reached at least an intermediate level of fluency in English.

Today we know that we cannot wait until students develop English proficiency to teach them grade-level content information. They can and will learn, given appropriate instruction, support and assistance. We need to recognize that as students learn English, they must also develop strategies to critically analyze and effectively learn.



The Strategies component focuses on the cognitive and metacognitive strategies that learners use to make sense of new information and concepts. Examples of learning strategies include rereading, note-taking, organizing information, predicting, self-questioning, evaluating, monitoring, clarifying, and summarizing. Studies have shown that explicit teaching and modeling of these (and other) strategies helps students become more strategic in their thinking and learning. Teachers can further develop students' strategic thinking by planning and asking higher-order questions and requiring tasks that promote critical thinking. It is no longer acceptable to ask English learners a preponderance of low-level questions.

There are many ways teachers can provide scaffolding support that is gradually released as students begin to independently apply their new knowledge. Examples of instructional scaffolding include the appropriate use of graphic organizers, partner- and small-group instruction and practice, adapted texts, partially completed outlines, and texts with key concepts and vocabulary marked with a highlighter. Verbal scaffolding includes techniques such as think-alouds, paraphrasing, repetition, careful enunciation, and frequent review of contextualized vocabulary. We have often heard from teachers that the entire SIOP[®] Model is about scaffolding instruction for English learners; we agree.

The Strategies component includes the following features:

13. Ample opportunities provided for students to use learning strategies.
14. Scaffolding techniques consistently used, assisting and supporting student understanding (e.g., think-alouds).
15. A variety of questions or tasks that promote higher-order thinking skills (e.g., literal, analytical, and interpretive questions).



Canned Questions



COMPONENT: Strategies

(Adapted from Karen Mettler, Prescott Senior Elementary School, Modesto, CA)

Grade Levels: 2–12

Subject Areas: All

Grouping Configuration: Whole class

Approximate Time Involved: 20 minutes

Materials: Coffee can with hole cut in lid; question strips

Description:

Write (on strips of paper) a variety of questions related to the particular topic being studied. The questions should range from lower to higher levels of thinking. Ask students to demonstrate (according to Bloom's Taxonomy):

- Knowledge by defining, locating, underlining, labeling or identifying.
- Comprehension by describing, summarizing, explaining, or paraphrasing.
- Application by computing, building, or giving an example.
- Analysis by categorizing, classifying, comparing and contrasting.
- Synthesis by combining, creating, designing, or predicting.
- Evaluation by concluding, defining, justifying and prioritizing.

Place the question strips in a can. Group students as partners or in small groups (to lower anxiety and to scaffold). The teacher draws out the questions, one by one, and students work together to answer them. Occasionally the teacher may pull a question and based on its difficulty (i.e. the English proficiency required for response), select individual students to answer. When this is done, all students gain exposure to questions of varied cognitive levels, even though they are only responsible for answering the questions that are appropriate for their level of English proficiency.

Students may also (individually or in groups) submit questions to the Question Can. These can be drawn for other students to answer. Teachers can teach students how to ask higher order questions using QAR's: Question-Answer-Relationships (p. 79).



SIOP® Connection

Content Objective:

Students will be able to (SWBAT) . . .

- Respond to questions written at various cognitive levels on (a topic).

(continued)

**SIOP® Connection** *(continued)***Language Objectives:**

Students will be able to (SWBAT) . . .

- Display their knowledge of (topic) by using complete sentences when answering a question.
- Answer questions on increasingly sophisticated levels of cognition using the following prompts:

Knowledge: The definition of (topic) is _____.

Comprehension: (Topic) can be explained as _____.

Application: An example of (topic) is _____.

Analysis: (Topic) can be compared to _____.

Synthesis: If I create a diagram of (topic) I would include _____ in my diagram.

Evaluation: We can conclude that (topic) _____.

Sample pages

Interaction

Overview of the Interaction Component

One thing we know for certain about English learners is that they will not become proficient speakers of the language unless they have frequent opportunities to use it. While this seems obvious, it's surprising how few chances there are each day for ELs to speak English. English learners are likely to speak their native language before and after school, during breaks, recess, and lunch, if they have peers who speak their same native language. Teachers who monopolize the vast majority of classroom talk, as is common practice, compound the problem and ELs have even fewer opportunities to speak English.

Effective SIOP[®] teachers incorporate into their lesson plans multiple opportunities for their students to use English, in writing, in reading, and in interaction with the teacher



and other students. SIOP[®] teachers also provide time for students to process in English what they are hearing prior to answering questions or participating in discussion. Students occasionally work independently during SIOP[®] lessons, but more often they learn with partners and in small groups. The teacher purposely decreases the amount of teacher-talk by planning few lectures (and “mini” ones at that), and by turning the talk over to students with probes such as, “Tell me more about this;” “Why do you think so?” “Where did you get that idea?” “Will you explain your thinking to your partner?” When an English learner has difficulty understanding a direction or concept in English, the teacher encourages clarification in the student’s language, if possible, by another student, an instructional assistant, or by the teacher. These deliberate teaching practices maximize classroom and student exposure to and practice with English.

The Interaction component includes the following features:

16. Frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion between teacher and student and among students, which encourage elaborated responses about lesson concepts.
17. Grouping configurations support language and content objectives of the lesson.
18. Sufficient wait time for student responses consistently provided.
19. Ample opportunities for students to clarify key concepts in L1 as needed with aide, peer, or L1 text.

Sample pages



You Are There



COMPONENT: Interaction (and Practice/Application)

(Vogt, 2000)

Grade Levels: 4–12

Subject Levels: Social Studies, Math, Language Arts, Science

Grouping Configurations: Small groups, whole class

Materials: Resources (books, articles, websites) for research

Description:

This activity is based upon the classic television program *You Are There*, hosted by Edward R. Murrow, in which characters involved in actual historical events were interviewed about their involvement and participation in the event. The re-creations were historically accurate, and the historical figures came alive for viewers.

In preparation for *You Are There* in the classroom, groups of students conduct research on the event they will be portraying. Having completed their research, the students select a character that played a crucial role in the event and write interview questions and responses that an interviewer will use during the dramatic re-enactment. Students could interview Sacajawea, the Shoshone guide and interpreter who accompanied Lewis and Clark on their expedition, or interview the Wright brothers upon their arrival at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Both the interviewer and the interviewee are apprised of all questions and responses prior to the performance.

Another dimension can be added to this activity, especially if you are working with older high school students: audience members direct unrehearsed questions to the central character. Obviously, all students, including the interviewee, must have a thorough knowledge of the event for this to be a successful activity.

SIOP® Connection

Content Objectives:

Students will be able to (SWBAT) . . .

- Demonstrate their understanding of a person or historical event by creating interview questions and responses.
- Convey the essence of the person or historical event through an interview that is performed for peers.

Language Objectives:

Students will be able to (SWBAT) . . .

- Write interview questions.
- Create appropriate responses to the interview questions.