

## Scaffolding Instructions (Secondary)

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**I** knew I was going to fail when I didn't even understand the instructions on the exam.' So said one student after, indeed, failing an exam that she had studied faithfully for. Instructions on exams, worksheets, laboratory reports, etc., are more confusing and intimidating for our students than we might recognise, yet it's an area we virtually never address when preparing our students for evaluations.\* The difficulties lie in the words, phrases, terms and the structure of the sentences we use when we speak to our students day-to-day, because they are very different from the academic language and passive grammatical structure they will read in instructions on their exams.

**I**nstructions on exams, worksheets, laboratory reports, etc., are more confusing and intimidating for our students than we might recognise, and so it's something we rarely address when helping our students to prepare for any type of evaluation.\*

**E**xams are often frightening for our students and there is a lot of pressure – from themselves, from their parents, from their peers – to focus on marks and not necessarily to learn the material.

**Y**et we often forget that even if they have managed to learn the information, the instructions used on virtually any type of evaluation, is almost always very different from the words, phrases, terms and the structure of the sentences we use day-to-day.

**I**n our pursuit to help our students become effective learners, we need to address not just content, but the instructions that proceed that content: in exercise books, in laboratory reports, in essay prompts, in computer programming, in construction procedures, in exams, etc.. Many times the difference between passing a course is the knowledge (or lack thereof) of the language used in the instructions on assessments.

**T**his scaffolding activity breaks down challenging vocabulary and structure, and also helps to balance a diverse student population; those students who need to move to be able to assimilate information, to speak, to use interpersonal skills, to touch and manipulate information, will all have something that supports their learning style. The scaffold promotes collaboration, critical thinking, and inferencing, many other essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The example we give here is for a biology exam.\*\* Because of how familiar we are with the language, the instructions may look transparent at first; however, once we begin looking more closely, we'll admit that the words and phrases might impede our students from completing the task with a lot of confidence.\*\*\* You'll see how easy this scaffold is to adapt to your needs.

**Exam Instructions:**

Choose your answers to the questions and click 'Next' to see the next set of questions. You can skip questions if you like, and come back to them later with the yellow 'Go the First Skipped Question' button. When you have completed the practice exam, a green 'Submit' button will appear. Click it to see your results.

Question 3 is an open-response question.

BE SURE TO ANSWER AND LABEL ALL PARTS OF THE QUESTION.

- Show all your work (diagrams, tables, or computations) in your Practice Test Answer Document
- If you do the work in your head, explain in writing how you did the work. Write your answer to question 3 in the space provided on page 4 of your Practice Test Answer Document.

Good luck!

*\* Academic success 'is intricately linked to higher-order thinking processes developed by extensive modeling and scaffolding of classroom talk and accelerated by weaving direct teaching of its features while teaching content concepts.' (Zwiers, 2008).*

*\*\* In this case, we've chosen as an example, an online exam. While there is a plethora of examples of instructions on sit-down exams for secondary students that have challenging language, we also need to recognise the online lives our students have and help them to be successful in these venues as well.*

*\*\*\*Some difficulties students might have with these instructions:*

- *Lack of pronouns ('Click to see your results'...', 'Show all your work', etc.)*
- *The words 'click', 'set', 'skip', 'open-response', 'space', 'label', etc.*
- *Phrases 'in your head', 'come back to them', 'go to first skipped question', 'show all your work', etc.*

### **S**tep by **S**tep:

1. On a separate piece of paper, copy and paste the instructions to the exam your students are about to take.
2. Enlarge the sentences, put ample space between each line (separate them by words, not sentences. This will oblige your students to think more critically during the activity. You can use this [template](#).) and print them out. (See example below.)

Choose your answers to the questions

and click 'Next' to see the next set of

questions. You can skip questions if

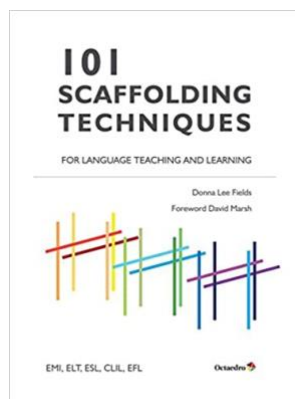
you like, and come back to them

later with the yellow 'Go to First

Skipped Question' button. When you

have completed the practice exam,

3. Cut up the lines and make sets for each group of students.
4. Give each group a set and begin by putting the first line of the original on the wall or the floor where everyone can see. Each group finds that line and places it on their desks.
5. As a chorus, you all verbalise the first line aloud.
6. Groups negotiate which line comes next, they hold the one they believe is appropriate over their heads, and you confirm (or not) their choice by putting the next line under the first.
7. The groups find that line, put it under the first and as a chorus, you all repeat the first two lines.
8. You continue this dynamic until all the instructions are placed down and you have all (as a chorus) repeated the instructions many times. (The students will have read and/or heard them many times and will begin to feel familiar with the language and structure in a way they probably did not before.)
9. Clarify any doubts students may have about the academic language/structure of the instructions.
10. *Formative evaluation*: Ask pairs of students to rewrite the instructions in their own words. They read these to their classmates and receive respectful comments on whether they have faithfully re-written the intentions of the instructions.
11. *Reflection*: Pairs join with another pair and spend 2-3 minutes discussing whether they would have understood the instructions without having participated in the scaffold, and whether this has helped them feel more confident (or not) about sitting for an exam in the future.



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video explanation of scaffold...



transcript of video explanation...

Hi, I'm Donna Fields and welcome to CLIL Scaffolding 15. It's a series of webinars designed to help give you support for using scaffolding in your lessons. Today we're going to use scaffolding technique #157.

One hundred and one more of these technique can be found in my book: *101 Scaffolding Techniques for Language Teaching and Learning* that has also been translated into Spanish.

More times than we may realise, our students' assessments are affected by their ability to read the instructions. No matter how much they may have studied, they are often thwarted by the unfamiliar language and structure used in exams. Here are examples of this phenomenon: 'I knew I was going to fail when I didn't even understand the instructions to the exam questions.'

The language we use every day in the classroom is more often than not very different from the written language we use or what is found in instructions given on exams, in lab reports, on assignments and so on.

We need to help our students become familiar with this language. So how do we help them?

It's easy.

Let's take an example from a Secondary History exam. This is what students might see before they even begin reading the actual question on the exam.

Let's take the instructions, enlarge them so that there is part of sentence on each line, cut them up, divide the slips of paper between pairs or groups of students, put the first one on the board to help start them off, and then all the students have to read their slips and figure out which comes next. Each time they put one on the board, they read what's already been put up before. By the time they've finished putting up all the instructions, they've read them many times. You can question them on certain words to make sure they've understood everything.

You use this same dynamic for any Primary exam. Again, it may seem simple to you, but these instructions take time for students whether their home language is different than the classroom language or not.

And that's it! Another simple scaffolding technique that I hope you can use in your classes. And you've helped your students to focus on important words and structures so that they are more comfortable taking an exam.

So all you SUPER TEACHERS out there, I look forward to seeing you next time and have fun in your classes! Bye!

You can find me at:

<https://scaffoldingmagic.com/>