

Building Background - Benefits of Using Sentence Frames to Build Background Knowledge

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Even as native English speakers we sometimes struggle with just the right word to explain, describe, clarify, or elucidate what we want to convey. We always understand more than we can speak. One of the best ways to engage English language learners (ELL) in actively acquiring new material is to connect their background knowledge to the new topic. So, let's give them some sentence frames to help them use language.

We will be most successful if we remember to always start with the concept or theme.

#1 When beginning a new topic, let pairs pretest one another. Write this sentence frame on a board, overhead, or PowerPoint, or make your own blackline master with the sentence frame repeated four to six times on a page so you can cut them into strips to hand out to the pairs.

A: "Do you know anything about (topic)?"

B: "I'm not sure, but I do know _____."

or "I think it could be _____ because I learned _____."

After students copy the sentence frame, or use the handy strips, erase the word 'topic' in the first sentence. Write in the topic for today. It might be a theme, or a characteristic, or an emotion.

- Read the sentence frame aloud to the students.
- Read it again, and this time the students should repeat after you.
- Give them sixty seconds (yes, really time it, using the entire sixty seconds) to look at the word and think about everything they know about it. No talking. No writing. Just thinking.
- Next, let students use another 60 seconds (yep, time it again) to write words and phrases to capture their thoughts about the topic.
- Finally it is time to talk.

This is time well-spent. Your lesson will be stronger and more relevant. Your students will be engaged. You can continue to spiral the content, connecting it to what they already know or previously learned. The ELs will build confidence as they are encouraged to think, write, and talk about what they already know.

#2 Plan more opportunities for student interaction. Here's another sentence starter than can be used with individuals, then shared in small groups.

This new theme of _____ reminds me of a time in my life when _____.

#3 Make sentence frames with the word 'because' to have students explain connections between previous learning and the new topic.

"I think the next topic will be _____ because our last lesson was _____."

This kind of sentence frame encourages prediction according to prior learning. This is a good time to show the students how much they have learned and how it all links together.

#4 After reading a story, a sentence frame can be used to let students speak with a partner. You can expand this speaking activity to include a second partner, like elbow-partners and across-the-aisle partners. Provide a sentence frame:

For example, "I think _____ is a hero, because _____."

#5 Ask students to make comparisons to concrete objects in linguistic ways.

Hand out objects to students and give them some time to think and write again, before speaking.

Try this sentence frame with a variety of objects:

I am like this _____ (Snickers bar), because I am _____ (nutty).

I am like this _____ (Matchbox Ferrari), because I am _____ (small and fast).

I am like this _____ (red pencil) because I am _____ (my face is red because I have to talk aloud).

The objects you use can be almost anything!

Now that your imagination is gearing up, make up some sentence frames to use tomorrow.

- Think about how you would want the smartest student in the school to speak.
- Then use your target vocabulary and academic language to make a sentence frame.
- Encourage your ELLs to speak in complete sentences in all conversations in the classroom. This will increase their academic vocabulary, which maximizes learning, and builds confidence.
- Kids like to feel smart!

Linda Evans offers tips for mainstream teachers. Get your FREE copy of "They Keep Calling Me 'Miss'...Tips for Bridging Cultures" by visiting.

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