
Interactive Notebooks and English Language Learners

How to Scaffold Content for Academic Success

Marcia Carter, Anita Hernandez,
and Jeannine Richison

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Introducing the Interactive Notebook



We know you. You teach mainstream classes in core content areas such as English or math or perhaps teach elective classes, and you know exactly where you want your students to be on Friday. You have a worry, though—you have students in class whose home language is not English. The fact that your English learners differ from one another in various ways adds another layer of complexity to the task. One of the most obvious ways that they differ is that they probably do not all speak the same heritage language in their homes. Other dissimilarities include different levels of oral English proficiency, different literacy abilities in both their heritage language and English, and different cultural backgrounds (NCTE Position Paper 2006). The following student descriptions may be representative of some students in your classes right now:

1. New to class, in fact, relatively new to school, having only attended the second semester of eighth grade at the middle school, Mei Ling knows no one. She enters the room alone, carrying a new binder. She gives you her student schedule, and you welcome her and ask her to take a seat. She ducks her head as she smiles and heads for the farthest seat away from the front of the classroom. No one talks to her. All around her everyone else is talking or scooting into seats or unzipping book bags or making some other getting-settled noise.
2. Jorge is in his third year in the United States and has been transferred to your class because his guidance counselor yesterday discovered he had been misplaced in a senior English class. It is the beginning of class,

and you have already started taking roll as your students read the day's assigned warm-up on the board. Jorge swaggers up to you and thrusts his schedule into your hand. In fact, his focus is more on the students in your room than on you. You smile and welcome him, but he acts as though you aren't there. The classroom is quiet, and you notice all eyes follow Jorge as he slowly walks to the remaining empty seat. He carries a binder but no books.

3. Abdi is from Somalia, and as he enters class, he looks confused. His counselor has told you about him. Although listed in your class for a week, today is the first day he has attended. "Before you start thinking he doesn't belong, keep an open mind about his capability. He's really smart," the counselor told you. "He just needs to become acclimated. He completed a year in the Newcomer class, and his parents feel he is ready for more academics than he was getting in the ESL class."

Not one of these new students speaks in class today. It isn't until the end of class when you are reading your students' written responses that you realize why Mei Ling seems shy, Jorge acts disaffected, and Abdi looks confused. Though you are already aware of Abdi's intermediate level language status, Mei's writing confirms your initial observation that she has only recently advanced as an intermediate level English language learner. Jorge has advanced speaking skills, but his reading and writing are still at the intermediate level of English language proficiency. He looks more advanced than he is. With this realization comes the sinking feeling that, even though you want to differentiate learning for your students, these three new students are going to require more scaffolding with their learning than you are used to providing. The types of scaffolding needed will vary even among these three students. They may only understand about half of the concepts you are expected to deliver unless you can figure out a way to make the concepts more comprehensible. Your dilemma is what to do on all the Mondays that will help English learners get to all the Fridays in the curriculum.

In a pedagogical sense, you have several more concerns: How can you accelerate your students' acquisition of English to enable them to become fluent in the same way that is already built into ESL programs and transition classes (such as sheltered core classes)? How can you scaffold the learning of content so that your English learners can access the information you are teaching? Clearly, many English learners in secondary school need additional time, which will require that you "extend their time for obtaining language support while giving them a jump-start on the content" (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 2008, 13).

This book offers support for English learners through the systematic use of an Interactive Notebook. Familiarity with academic language is a key component to academic success for all students, and the Interactive Notebook can be used to scaffold content to move English language learners (ELLs) to the stage where they are academic language learners (ALLs). Our ideas about how the Interactive Notebook can serve *all* the students in your classroom result from understanding how the fundamentals of learning to use academic English proceed for any typical learner. We focus on how to serve the ELL population in particular so that you can be effective in serving any learner.

We provide background on the theory behind scaffolded lessons for English learners and help you carefully plan and prepare to work with students who, using a language that is not natively their own, are also learning how to learn. The Interactive Notebook also provides benefits in this test-laden era.

The Interactive Notebook is a useful teaching tool that will encourage your English learners to move forward along with their peers (and, by the way, will also benefit the academic language learners). Perhaps you already use a form of note-taking journal such as a two-sided journal or dialogue journal. If so, you may wish to consider some of our suggested lessons in literacy that will add to your repertoire of strategies to serve your English learners better. Although these strategies are designed for the Interactive Notebook, they can be used or adapted for other purposes as well.

What Is an Interactive Notebook?

If the dictionary were to feature a definition of the Interactive Notebook, it might look like this:

Interactive notebook. (in'ter-ak'-tiv nōt-bük) *n.* 1. A collection of notes taken from reading, listening, discussion, and viewing, including corresponding responses, either in graphic or written form. First introduced in Addison-Wesley's *History Alive!* 2. Daily journal-type recording of student-written class notes from reading, lecture, and discussions, and the reflective and metacognitive responses students make to their own note taking.

The Interactive Notebook is a scaffolding tool that makes learning tasks more efficient. Simply stated, the Interactive Notebook (IN) is a self-created,

teacher-directed collection of notes taken for the purpose of commentary, comparison, illustration, review, and response and compiled in an organized spiral notebook (or binder section) that students use for their own reference and study. The IN facilitates original learning and interaction with the text in written, oral, and illustrative form. Literally, English learners interact with their own learning in a variety of ways that results in stronger retention of knowledge. This is a recursive, continual process. There is no doubt that the combination of “linguistic and nonlinguistic methods of learning help students recall and think about information” (Hill and Flynn 2006, 36).

That’s not all, however. This teacher-directed, user-created text also is a tool to enhance student learning through active engagement. Students take notes on the right side of the notebook and respond to those notes on the left side (see Figure 1.1). Responses might take the form of summaries of class notes or reflection on the points the teacher made when instructing or discussing points, or they may be reactions to the ideas in the information presented. These responses may take many different forms.

The Interactive Notebook is a means of communication between the teacher and the students and the teacher and the parents/guardians. Additionally, the Interactive Notebook provides a way for students to work with their parents academically. Those of us in the classroom know that the support of family is a strong indicator for future success. When we fail to include parents as partners in our planning for their students, we lose a vital link toward progress. Often the parents of English learners entrust their child’s future to the teacher, and in their eyes it is a measure of their respect that they feel that their child’s teacher is the only person necessary to deliver education. For example, one of us (Marcia Carter) has had parents tell her she is the expert, that they trust her to tell them what is best. They feel reticent to help by making comments in the notebook. However, parents are uniquely qualified to support the language and academic goals of their children even if they are themselves not as literate as they would like their children to be.

The Interactive Notebook is an effective assessment tool to determine the level or quality of student learning, and English learners should be encouraged to monitor their own learning, displaying their thinking in the process of commenting and responding on the left-hand side to the information they recorded on the right-hand side. The Interactive Notebook is *an authentic assessment tool*. Students write, graph, draw, respond, observe, and then use all the material for discussion, review, group decision making, and individual “time trials” when they are using the notebook as a practice for tasks. This makes the notebook sheer gold for assessment purposes. How many times have you wished

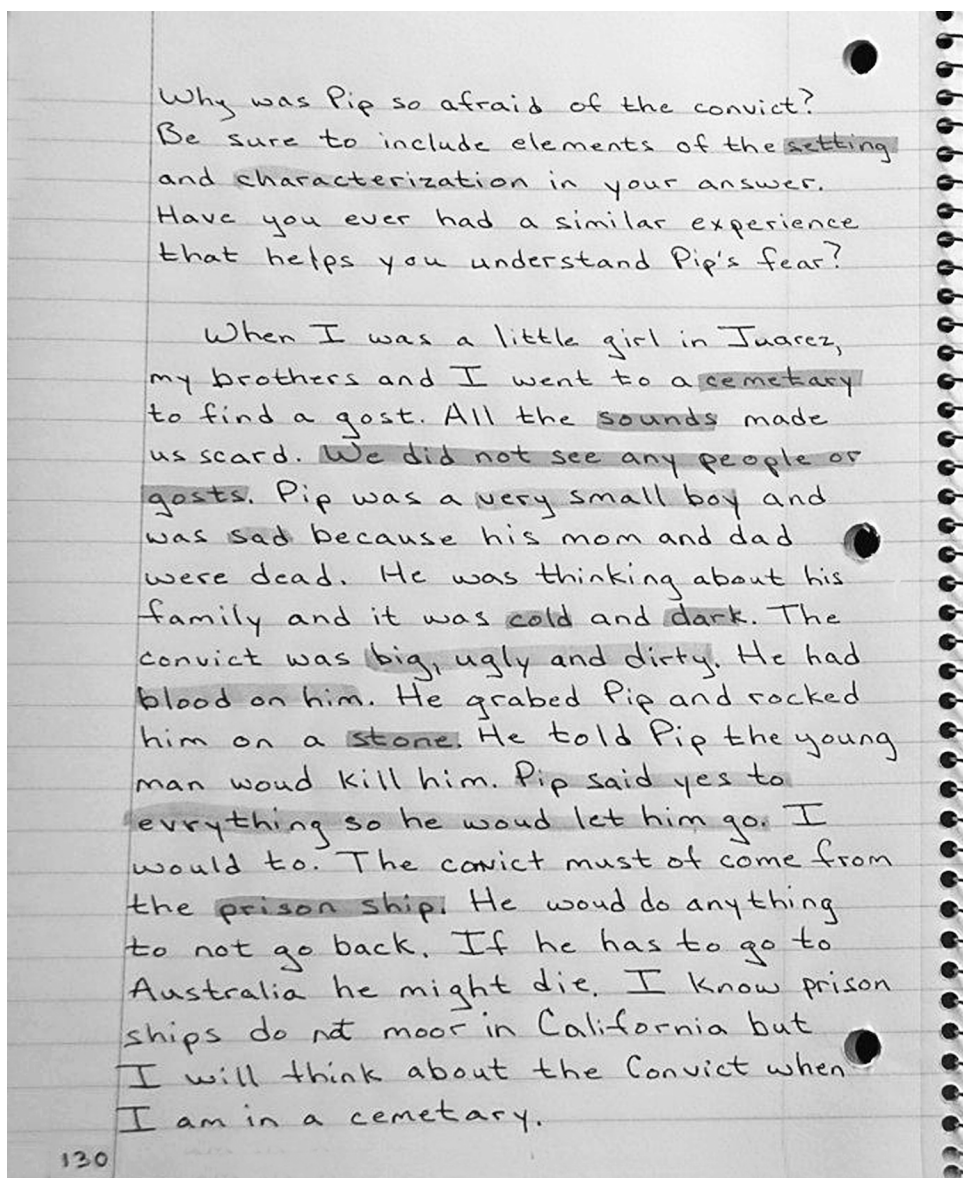
you knew how students came to a conclusion or how they arrived at an answer or even what connections students were making? With the IN, there is no mystery because all of their work is displayed.

The use of color is an effective tool to enhance student acquisition of language and understanding of content throughout this process. Students highlight, connect, draw, or map their interactions with the text and classmates. All this “evidence” of student language and content acquisition helps us determine the next steps in planning for mastery. The IN is an ongoing, authentic assessment that enables us to adjust our own teaching, redesign our delivery of information, or pinpoint specific areas for focus in our students’ acquisition of skills.

The Interactive Notebook is a text that is individually designed (thus, each is unique) but collaboratively created so that all share in background information. Teachers and students work together to create their individual notebooks. The instructor gives general design directions, but student responses are personally conceived and created through discussion and reflection on the discussions. INs also are a means for developing and keeping a record of background information. As teachers we may not require students to “color inside the lines,” but we do foster the thinking that encourages learners to make their own connections to prior knowledge. In addition, students share their discoveries with each other so that all can profit, which is especially important for English language learners. As they become better informed readers, they can tap into the value of personal background knowledge gained through their experiences with another culture.

The Interactive Notebook is constructed as directed by the teacher but is shared as the text in group discussions. For example, one of the first tasks we ask students to do in creating their IN as a text is to number the pages. During class discussion of the lessons presented or reviewed, students and teachers alike will be referring to specific pages where they have been directed to record the information that has been presented and summarized. The Interactive Notebook serves as the archive to which they refer when they support their work. Numbering the pages in the notebook facilitates that usage, as do the table of contents pages they create as they use their notebooks. In all academic classes, students are expected first to be ready to learn by having all materials at hand, and second, to support their conclusions, whether those conclusions are about a novel, a historical event, or an algebraic equation. When we use Interactive Notebooks in class, we are simply expecting our English learners to perform as all academics do when they refer to information sources that underlie their responses, assumptions, and conclusions. Most students, including English learners, do not want to venture a thought in active dialogue unless they

Sample Pages from an Interactive Notebook



Target: I will understand why
Pip was so afraid of the convict by learning about prison ship and examining the setting of GE.

Emmy Camacho
Per. 3 2-19-08

GREAT EXPECTATIONS CH. 1

Why were people
who stole bread
punished the same
as murderers?

Where did they get
the ships?
thief → thievery

Where did they get
money?

How did they
hear from other
prisoners?

Hardtack?

bribe ✓	19 th century ✓	Australia ✓	transported ✓
14 pounds ✓	hardtack ✓	contagious ✓	50% ✓
thievery ✓	leg shackles ✓	scurvy ✓	hulks ✓

The Prison Transportation System

In England during the first half of the 19th century, prisoners who had been convicted of all degrees of crimes from petty thievery to murder were housed in prison ships called hulks. These ships were moored on the river until they were full. Once full, some ships set sail for Australia where the British maintained two large prison colonies.

Prisoners on the ships often performed hard labor on the shore during the daytime. They wore leg shackles made of iron—one if they had money to bribe the prison guards, two if they did not. These iron shackles and the chains that connected them weighed approximately 14 pounds.

Prisoners would do whatever they could to avoid being transported to Australia because reports reached them that 50% of the prisoners died before reaching Australia. Conditions were crowded; prisoners were only fed bits of bread or hardtack and water each day, and eventually the fresh water ran out because of the long voyage. Prisoners died of hunger, scurvy, dysentery, and very contagious diseases like typhoid.

Summary

Prisoners must have really wanted to escape or else they might die.

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know they are “right,” however they define *right*. The Interactive Notebook enables students to explore their own thinking, to create connections with other text sources, and to be active learners. In using the IN, students have a tool that makes their work “safe to discover, to learn and not to have to be certain” (Wellman and Lipton 2004, 12).

The Interactive Notebook is one of the best tools for assisting in activating prior knowledge to acquire background information. Chief among the needs of English learners is the need for a common background on which they can build their academic lives. “Our ability to process and store information dictates whether our experiences parlay into background knowledge” (Marzano 2004, 4). While we cannot give our students all the references they will need to make connections to new learning, we can help them develop the tools to compare what they know natively with what they are learning. “Making explicit connections between concepts serves as a form of reinforcement and review” (Reiss 2005, 88). Students will construct their own word banks, important reference sources, and website lists. They will create charts and diagrams so that when new information is presented or read, they can contrast and add to their knowledge banks and refer to those charts and diagrams as needed in their continued instruction. They can log their discoveries and write instructions as given so that they can continue with their work in other venues. Most of all, we can help them organize their learning so that the Interactive Notebook itself becomes the compendium of background information and tools they will use tomorrow, next week, and in history or science or any class, anytime.

Summary

We have briefly introduced some of the uses and characteristics of the Interactive Notebook. For example, we’ve already touched on these details:

- Students use a spiral notebook or a section in their binders.
- The first assignment in creating an IN is to number the pages for referencing information in class and for tests.
- Students create a table of contents as they construct their notebook pages.
- The right-hand pages of the notebook are reserved for information gathered through note taking and/or from handouts.
- The left-hand pages of the notebook are reserved for student processing responses or reflection on the information posted on the right side.

- The teacher directs and monitors the creation of the pages, and there is regularly scheduled parent commentary on the notebooks.
- The IN is a text that is to be used in class for instruction and as a source of information for the students to use in discussions and as the basis for their continued work.
- The IN gives English learners and, for that matter, all academic language learners the support they need to perform in the same way all academics perform—as informed and participatory learners.
- The use of INs encourages English language learners to monitor their own learning; learning in a second language can seem like a slow process, especially when there is so much content being covered in middle and high school.
- INs provide a venue for all students to develop the same background knowledge about a topic.

In short, the Interactive Notebook supports active learning using the texts that the students themselves create as they are informed by their teachers, their peers, and their own thinking.

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