

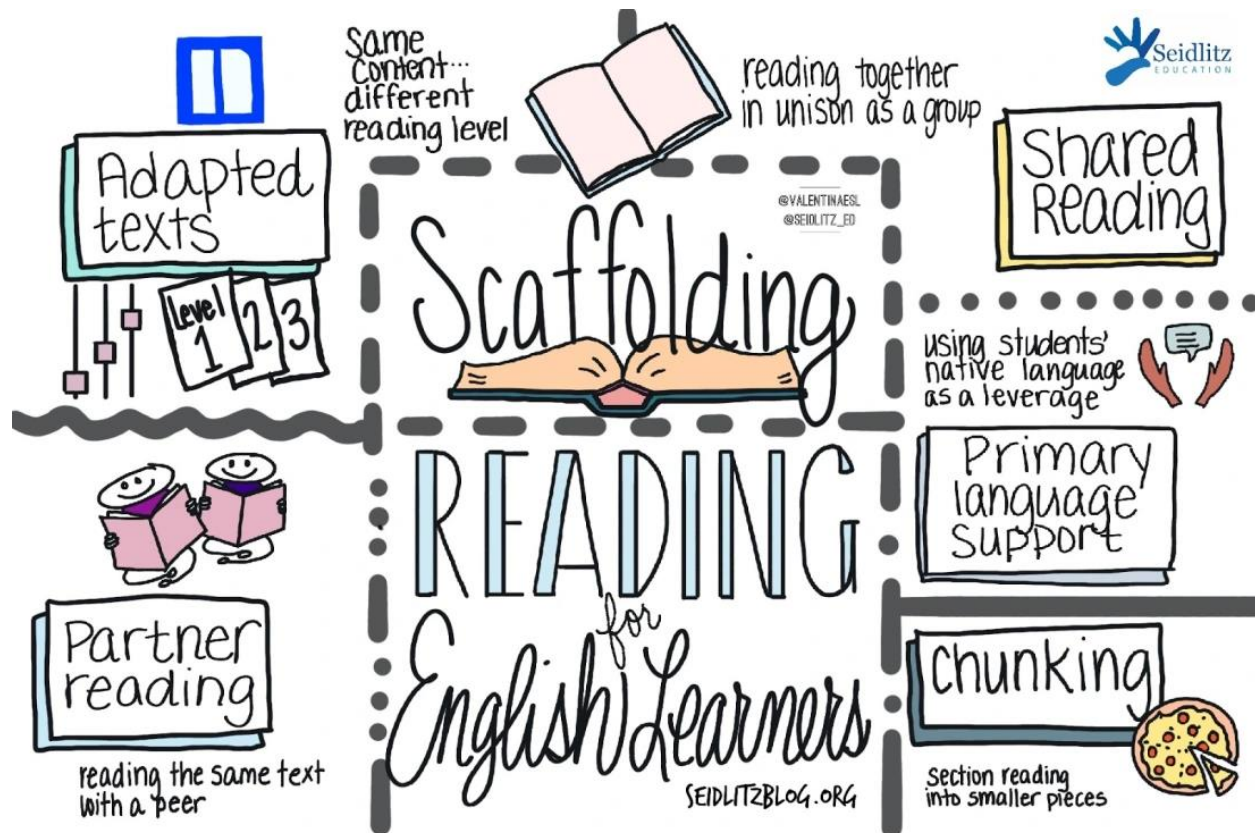


## **An Instructive Document for Teaching Assistants and Fellows to Support Students with Lack of English Language Proficiency**

Students at Ashoka University typically have to read academic texts, participate in classroom discussions, make presentations and write various assignments including academic papers, response papers, book and film reviews, op-eds and participate in classes, discussion sessions and office hours throughout the semester. Some students lack English language proficiency and require support and assistance in their academic endeavours. This document lists some concrete measures that can be taken by a TA/TF in order to make a course more accessible and meaningful - **in classrooms, discussion sessions and office hours** - for students who need English language support.

### **How to identify students who need ELT support?**

- In the case of speaking, when the student does not participate and is mostly a passive listener, or speaks but is highly diffident, this could be because of a problem with English. *Intelligible but grammatically incorrect sentences* and *unintelligible and grammatically incorrect sentences* will clearly hint that the student needs support with language.
- In writing, instances of missing articles (a, and, the), incomplete sentences, incorrect use of punctuation marks, incorrect or non-existent verb forms and use of inappropriate synonyms (often with the help of a thesaurus but without understanding the contextual meaning) will tell the TA/TF that the student is struggling to express themselves in English.



(<https://seidlitzblog.org/2019/12/18/teaching-techniques-to-scaffold-reading-for-english-learners/>)

### How to help students who need ELT support?

With regard to ELT students, the primary point that needs to be taken into serious consideration is varying levels of comprehension owing to a lack of proficiency in the language of instruction. To ensure that the readings assigned as part of the course are clearly understood, with this clarity translating into well written assignments, the following strategies can be useful:

- Modifying course material and learning outcomes
- The learning outcomes for ELT students can be different from the rest of their peers. Keeping in mind the language proficiency of the individual student, they can be prescribed a different set of course materials. We do not recommend ‘simplifying’ a text but suggesting alternative texts or resources which the students might find more accessible. For example, to discuss the anthropocentric nature of climate change, essays that explain

the idea through case studies can be given, or to discuss gender relations in the Indian family, essays from popular magazines can be included. Learning outcomes could also be re-defined for the students. The course could expect them to acquaint themselves with the disciplinary vocabulary and concepts rather than becoming adept at using them in papers, for example.

- Certain dense theoretical readings can be supplemented with some sections from introductory readers. For instance, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide* or the Cambridge/Routledge Introduction series, such as *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Derrida*. This helps clarify certain concepts which could be difficult to follow from the assigned readings in class.
- Modifying prompts for students- Assessment prompts must be modified for students who need ELT support. This can mean breaking down the prompt into multiple parts in a language that the student can access. This might also mean changing the prompt altogether for the student. For example, the student can be asked to reflect on one text and be given a set of guiding questions/prompting statements rather than a set of readings without any directions to interpret it. Essentially, the language of the prompt can be modified for the benefit of the student.
- Reading-Writing Practices
  - The classes can be followed up by giving a short summary of the main points covered in the class which helps break down complex and dense readings in an accessible manner. This can be done, for instance, by picking up important excerpts from the text and having a discussion around the central conceptual framework and examples used. The GIST (Generating Interactions between Schemata and Texts) strategy of summarisation can be used. If the student is meeting the TA/TF regularly, the latter can adopt the KWL (Know - Want to know - Learned) strategy as well, to maximise the student's comprehension.
  - This reading exercise which is geared towards learning how to critically examine the claims made by the chosen text can be supplemented with short writing exercises where the students can work in groups to summarise/paraphrase certain selected portions from the text. This will help make sure that the students leave the session with a written

document to go back to when they revise the assigned reading. Writing tasks can be incorporated as an important component of classroom pedagogy itself. Students can be given 3-5 minutes to write by giving them opening sentences or guiding questions or pointers.

- All readings which are positioned in a context alien to the student's own location need to be scaffolded with certain specific and concrete examples which the student can find relatable. Students understand better when examples are drawn from cultures and traditions familiar to them. For example, with ELT students in India, Hollywood references or Harry Potter references usually do not work. This understanding can go a long way in simplifying concepts along with underlining not merely how these concepts are grounded in specific locations but also understanding what changes when concepts travel across contexts.
- The Discussion Sessions need to focus on returning to the prescribed readings assigned as part of the course and not adding separate readings. Adding different readings for these sessions further burdens the student's already packed schedule.
- If the student is struggling to respond in English, they can be encouraged to speak in their native language during office hours. In case this is happening in a class, the professor/TA/TF/any other student can rephrase it in simpler English. Similarly, colloquial or advanced vocabulary may not work with them. Example: the student may not understand you when you say "I don't speak with conviction – I am merely spitballing some ideas". Instead, you may say, "I am not sure – I am just sharing a few ideas." There is a better chance that the student will understand this sentence perfectly well.
- Using multiple modalities- Using videos, podcasts, films, photos, diagrams and so on will definitely help the learner. For recorded lectures, subtitles should be provided. If subtitles are not adequate or helpful, a translated version can be arranged for the student. If written translation is not possible, all the main points can be translated orally.

- Assessment/Assignment Submissions

Formative Assessment, or assessment that happens at all stages of learning rather than at the end of the term can help students needing English Language support. The aims and objectives of assessment will need to be re-thought and re-defined for ELT students. Their assessment can evaluate the progression in thought about concepts, theories, and arguments while not evaluating the English language per se. Some strategies can be-

- Modifying deliverables- The course can ask ELT students to make PPTs, flowcharts, mind maps or write in bullet points rather than a 3000 words paper, for example. If the student struggles especially with writing, an oral exam can be conducted. They can also be asked to make videos if they are adept at it or be asked to submit a reflective piece rather than an academic one with specific language demands. Students can also be given alternate deadlines to submit their work.
- Developing a rubric- When modifying prompts and deliverables, assessment rubrics must be developed and shared with the students. These rubrics will ensure that the students and the teaching faculty are on the same page in terms of what is expected from the students and in which formats.
- CWC support- If the student has been recommended for regular (weekly/monthly) sessions with the ELT team at CWC then the concerned tutor can also keep track of the student's progress and contribute to assessment.
- Feedback giving is to be done constructively, with some concrete examples on how to remedy the said problem. For instance, in case of a badly phrased sentence, the solution is not to merely point out the problem but also provide some case examples for how the sentence could have been written.

## **How can the CWC help you?**

- When you identify a student who needs ELT support, you can refer them to the CWC for regular help. The ELT team at the centre provides sustained support to students who need ELT support through one-on-one appointments. We encourage you to get in touch with us with the details of the student and the course outline and we can together devise a plan that is both realistic and meaningful for the student.
- You can also meet us and discuss teaching-learning strategies to help students who need English language support. Please feel free to write to us at [cwc@ashoka.edu.in](mailto:cwc@ashoka.edu.in) to set up a meeting.