

## Content, Language, and Literacy Learning for Secondary Newcomers



### Who Are Our Newcomers?

Newcomer multilingual learners constitute a highly diverse group of students across a range of cultural and linguistic identities, each with unique lived experiences. While defining characteristics vary by state and local policies, the U.S. Department of Education regularly classifies newcomers as individuals who are foreign-born and have arrived in the country within the previous three years (Office of English Language Acquisition [OELA], 2023).

While the makeup of this population of learners has changed and evolved over time, newcomer populations are known for fluctuating in ways that mirror global, social, political, and environmental happenings. Historically, multilingual newcomers have largely settled in metropolitan areas; however, recent trends indicate that more newcomers are settling in suburban and rural locations than ever before (Sugarman, 2023; Ward & Batalova, 2023).

Multilingual newcomers serve as a powerful force, influencing our nation's social, cultural, and economic systems. In turn, U.S. schools play a vital role in helping newcomers and their families develop a sense of learning and belonging and setting them up for success as members of their new communities.

## Why Focus on Literacy Development With Secondary Newcomers?

At the secondary level, multilingual newcomers and the educators that serve them experience a distinctive set of circumstances, such as language- and text-heavy curricula, paired with expectations to develop deeper content-area expertise. Together, this fuels a sense of urgency to adequately equip older students who are new to U.S. schools with the knowledge and credentials necessary to graduate.

We know that language, literacy, and content learning are intrinsically intertwined. We also understand that authentic engagement in classroom discourse and activities is necessary for student learning and growth (WIDA, 2020). It therefore becomes essential for secondary newcomers to have opportunities to read, write, listen, and speak through grade-appropriate, age-appropriate literacy experiences (WIDA, 2025).

Our newcomers bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural resources to the classroom, and it's critical to see these resources as useful for learning. With an asset-based mindset, we recognize that newcomers are capable of grade-level thinking and grade-level engagement in content areas.

Hali is a University of Wisconsin student and a WIDA Dassler intern. She came to the United States from Somalia with her family and has insights about her newcomer experience to share with educators.

[Listen to Hali](#) as she shares her story as a newcomer and the impact that her English teacher, Sarah, had on her.



Hali

## A Sample Unit Overview: Biodiversity at Risk

This unit focuses on developing students' understanding of the interdependence of various elements of an ecosystem. The goal is for all students to be able to explain how an ecosystem is impacted by the introduction of an invasive species. In the classroom examples, you'll see a focus on the Australian ecosystem and rabbits as the invasive species. As you read this focus bulletin, refer back to this overview to help contextualize the ideas and examples from the classroom.

## Biodiversity at Risk: Consequences for Ecosystem Imbalance

**Grade Level:** 7

**Content Area:** Biology

**Content Standard:** Recognize the consequences of the losses of biodiversity due to catastrophic events, climate changes, human activity, and the introduction of invasive, non-native species.

### WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards

Standard 1: Language for Social and Instructional Purposes

Standard 4: Language for Science

**Final Assessment Description:** Write an explanation of how the introduction of an invasive species impacts the ecosystem.

**Key Language Use:** Explain

### Language Expectation, Function, and Features

<b>Language Expectation</b>	Multilingual learners construct scientific explanations that ...
<b>Language Function</b>	... develop reasoning to show relationships among variables in an ecosystem through ...
<b>Sample Language Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Connectors to link clauses and combine ideas into logical relationships (<i>so, because</i>)</li><li>• A variety of clause types to express causality (<i>The rabbits overeat the vegetation, so native species do not have enough food.</i>)</li></ul>

## Amplifying Content Texts

Effective planning for newcomers involves identifying content goals and then carefully considering what instruction and supports students will need to meaningfully engage with the content goals. One challenging aspect of planning instruction for newcomers is working with dense academic texts. Texts that are common in secondary settings, such as science textbooks, are often inaccessible to many newcomers in their original format. It can be tempting to oversimplify texts or provide below-grade-level alternatives, but doing so can strip away the rigor of the content and prevent students from having meaningful access to the curriculum. Rather than simplifying, we can amplify texts to promote rigorous content learning while making the text more accessible.

# Eight Strategies to Amplify Text

We can amplify content-area texts for students at the beginning stages of English proficiency by providing additional support to scaffold comprehension.

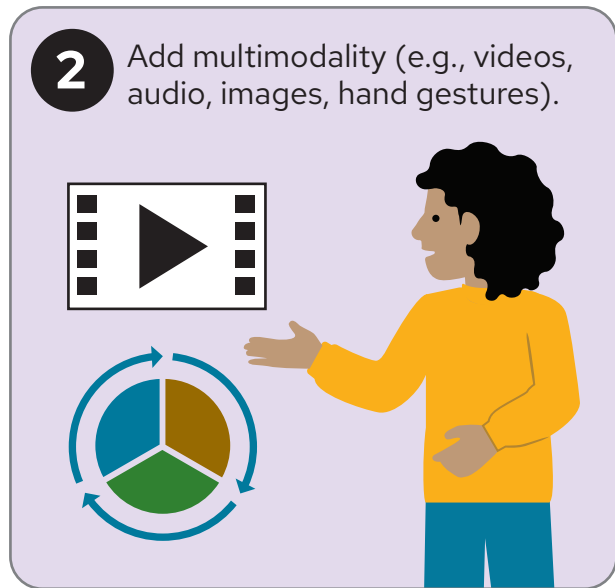
When selecting texts, remember to...

- Pick a grade-level text.
- Ensure the text builds or reinforces content learning.
- Use shorter, more manageable chunks of text.

**1** Bridge hands-on learning experiences to the text.



**2** Add multimodality (e.g., videos, audio, images, hand gestures).



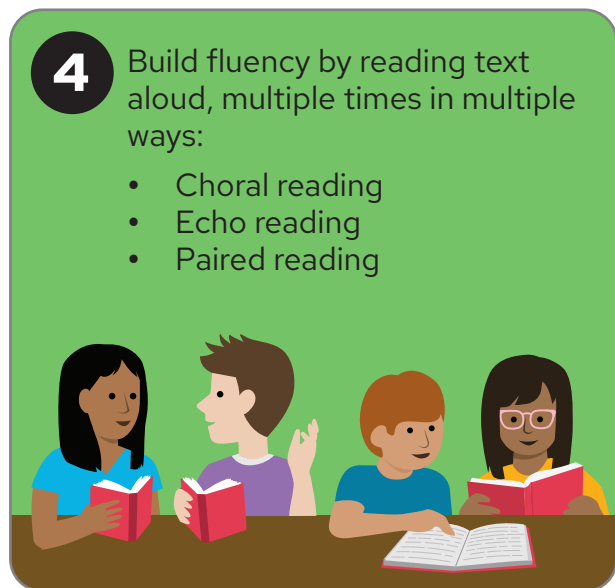
**3** Support understanding of content texts by exploring the text's organizational structure.



Before we read, let's look at how historians organize their writing when they write about important events.

**4** Build fluency by reading text aloud, multiple times in multiple ways:

- Choral reading
- Echo reading
- Paired reading



**5** Identify and break down content-heavy sentences.

On the side covered in native vegetation, rain-producing clouds often develop, while the farmland side has clearer skies and less rain.

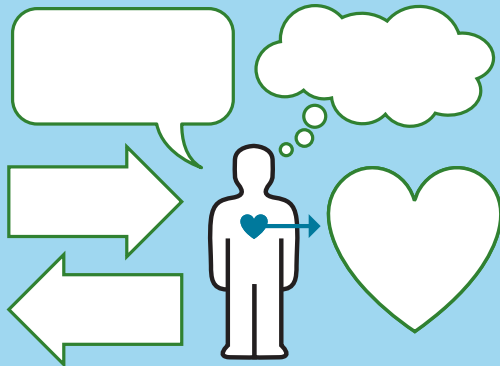
- There is land with two sides.
- The native vegetation side often has rain-producing clouds.
- The farmland side has clearer skies and less rain.

**6** Prompt strategic reading by asking questions such as . . .

- How does this information connect to what you already know?
- What can you do if you don't understand something you read?



**7** Use graphic organizers to work toward content objectives.



**8** Provide opportunities for text-based discussion in English and/or home language(s).



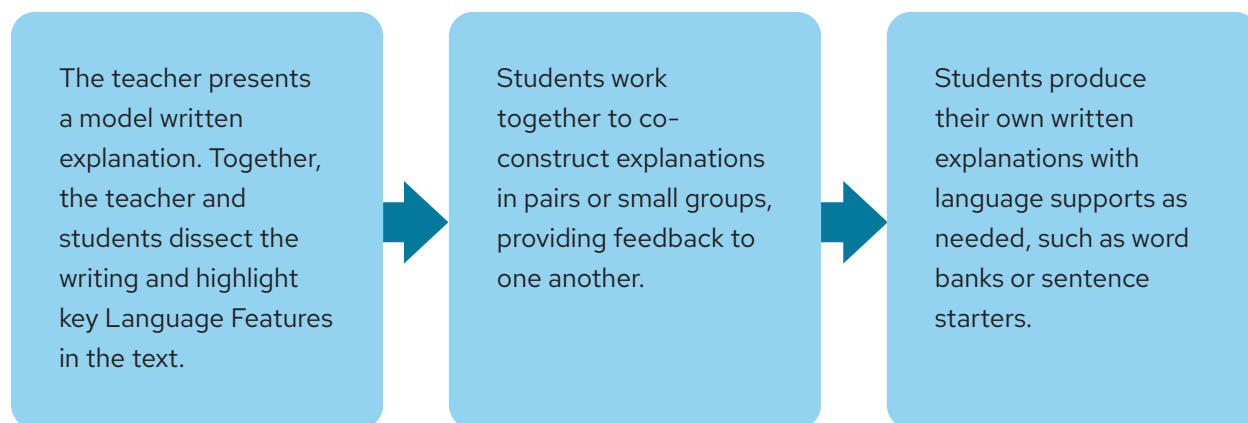
By thoughtfully selecting and adding support to texts, educators can create meaningful learning experiences that enable multilingual learners at any level of English proficiency to access grade-level texts and grade-level content. Within the context of rigorous content learning, these strategies empower students to build comprehension, deepen understanding, and develop language skills.

# Deepening Engagement and Eliciting Written Language

During delivery and instruction of academic content, our secondary multilingual newcomers benefit greatly from highly structured teaching protocols. Key features of structured protocols include familiar and consistent schedules and activities enhanced with visual and physical supports. Introducing and repeating specific, organized classroom routines over time builds predictability and enhances students' understanding of classroom and teacher expectations, thereby lowering stress levels and increasing student capacity to focus on content and more deeply participate in classroom learning.

While we prepare to support our students in content-focused language of an upcoming unit, we must also ensure we are setting them up for authentic engagement in classroom learning. This includes fostering participation by building familiarity and offering supports around the language of classroom instructions, the expectations for particular student actions at different points in the unit, and the language required to engage in discourse with peers and teachers. In addition to the content-area language being taught, WIDA ELD Standard 1, which states that “English language learners communicate for Social and Instructional purposes within the school setting” (WIDA, 2020, p.9), should also be considered when planning instruction for multilingual newcomers.

One example of how to break down a highly structured teaching protocol is through a gradual release writing protocol. Ideally, this process would be reinforced by supports, such as the whole class acting out expected student actions or the construction of an anchor chart with short phrases and visuals portraying each step of the routine. Once students have been introduced to information in multiple modes (e.g., informational videos, visual diagrams, text in home language), and once educators are familiar with and comfortable using the writing protocol, it can be applied across classrooms and content areas to deepen engagement and elicit written language.



Depending on each student's language proficiency level and individual learning style, a variety of supports could be offered in a gradual release writing protocol, including sentence or paragraph frames, reference materials such as anchor charts or multilingual class notes, model exemplars from classroom texts, and word/phrase banks with visuals and translations for key topic language.

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### Antonella's Newcomers

Ms. Antonella D'Eramo is an experienced educator and school leader who supports teachers and multilingual newcomers in a newcomer program in Massachusetts. She implemented the language and content standards of the Biodiversity at Risk unit exemplar introduced earlier, with a focus on resources and practices that ensure accessibility for her seventh-grade newcomer students.

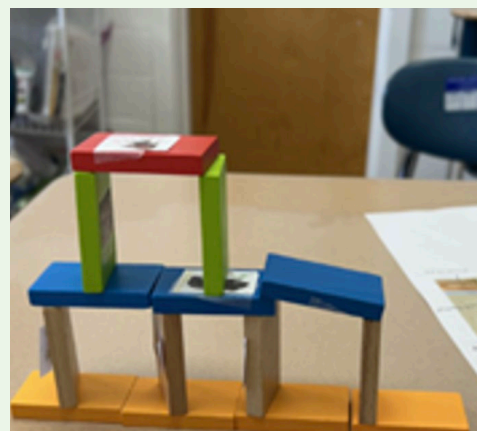


*Antonella D'Eramo*

### Instructional Considerations

Antonella recognized that, while specific details of the unit topic might be new to her students, they did have existing knowledge that could connect to current learning. She also recognized that the goal of the unit was for students to understand the impact of invasive species on ecosystems. Although she may begin by building foundational knowledge about animals and ecosystems, it was essential to keep the unit's ultimate goal in focus: helping students explore the more complex concepts and connections related to invasive species. This meant ensuring the unit didn't become solely about animals or ecosystems in general but instead progressed toward those deeper understandings.

Before unpacking academic texts, Antonella built whole-group understanding around ecosystems and food webs, grounded in the Australian context. Models of these concepts were supported by visuals, labeled together with connecting arrows and key vocabulary, and posted on an anchor chart for reference throughout the unit. For example, Antonella's students used blocks to build a food web and understand the concept of ecosystem balance. The building and activation of background knowledge supported students as they began to work with grade-level text. Having that knowledge allowed for access to more rigorous text and concepts.

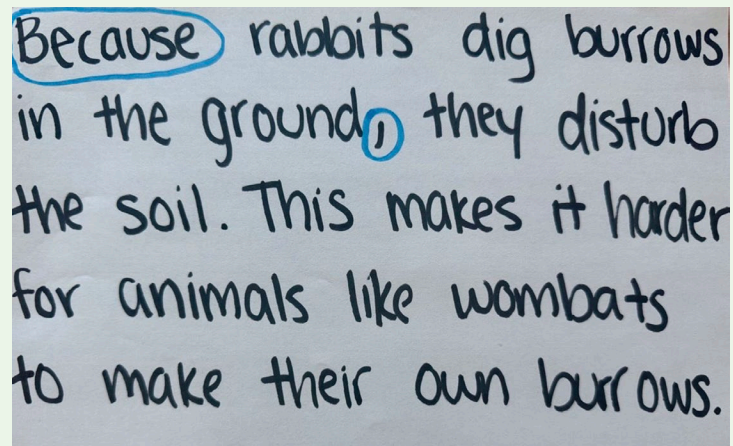


After spending time building background knowledge and discussing rabbits as an invasive species, students completed a structured notetaker during reading and after reading a text. This helped organize students' comprehension of the text and build toward writing cause-and-effect sentences. Next, Antonella guided her students through a scaffolded approach to writing.

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### Writing Explanations

Antonella's students read a short text about invasive species that modeled the Language Feature they were focusing on: cause-and-effect language.



Because rabbits dig burrows in the ground, they disturb the soil. This makes it harder for animals like wombats to make their own burrows.

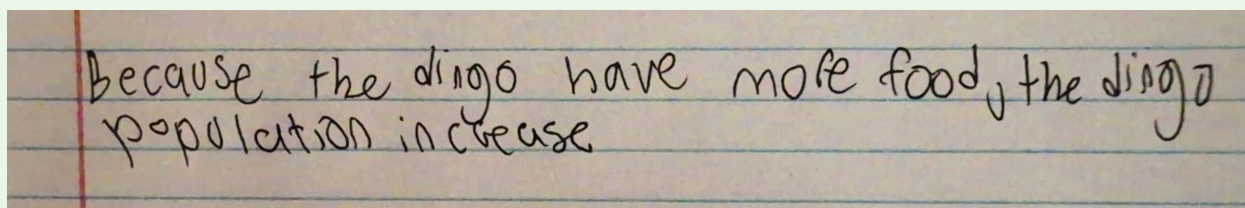
Students then referred to the structured notetaker they had created previously, which showed the cause and effect of an increase in rabbits on different parts of the ecosystem, to help them co-construct their own cause-and-effect sentences.

Abiotic/Biotic component	Rabbit Influence: What did the rabbit do?	Consequence: What happened?
trees and shrubs	eat, over time "gum tree"	the gum tree decrease
wombat	the rabbit overconsumption vegetation	the wombats are threatened
dingo	more food for the dingo	the dingo increase

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

This artifact demonstrates that Antonella's students understand how an invasive species affects various aspects of the ecosystem, but the work doesn't stop here! The goal is for students to write an explanation. From here, Antonella and her students worked together to turn the content in the graphic organizer into cause-and-effect sentences using another target Language Feature: connectors to signal cause and effect.

After some practice, the students worked in pairs to practice saying and writing their sentences with one another.



This student example is a good reminder that success in this activity is about applying the Language Feature to the content, not producing an error-free sentence. By providing scaffolded opportunities for language practice, a gradual release framework helps students to apply Language Features and incorporate them into their regular language use over time.

### Conclusion

Supporting secondary multilingual newcomers requires intentionality and creativity as we find ways to connect content to students' unique sets of existing knowledge. Recognizing students' assets is the first step to structuring meaningful opportunities for engagement and creating classrooms where language development and content mastery can grow together. The Biodiversity at Risk unit exemplar illustrates how rigorous, grade-level appropriate learning experiences can be accessible without sacrificing complexity. As educators, our role is to ensure that every student has the chance to participate fully in school in ways that honor their age, intellect, and potential. By doing so, we prepare them not only for graduation but also to thrive in their post-graduation pursuits.

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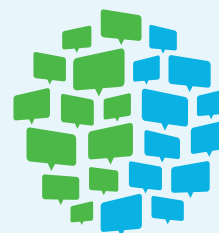
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