

TEACHING & LEARNING INSIGHT

# Providing a High-Challenge Curriculum for All Students

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How a shared metalanguage and the right balance of challenge and support helps every student — including EAL/ESL learners — succeed with the full curriculum.

When we take a moment to consider the range of texts students are expected to compose and comprehend in any schooling context, we begin to understand the enormity of the meaning-making challenge that all students face as they move through school. For EAL/ESL students, particularly those who are learning through a language they are still in the early stages of learning, the challenge is even more formidable. While they bring with them a set of language resources, including their mother tongue and additional languages, they are still catching up to their peers in terms of their English language resources. Even for many other students whose first language is English, the language resources they bring to schooling contexts are not sufficiently developed to allow them to cope with the demands of the curriculum.

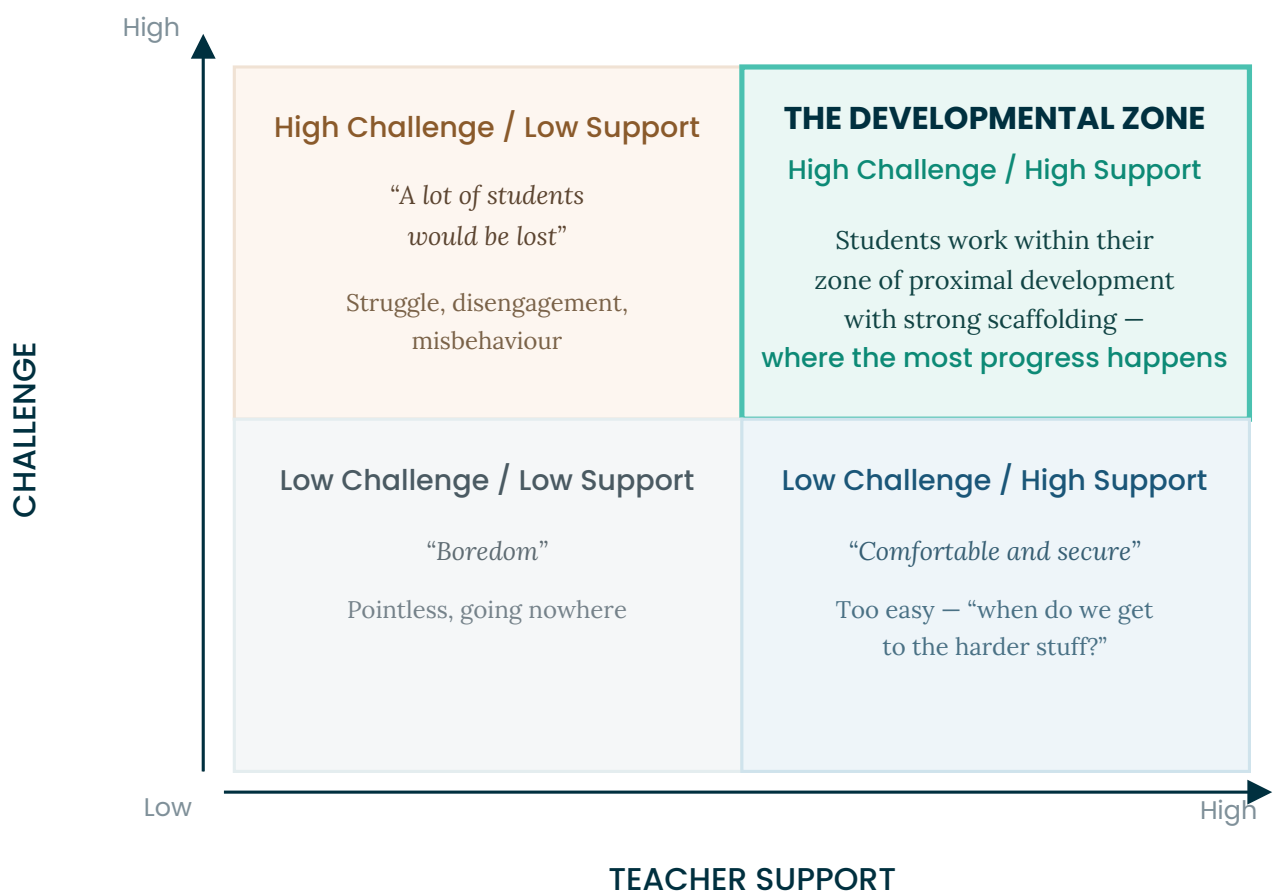
The challenge for teachers is how to improve literacy outcomes for students who struggle to meet the demands of the curriculum. If we agree that all students, including EAL/ESL students, have the right to the same curriculum, then we need to be concerned with ‘ways of supporting-up such students rather than with dumbing-down the curriculum’ (Hammond & Gibbons 2005: 6).

**“The most effective way of ensuring all students meet such a high challenge is through a pedagogy that provides the necessary scaffolding.”**

As many others have also argued, the most effective way of ensuring all students meet such a high challenge is through a pedagogy that provides the necessary scaffolding for our ESL students to meet this challenge. A core principle of this pedagogy sees language as playing a central role with teachers providing the explicit language support needed in order that their students achieve success in schooling. A critical part of this explicit pedagogy is for teachers and students to have a shared metalanguage, which means that both teachers and students need to have a knowledge about language, about how it works to make meaning.

## THE DEVELOPMENTAL ZONE

In our *How Language Works* course, we address this issue by looking at the four potential learning contexts that emerge when we consider two axes: a challenge axis and a support axis, both of which move from low to high.



We take each quadrant in turn and ask participants to come up with words or phrases that might describe how students feel if they found themselves in that particular learning context. So for the top left quadrant (high challenge and low teacher support), participants come up with responses like, ‘a lot of students would be lost’, ‘my students would struggle’, or ‘I can see many students just turning off or maybe misbehaving’. The quadrant at the bottom left (low challenge and low support) draws responses such as ‘boredom’, ‘pointless’ or ‘possibly happy but going nowhere’. In the third quadrant on the bottom right (low challenge and high support), participants often say things like ‘they could feel very comfortable and secure’, ‘it’s too easy’ or ‘when are we getting to the harder stuff’.

We then consider the top right quadrant (high challenge with high support) and argue that this is the context in which students will make the most progress. Here, students are given challenging work, considering their zones of proximal development but, crucially, at the same time given the necessary scaffolding to meet those challenges. We have called this the ‘Developmental Zone’. It is only by providing rich curriculum cycles with strong scaffolding (staying in the ‘zone’) that all students will enjoy success.

This notion of high challenge is supported in work by researchers such as Misty Adoniou, Associate Professor in Language, Literacy and TESL at the University of Canberra, who argues that only by ‘raising the quality and the challenge’ of the literacy work and building our students’ capacity to understand ‘the ways in which language works’ will we begin to see all students enjoying successful literacy outcomes (see her article in *The Conversation*). The evidence for this is in the data over recent years from Australia’s national literacy test, NAPLAN. Adoniou identifies that low-challenge literacy work is the main reason for the lack of real improvement in student literacy.

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#### REFERENCE

Hammond, J., & Gibbons, P. (2005). Putting scaffolding to work: The contribution of scaffolding in articulating ESL education. *Prospect*, Vol 20, No. 1.