



The InTA Signature Planning Tool

Language scaffolding

From vocabulary to full sentences: supporting academic language

Language support in CLIL, multilingual classrooms, and regular subject lessons

In many lessons, students learn the key vocabulary of a topic and seem to understand the content. However, when they are asked to explain, write, or describe, they may produce isolated words, very short sentences, or incomplete answers. This often happens not because the student does not understand, but because the language demands of the task are too high.

To write a clear explanation, the student must manage several things at the same time: remembering vocabulary, organising the sentence, using correct grammar, and following the structure of the task. When these demands are not made explicit, some students become blocked, even though they know the content. The goal is not to simplify the learning objective, but to make the path from vocabulary to full sentences clearer and more structured so that more students can express what they understand.

Example

Vocabulary:

evaporation – heat – water – sun

Task:

Explain evaporation.

Student answer:

water sun heat

water go vapor

I don't know

In this situation, the difficulty often comes from the gap between knowing the words and knowing how to build a sentence. Before asking students to write full explanations, it can be helpful to make the intermediate steps more visible.

The objective is not to simplify the content.

The objective is to make the language path clearer.

1 From words to word groups

Students who only know isolated words often cannot write sentences.

Before asking for full sentences, it helps to build small meaning units.

Example — science lesson (CLIL or regular class)

Vocabulary:

water / vapor / sun / heat

Instead of asking immediately to explain evaporation, ask students to combine the words.

Possible answers:

water vapor

liquid water

the sun's heat

hot water

✓ This helps students understand how words work together.

✓ When meaning units are clear, sentences become easier.

2 From word groups to simple sentences

Students may know the words but not know how to build a sentence. Without support, they must think about vocabulary, grammar, word order, spelling, and meaning at the same time. When too many demands appear together, some students become blocked even if they understand the content.

Providing language scaffolding makes the structure visible and reduces this overload, so students can focus on the meaning instead of guessing how to write the sentence.

Possible supports:

- sentence starters
- sentence frames
- word banks
- key words
- substitution tables
- model sentences

Example — science lesson

Vocabulary:

plant / roots / water / soil

Sentence starters

The plant ...

The roots ...

Water ...

Sentence frames

The plant needs ____.

The roots take ____ from ____.

The plant gets ____ from ____.

Word bank

plant / roots / water / soil / needs / takes / from

Substitution table

The plant | needs | water

The roots | take | water

The plant | gets | water from the soil

Students can write:

The plant needs water.

The roots take water from the soil.

The plant gets water from the soil.

- ✓ The learning objective stays the same.
 - ✓ The structure makes the task accessible. Sentence frames are not meant to be permanent, but to help students start writing. As students become more confident, the support can be reduced gradually.
-

3 From simple sentences to more precise sentences

Students often write correct sentences but keep them very short.

Example

The plant grows.

The desert is hot.

Water evaporates.

They understand the idea, but they do not yet know how to make the sentence more precise. They may stop after a very short answer because they are unsure how to add more information. Students often need explicit support to learn how to expand their sentences.

Useful prompts:

where

when

why

how

from where

Example

Water evaporates.

→ Water evaporates in the sun.

→ Water evaporates when it gets hot.

→ Water evaporates from rivers.

→ Water evaporates because the sun heats it.

- ✓ Expanding sentences helps students express more precise meaning and show their understanding more clearly. This is especially important in CLIL, where students need language in order to demonstrate what they know.
-

4 From sentences to connected sentences

In many subjects, students must do more than describe.

They must:

- explain
- compare
- justify
- describe a process
- interpret data

To do this, they need connectors such as *and*, *but*, *because*, *when*, or *so*. These words help students link ideas and explain relationships between them, so they need to be taught explicitly and used regularly in class.

Example

The sun heats the water.

The water evaporates.

→ The water evaporates because the sun heats it.

✓ With connectors, students can express relationships between ideas instead of giving isolated facts. They can explain causes, make comparisons, describe processes, or justify their answers, which makes their language more precise and more academic.

This is essential in CLIL, where students must use language to show their understanding of the content, but it is also useful in any subject, especially for multilingual students or for learners who are still developing academic language.

5 Structuring a short text

Students may know how to write sentences but still struggle to organise a paragraph. Without a clear structure, they may write only one sentence, repeat the same idea, stop quickly, or move from one idea to another without clear links.

Many students fail not because they do not understand the graph, the text, or the experiment, but because they do not know how to organise the answer.

Providing a simple text structure helps students know how to start, how to continue, and how to finish their response.

Example — interpreting a graph

Introduction

The graph shows ...

The graph compares ...

We can see that ...

Focus on one element

... is higher than ...

... is lower than ...

... increased between ... and ...

Compare other elements

In contrast ...

However ...

... remained stable ...

Useful connectors

first

then

after that

finally

Useful adverbs

a lot

slightly

quickly

slowly

almost

about

✓ With this type of scaffolding, students can write a short paragraph even if their language level is still developing. The learning objective remains the same, but the structure makes the task more accessible.

6 Reducing support gradually

Support should not stay forever, but it should not disappear too quickly. If it is removed too early, some students may stop writing, but if it stays too long, they may become dependent on it. Support is not removed all at once. It is reduced step by step.

Too little support → students stop writing

Too much support → students depend on it

Example

High support

The plant needs sunlight because ____.

Medium support

Use words:

sunlight / energy / grow

Low support

Explain why plants need sunlight.

Independent

Plants need sunlight because they use it to make energy and grow.

✓ The objective stays the same. Only the level of support changes. This allows students to become more independent without lowering expectations.

7 Classroom scenario — From vocabulary to explanation

Example — history lesson (The Romans)

Objective:

Students explain why the Romans built roads.

Vocabulary taught:

Romans / roads / army / travel / cities / fast / empire

FIRST ATTEMPT (NO LANGUAGE SUPPORT)

Teacher asks:

Why did the Romans build roads?

Student answers:

Romans roads

army travel

for cities

fast

I don't know

→ Students know the words, but they cannot build the explanation. The difficulty is not the historical concept, but the language needed to express the idea.

ADJUSTMENT 1 — WORD GROUPS

Teacher asks students to combine the words.

Roman roads

the Roman army

travel fast

between cities

the Roman Empire

→ Students start to see how words work together.

ADJUSTMENT 2 — SENTENCE FRAMES

Teacher provides frames:

The Romans built roads to ____.

The roads helped the ____ to ____.

The roads connected ____ and ____.

Students write:

The Romans built roads to travel.

The roads helped the army to move fast.

The roads connected cities.

→ Students can now produce simple sentences.

ADJUSTMENT 3 — CONNECTORS

Teacher adds connectors:

because

so

and

to

Students write:

The Romans built roads because they wanted to travel fast.

The roads helped the army move quickly, so they could control the empire.

The roads connected cities and helped trade.

→ Students begin to explain, not only name words.

ADJUSTMENT 4 — PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE**Teacher gives a structure:**

First ...

Also ...

Because ...

So ...

Students write:

The Romans built roads to travel across the empire.

Also, the roads helped the army move fast.

Because of the roads, the Romans could control many cities.

So the Roman Empire became stronger.

→ Students can now write a short explanation.

✓ The objective did not change.

✓ The language support made the task possible.

From vocabulary to full sentences — progression of support

Step	What students can do	Difficulty	Possible support
Words	name key vocabulary	cannot write	word banks, matching, sorting
Word groups	combine words	unsure how to build sentence	collocations, noun groups
Simple sentences	write short sentences	grammar + structure overload	sentence starters, frames
Precise sentences	add details	answers stay too short	prompts: where / why / how
Connected sentences	explain / compare	ideas not linked	connectors: because / when / so
Paragraph	organise ideas	no structure	text plan, model paragraph
Independence	write alone	support removed too fast	gradual reduction

Summary

Writing difficulties often come from the path, not from the knowledge itself. Students may struggle to write even when they understand the content, because the steps needed to move from vocabulary to full sentences are not always clear. When the structure of the language is not visible, the task can become overwhelming, and students may stop after a few words or very short answers.

Providing supports such as word banks, sentence frames, connectors, or text structures helps make these steps explicit. This allows students to focus on the meaning of what they want to say, instead of being blocked by how to say it.

Making the path more structured does not change the objective, but it makes it possible for more students to reach it.

InTA ANCHOR — Supporting language without lowering expectations

When students struggle to write, the first reaction is often to think that they do not understand the content. However, in many situations, the difficulty comes from the language demands of the task. Students may know the concepts but not yet have the language needed to express them.

Producing an explanation requires several operations at the same time: understanding the idea, remembering vocabulary, organising the sentence, choosing the correct structure, and following the instructions.

When all these demands appear together, the task may become inaccessible, even for students who have the required knowledge.

Providing language support does not mean lowering expectations. It means making the path clearer.

Word banks, sentence frames, connectors, paragraph structures, and model texts do not simplify the objective. They make it possible for the student to reach the objective.

- ✓ The content remains the same.
- ✓ The level of thinking remains the same.
- ✓ The framework becomes more explicit.

This type of scaffolding is particularly important in CLIL and multilingual contexts, but it is also useful in many regular classrooms, where students may understand but struggle to express their ideas in academic language.

At InTA, we consider language support as a professional tool, not as a simplification.

Helping students move from words to sentences, and from sentences to explanations, allows them to show what they really understand without reducing the level of the task.

Structuring the language does not mean giving less.
It means giving access.