

# Supporting High School English Learners with Appropriate Scaffolds, High-quality Literature and Content, and a Focus on Writing and Critical Thinking to Build Student Success

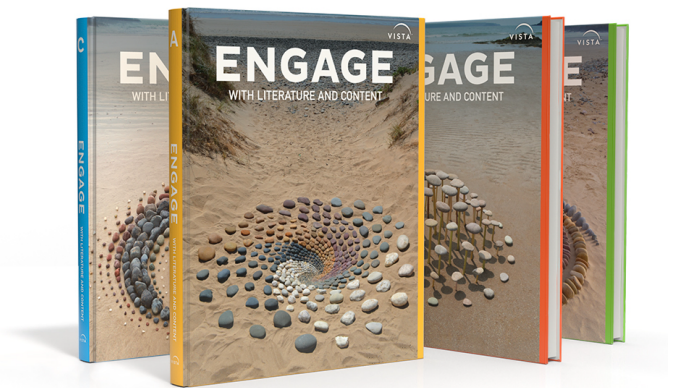


**Kevin P. Colleary, EdD**

Adjunct Professor Graduate School  
of Education at Fordham University, New York

With an abundance of teen novels and Hollywood films about football games, cool cliques, and breakfast clubs, popular culture has always reminded us of how exciting, demanding, and sometimes difficult the American high school experience can be. Each of us who lived through it remembers the broken hearts, lost games, and failed exams, as well as the secret smiles, winning scores, and surprising “As” received. For many newcomers to this country, those wonderfully challenging adolescent years are overlaid with the incredible experience of learning a new language—a language they need not only for social integration, but also for their academic success in school and in their chosen futures. How can we support our English learners as they navigate these challenging tasks in grades 9–12? What does the research tell us about the best ways to help them succeed?

Vista’s Higher Learning’s **Engage with Literature and Content** for grades 9–12 is a comprehensive, standards-based high school literacy program designed to empower students to become strong readers, confident writers, and critical thinkers. **Engage** is a powerful print and digital solution that develops language and literacy skills through engaging literary texts and content-driven lessons that connect to students’ everyday lives.



*“Research has shown that there are three areas that can help English language learners in grades 9–12: 1) the use of scaffolding to support English language learning; 2) high-quality, diverse literature and standards-based content as tools for language instruction; and 3) a focus on writing and critical thinking to build student success.”*

## 1) Scaffolding to support student learning

The benefits of helping students increase their English language capacity with scaffolded support have been supported by research for many years (Bruner, 1977; Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Monica & Olatubosom, 2013; Gibbons, 2015; Faraj, 2015; Spycher, 2017). Scaffolding helps students succeed by making the component whole a bit smaller and easier to digest. It can also allow students the time they need to figure out new and sometimes challenging ideas. For students exposed to academic English for the first time, scaffolding is especially important, as English grammar and construction can be particularly complex and sometimes very confusing for many students—especially those who are new to and still learning the basics of the language (Yi, 2013).

In Vista's **Engage** program, scaffolding support is found throughout the print and digital programs. In the teacher support materials, on the student pages, and integrated seamlessly into the **Engage** Supersite, scaffolded support is built in to help all students access quality, grade-level, authentic text.

Digital scaffolding supports, including videos, audio, note-taking guides, recording/playback features, and carefully scaffolded practice activities with corrective feedback are all accessible from any device, so students have access to the support they need, no matter where they are. In the Student Editions, on-page scaffolding supports that help focus and guide the student are found in motivating activities designed to develop language, literacy, and content and that include the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as viewing. The “Study Group” feature, which encourages students to express their own evidence-based ideas about the text and includes videos that provide a model of students engaged in academic discussion, is another example of how scaffolding is built into the very core of the program.

### Multiple Exposures and Scaffolds to Build Understanding

- Identify the present participle. Direct students to the grammar tip in the sidebar. Explain that the base verb is capitalized for present participles. For example, the word “raining” in “raining water” is the present participle. Have students try to come up with another example on their own. Call on volunteers to share with the class.
- Express ideas in varied tenses. Draw attention to section E. Have students write three sentences in their notebooks about a career that interests them using the simple past, present, and future tenses. After comparing their sentences, have students discuss with a classmate.
- NOTE IT!  
Identify answer verb tense usage. Direct attention to the Note It! section in the sidebar. Explain that there is a time and place for past, present, and future tense in an autobiography.  
Engage in academic conversations. Have students discuss when they think each verb tense would be useful in an autobiography and write the answers in their notebooks.
- Inspect the Text  
Identify verbs. Remind students to look for the irregular verbs they wrote in their notebooks, as well as regular verbs.  
Read for gist. Have students listen to and read “When I Needed Her.”  
Identify verb tenses. Have students scan the text, identifying the verbs. Instruct them to write the answers to the question in their notebooks.

#### DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

**Scaffold**

- The student work tenses. Instruct students to write three sentences that have tense in the past, present, and future tense in their notebooks. (Sample answer: I went to the zoo last year.)

**Assess**

- Check for understanding. Instruct students to write two additional paragraphs making sure to use a variety of verb tenses. Have them discuss the text. Have them write two paragraphs with a character who the character before for proper usage.

#### DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

**Scaffold**

- Write a paragraph. Instruct students to write three sentences, each using one of the progressive verb tenses. Have them exchange their work with a classmate and check each other's work.

**Assess**

- Write a paragraph. Have students write a paragraph using all three of the progressive verb tenses. Have them exchange their work with a classmate and check each other's work. Use a checklist to assess their work.

### Scaffold Reading Strategies Before the Text

**BEFORE YOU READ**

**Genre: Autobiography**

**Reading Strategy: Ask Questions**

**Map It! Text Structure: Chronology**

**Ask Questions**

**Read the text**

**Map It!**

**Assess**

Scaffolding Examples

Scaffolding Examples

## 2) High-quality literature and grade-level content as tools for language instruction

Research has shown that English learners who are exposed to thoughtful, progressive, grade level-appropriate content instruction show greater gains in vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. (Custodio & Sutton, 1998; Snow, 2005; Short & Boyson, 2012). Consistent research studies have also concluded that teachers who set high expectations for content achievement help English learners (Minaya-Rowe, 2004; Ray, 2009; Faulkner-Bond, et al., 2012). Our high school students are expected to master grade-level standards-based content and understand the nuances of a variety of literature genres, including classics and those from a diverse cross-section of authors.

In Vista’s **Engage** program, we see a consistent pattern of units built on engaging and motivating science and social studies content topics. Each unit begins with an “Essential Question” inquiry to focus learning, and all units have a consistent content structure and routines to help students organize and retain information. We see clear student goals, along with repeated opportunities for students to build background and deepen content knowledge. Students and teachers are provided with strategies that are used to learn content and it to their ELA practice, thus marrying the goals of ELA success and content instruction.

Students and teachers are provided with strategies that are used to learn content and it to their ELA practice, thus marrying the goals of ELA success and content instruction.

Authentic texts, motivating literature, and content-driven lessons are offered through print and digital resources to build capacity and address the proficiency needs of each student. Students are exposed to a wide variety of literature types and genres. Examples include canonical classics such as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as well as modern works like *Swing* by Kwame Alexander and *Mary Rand Hess*. Young adult literature, historical literature, and many other genres are also included. Students are also exposed to a diverse group of authors who write from a variety of perspectives and present unique story types and characters. In the **Engage** program, the “Book Trailer” feature uses high-quality video and thoughtful questions to spark student interest in the readings.

**Bowman's Store: A Journey to Myself**  
by Joseph Ruchac

**Note It!**  
Which one or two important events in your life would you include in your autobiography?

**Book Trailer**  
Watch the book trailer for *Bowman's Store*.

**React to the Trailer**  
Watch the video. Answer the questions.  
|| This autobiography sounds pretty interesting. I live near the mountains, too, so I can relate. But I live in a small city, so it isn't as rural as the setting of *Bowman's Store*. What about you? How would you describe where you live, your friends, and your family? ||

Engage A, Unit 1 Book Trailer

## 3) Writing and critical thinking in secondary school

Academic writing in the content areas is a key skill that every student needs to master (Huie & Yahya, 2003; Schulz, 2009; Wilcox, 2011). Utilizing critical thinking skills throughout their school day and, most importantly, transferring that critical thinking to the world outside school is also extremely important for student and life success. Research has shown that explicit teaching of writing, linked with academic content, can have positive effects on English learners' achievement (Bhowmik & Kim, 2021). Writing can help encourage critical thinking. Teaching writing effectively can promote critical thinking in our English language learners (Pally, 1997; Graham, et al., 2016).

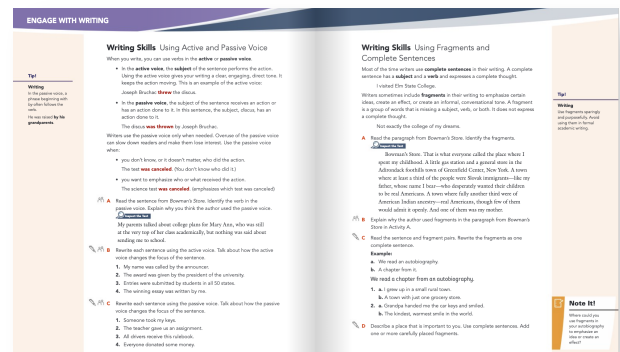
In Vista's **Engage** program, teachers are supported in their efforts to model both critical thinking and various reading and writing strategies. The Teacher Edition not only provides examples of questions and statements for teachers, but it also provides help in eliciting responses from students. Explicit support is also given for ways to discuss challenging or difficult topics. Teachers are provided with the support they need at the lesson and unit level to help their students build capacity in both critical thinking and academic writing in English.

In the Student Editions of **Engage**, high school students receive ample scaffolded opportunities to write in response to the text. First encountered at the start of every unit, the "Note It" feature helps students build a notebook of important details, graphic organizers, thoughts, connections, and short writing activities that will help them with their final writing project.

Throughout each unit, students are challenged to scan, predict, analyze, summarize, and synthesize as they read. All of these activities build critical thinking skills and strengthen students' capacity in reading in English. Next, students are challenged to write and revise in response to the text, always using text evidence and making connections between the reading, their own lived experiences, and the other content being studied.

Helping our English learners succeed is one of the many important challenges teachers face each day. Every teacher wants their students to soar, and by utilizing quality materials such as **Engage** from Vista and focusing on key elements supported by research, every teacher can achieve that goal.

When thinking about the challenges that our English learners face each day as they navigate the realities of our high schools, let's try to remember the importance of scaffolding for every student, the necessity of high-quality standards-based content and literature instruction, and the power of writing as a tool for academic success—and as an excellent way to strengthen necessary critical thinking skills. These are all ways that we can make a difference in every student's life and educational experience.



Engage A, Unit 1

**Dr. Kevin Colleary** is an adjunct professor at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education in New York. His research and publications focus on social studies education, knowledge curricula, content area reading, critical thinking, digital literacy, second-language learners, diversity issues, best practices in teaching and learning, and helping teachers understand how to develop content-driven literacy instruction at all grades. Dr. Colleary's most recent publication is *Ensuring a Better Future: Why Social Studies Matters*, published by Gibbs-Smith Education.

He has authored numerous chapters in a wide variety of educational texts and has been published in a variety of professional journals. Dr. Colleary received his BA in history from Siena College, Albany NY. He also earned both his master's and doctorate in education from Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

## REFERENCES

- Bruner, J.S. (1977). *The process of education*. Harvard University Press.
- Bhowmik, S., & Kim, M. (2021). K-12 ESL writing instruction: A review of research on pedagogical challenges and strategies. *Language and Literacy*, 23(3), 165–202.
- Custodio, B., & Sutton, M.J. (1998). Literature based ESL for secondary school students. *TESOL Journal*, 7(5), 19–23.
- Cunningham, P. & Allington, R. (2003). *Classrooms that work*. Pearson.
- Faraj, A. K. (2015). Scaffolding EFL students' writing through the writing process approach. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(13), 131–141.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2012). *Language Instruction Educational Programs (LIEPs): A Review of the Foundational Literature*. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-iii/language-instruction-ed-programs-report.pdf>
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2007). *Scaffolded writing instruction: Teaching with a gradual release framework*. Scholastic.
- Gibbons, P. (2015). *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching English language learners in the mainstream classroom*. Heinemann.
- Institute of Education Sciences. (2016). *Teaching secondary students to write effectively*. U.S. Department of Education. [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/508\\_WWCPG\\_SecondaryWriting\\_122719.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/508_WWCPG_SecondaryWriting_122719.pdf)
- Huie, K. & Yahya, N. (2003). Learning to write in the primary grades: Experiences of English language learners and mainstream students. *TESOL Journal*, 12(1), 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1949-3533.2003.tb00116.x>
- Minaya-Rowe, L. (2004). Training teachers of English language learners using their students' first language. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 3(1), 3–24.
- Monica, A. & Olatubosun, O. (2013). Effects of scaffolding strategy on learners' academic achievement in integrated science at the junior secondary school level. *European Scientific Journal*, 9(19), 149–155.

- Pally, M. (1997). Critical thinking in ESL: An argument for sustained content. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 6(3), 293–311.
- Ray, J. (2009). A template analysis of teacher agency at an academically successful dual language school. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 21(1), 110–141.
- Schulz, M. M. (2009). Effective writing assessment and instruction for young English language learners. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37(1), 57–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-009-0317-0>
- Short, D. J., & Boyson, B. A. (2012). *Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond*. Center for Applied Linguistics. [https://media.carnegie.org/filer\\_public/ff/fd/ffda48e-4211-44c5-b4ef-86e8b50929d6/ccny\\_report\\_2012\\_helping.pdf](https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/ff/fd/ffda48e-4211-44c5-b4ef-86e8b50929d6/ccny_report_2012_helping.pdf)
- Snow, M. A. (2005). A model of academic literacy for integrated language and content instruction. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language learning* (pp. 693-712). Routledge.
- Spycher, P. (2017). *Scaffolding writing through the “teaching and learning cycle.”* WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/resource-scaffolding-writing-through-the-teaching-and-learning-cycle.pdf>
- Wilcox, K. C. (2011). Writing across the curriculum for secondary English language learners: A case study. *Writing & Pedagogy*, 3(1), 79–112. DOI:10.1558/wap.v3i1.79
- Yi, Y. (2013). ESOL teachers as writing teachers: From the voices of high school preservice teachers. In L. C. de Oliveira & T. Silva (Eds.), *L2 writing in secondary classrooms: Student experiences, academic issues, and teacher education* (pp. 133–148). Routledge.