

High-Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) for Foundational Learning

Instructional Approach: Literacy



INTRODUCTION

High-impact teaching strategies (HITS), also referred to as high-leverage practices, are core pedagogical practices that help students understand content while also supporting their social-emotional development.¹ These teaching practices can demonstrably impact student learning outcomes in both literacy and numeracy.²

This mini-guide, one in a series, sheds light on how teachers can apply the high-impact teaching strategy of “instructional approach” in their literacy lessons.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is meant for those who support teacher professional development at the school level. Depending on the local context and approach to professional development, this role can be played by coaches, community of practice leaders, teacher-facilitators, lead teachers, trainers, and Ministry of Education staff working with teachers. As part of a wider professional development approach, this guide can be a tool to target teachers’ use of proven strategies to improve student learning in literacy and numeracy.

Teacher professional development has various modalities, ranging from pre-service courses to one-on-one coaching and mentoring to teacher-led communities of practice. This guide is intended to support professional discussions across a variety of contexts: in-school coaching, communities of practice, and pre- or in-service training. Teachers and coaches can use the guide as part of an individualized professional development plan; teacher-facilitators can use it to drive discussion on high-impact strategies as part of a community of practice; and pre-service designers can incorporate it into their curriculum for teacher training. Finally, this mini-guide reflects the incremental progression that teachers follow in their professional growth.

This mini-guide for Instructional Approach to Literacy, along with the others in the series, reflects the strategy domains and the HITS presented in the following table.

Finally, when adapting the content and use of this mini-guide to the local educational context, it can be integrated into a structured pedagogy program already in place. The mini-guide can be linked directly to the curriculum and teaching and learning materials, and supported through the existing professional development model.

¹ Ball & Forzani (2010).

² Ambrose et al. (2010); Danielson (2022); Rosenshine (2012).

HIGH-IMPACT TEACHING STRATEGIES (HITS)			
Strategy domains	Tier 1: Basic strategies	Tier 2: Developing strategies (built upon Tier 1 strategies)	Tier 3: Advanced strategies (built upon Tier 1 and 2 strategies)
Learning Environment	Teacher establishes clear rules and routines to support learning and create a positive learning environment.	Teacher uses and supports positive interactions in the classroom (teacher-student and student-student).	Teacher organizes students to work in pairs and small groups to enhance collaboration, to build teamwork, and to promote a sense of belonging.
Student Engagement in Learning	Teacher gives all students, including pairs/small groups, regular time for the practice of new skills .*	Teacher uses questioning to build and deepen student understanding of new content.	Teacher plans for the strategic use of partner and small-group work for collaborative learning activities.**
Knowledge Progression and Connections	Teacher plans with and states the lesson objective and links new content to students' background (prior knowledge).	Teacher provides a daily review and links content to previous learning .	Teacher purposefully sequences lesson objectives and adjusts the teaching sequence as needed.
Assessment-Informed Instruction	Teacher routinely monitors learning by checking for understanding during instruction and giving actionable feedback to students.	Teacher modifies content and instructional strategies based on evidence of learning collected through formative assessment.	Teacher provides differentiated instruction and remediation to address learning gaps.
Instructional Approach	Numeracy	Teacher provides explicit models and explanations of math concepts and skills, followed by student practice of modeled skills.	Teacher provides opportunities for students to explore concepts and then draws on their ideas when modeling and explaining concepts and their application.
	Literacy	Teacher provides explicit models and explanations of new skills and concepts, followed by student practice of modeled skills.	Teacher gives students opportunities to apply skills in meaningful ways .

Notes:

*Tier 1: Teacher groups students to engage all children in the learning activity, especially when materials are being shared.

**Tier 3: Teacher purposefully groups students to engage all children through homogenous or heterogenous grouping. Homogenous grouping can be used with students working at a similar, medium level to learn at a higher level together. Heterogeneous grouping is used to provide peer support to students who may be struggling with new content and skills.

Recognizing that professional development is most effective when it is focused and incremental, this guide proposes a tiered approach to mastering a collection of strategies, as shown in the table. Professional development activities that support teachers, especially those working in low- and middle-income countries, in mastering the specific strategies listed under Tier 1 are likely to result in improved instruction and learning outcomes. As teachers master the basic strategies of Tier 1 and move toward the more “advanced” Tiers 2 and 3 in each category, they will be empowered with a full set of strategies to reach and support more students. Over time (as measured in years, as opposed to weeks or months), a professional development program that follows a tiered approach can help teachers move toward more depth of instructional mastery (higher tiers) and significantly improve the quality of their teaching, which will ultimately help more students develop a deeper understanding and mastery of foundational literacy and numeracy skills and concepts.

It is important to note that not all teachers will start at Tier 1. Depending on the teacher’s level of experience and familiarity with implementing the strategies, she may start at Tier 2 or even Tier 3. Furthermore, a teacher starting at Tier 2 within the Learning Environment domain may start at Tier 1 in the Knowledge Progression domain; this type of variation and personalization is a key component of this guide and reflects each teacher’s individual journey within classroom practice. Each guide includes a decision tree that includes helpful questions

about teacher practices and the learning environment to help you decide on how best to work with the teachers you support.

DOMAIN:

Instructional Approach to Literacy

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Studies have shown that the classroom learning environment has implications for students' learning and performance.³ Explicit teaching involves providing instruction in a systematic and sequential manner. It encompasses several teaching behaviors: clearly planning with and stating the learning objective, providing an explanation of new concepts and modeling using examples, and allowing ample time for students to practice new skills and concepts. Under this approach, teachers demand a high level of student participation in the form of exploratory activities, discussions, and questions. Teachers scaffold student learning as children move through the learning process, and they give guided support as required.

Read more about instructional approach to content delivery [here](#).

WHERE TO START?

As mentioned earlier, **not all teachers will start on the same tier of strategies for a given domain**. The decision tree below is designed to help meet the teacher where they are and support them to implement these strategies at their own pace. There are three different boxes for each domain with prompts to help guide decisions as to which strategy teachers – in individual coaching sessions, in communities of practice, or in pre- and in-service training - should try and how to determine when a teacher is ready to implement a new strategy from the next tier. The strategies are color coded: Tier 1 strategies are listed in green, Tier 2 in blue, and Tier 3 in purple. However, it is important to remember and to convey to teachers that the strategies are not meant to be a checklist; it takes time to implement new ideas, and teachers may have to work on a strategy over several days, weeks, or months before feeling confident in using them and before students start benefiting from them.

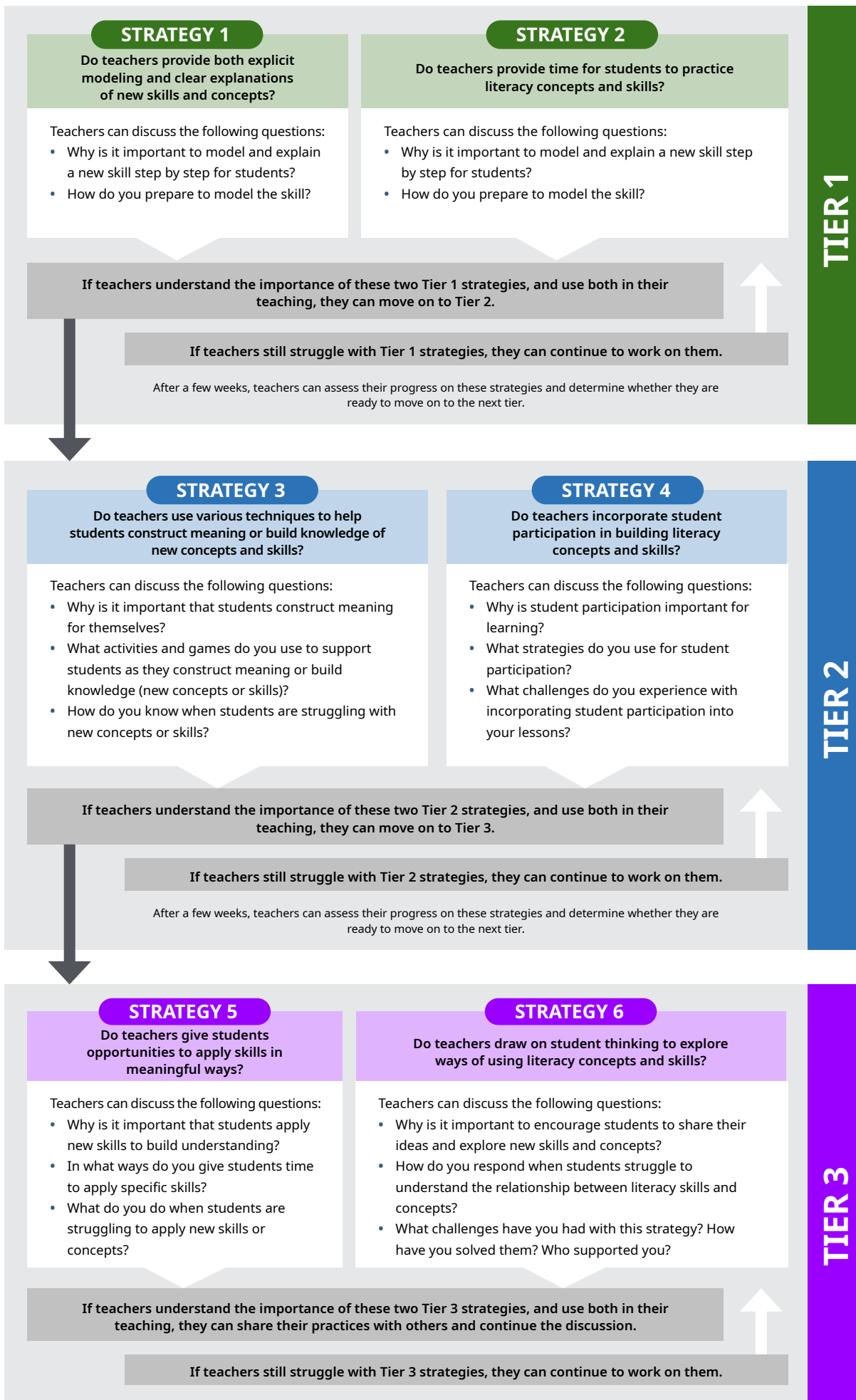
Decision Tree

The decision tree below can help teachers identify which strategies to begin with and help those who support their professional development focus their support. Starting with Box 1, teachers can discuss the questions listed to check whether they already implement that strategy. As they proceed through the subsequent boxes in the decision tree, when they reach a strategy that is new to them or they believe needs improvement, teachers work on the strategy noted in that box. The section after the decision tree provides sample activities and approaches for each strategy. Additional strategies offered by teachers should be welcomed.

Teachers and those who support them can also gauge what type of strategies they use in the classroom by discussing questions such as the following:

- How do you incorporate practice into your lessons?
- How do you use questioning to promote student engagement?
- Do you use collaborative learning activities with students? If so, how?

³ Victoria State Government (2020).



STRATEGIES FOR THE LITERACY CLASSROOM

The strategies below can be used with students across the early primary grades and adapted for the upper grades. Teachers may need to adjust the strategy from the way it is described to work with a specific grade or group of children. The strategies in this mini-guide are written with the classroom teacher in mind, even though, in most cases, coaches or teacher learning facilitators will be the ones sharing the strategies with teachers. Whether it is providing printed handouts or discussing the strategies together, the coach can decide the best way to share them with teachers.

Each of the strategies corresponds to one of three tiers:

Green: TIER 1

Blue: TIER 2

Purple: TIER 3

TIER 1: Teacher provides explicit models and explanations of new skills and concepts, followed by student practice of modeled skills.

Strategy 1 – Using Explicit Modeling/Explanations to Teach New Skills

Explaining and modeling new skills and concepts is a key part of instruction and should be integrated into lessons. Observing a teacher’s real-time modeling of how to use a new skill benefits learning. This, combined with clear explanations, also provides scaffolding as students learn new content.

This strategy reflects an instructional approach that many teachers use: gradual release, often called **I Do, We Do, You Do**, an instructional model whereby the teacher shifts responsibility to the students so they can eventually do the skill independently. This strategy focuses on the “I Do” step of teacher modeling of a new skill or concept. (See the [Literature Review on Structured Pedagogy](#).)

1.	Start your writing lesson with a warm-up exercise that gives students a chance to stretch their finger muscles. For example, students can practice drawing in the air the two basic shapes that they need in order to write—the stick and the circle. As they do this, write the shapes in the air and on the board.
2.	While modeling, face the same direction as students—that is, facing the board. This gives students clarity and can help prevent mirror writing. Be sure to model the writing for both right-handed and left-handed students.
3.	Now model writing the letter. If, for example, the content of the lesson is writing the lowercase letter “b,” first demonstrate making the letter shape with your finger in the air (writing in the air), explaining each step. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>First, I will write a line from top to bottom—this is called a vertical line. Watch how I do this.</i> • <i>Next, I will put my pencil in the middle of the line and add a curved line toward the right-hand side and connect it to the bottom of the line.</i>
4.	Then write the same letter on the board, again explaining each step. Do this several times.

Strategy 2 – Providing Time for Student Practice

Practice is essential for mastering reading and writing. Students need time each day to practice new content or skills. After modeling the new content or skill, give students time to practice as a whole class (with your guidance). Equally importantly is giving students time to practice the skill on their own or independently.

1.	In this strategy, you will use the same content that you used in Strategy 1. To get started, provide scaffolding to students by writing the letter in the air together with them or by providing a brief review or model on the board.
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<p>2.</p>	<p>During guided practice (<i>We Do</i>), guide student practice by practicing the skill along with them. For example, when writing a letter in the air, practice together with the students. Provide scaffolding (break the writing into smaller steps, for example) and give specific feedback to correct any students who may be writing the letter incorrectly.</p> <p>During the <i>We Do</i> step, avoid facing the board, so that you can monitor student practice. Move to different parts of the classroom—first go to the front so that you are offering support for all to see, and then move around the room so that you can observe students as they write and offer support to those who need it. For some students, this may involve holding their finger or pencil and writing with them a few times.</p>
<p>3.</p>	<p>Invite a few students to practice writing the letter on the board. Consider having a student who is struggling come to the board so that everyone can benefit from your scaffolding.</p>
<p>4.</p>	<p>Students are now ready to practice writing independently in their exercise books (<i>You Do</i>). They should practice writing one to three lines of the target letter (with spacing between each letter). Be sure to move around the room to monitor students as they practice and continue providing scaffolding and corrective feedback as needed.</p>

TIER 2: Teacher adds activities to construct meaning (or build knowledge) together with students.

Strategy 3 – Constructing Meaning and Building Knowledge of New Concepts and Skills Together with Students

Literacy is a collection of skills that children develop over time, and children continue to learn and build these skills every day. Constructing meaning together with students and building their knowledge of new concepts deepens understanding and strengthens skills needed for reading and writing. This can be done by having students apply and connect skills in new or different ways—by writing a new ending to a familiar story, answering a comprehension question after reading a new text, or drafting and solving new word problems. Another way is through learning games.

<p>1.</p>	<p>One game that can help build and link students’ skills in letter-sounds and vocabulary is Pictionary. This game will build on a previous lesson by helping students strengthen their oral vocabulary and decoding of words that start with the letter “b.”</p>
<p>2.</p>	<p>Prepare several cards with “b” words that the class has learned.</p>
<p>3.</p>	<p>Divide the class into two groups (or more if the class is large). Together with the groups, write more words beginning with “b” to add to the set of cards.</p> <p>Note: Choose words that are simple enough to be drawn.</p>
<p>4.</p>	<p>Allow a student from each team to pick a word card and draw the picture on the board. Their teammates get 30 seconds to guess the word, and if they guess correctly, they get a point. If they do not, the other team gets a chance to guess the word and earn the point.</p>

Strategy 4 – Incorporating Student Participation in Building Literacy Concepts and Skills

Involving students in lessons is important for deepening their understanding of concepts and strengthening their mastery of skills. This strategy uses student participation in a lesson to build their understanding of new skills and concepts, such as vocabulary.

1.	After students have learned new vocabulary words and they know what the word means or what the object it stands for looks like, you further build their understanding by involving them in a simple partner activity.
2.	Divide the students into pairs. Distribute a word card to each pair. Have different words but also have some identical ones across pairs to increase students' understanding of the word.
3.	Tell students to work together to make up sentences with the word—whether orally or written. Be sure that partners are talking to each other about the word and its meaning and are creating sentences with the target word.
4.	Ask students to write each word of their sentences on strips of paper and shuffle them in a basket. Then, ask them to draw words from the basket and recreate their sentences.
5.	Have students illustrate their sentences, and then post them on the wall for everyone to read.

TIER 3: Teacher gives students opportunities to apply skills in meaningful ways.

Strategy 5 – Giving Students Opportunities to Apply Skills in Meaningful Ways

Teachers can give students opportunities to apply skills that they have learned previously to new content. This helps students build mastery. It is important that students have opportunities to use or apply new skills in ways that reflect real life or are relevant to their lives in and out of school—that is, in meaningful ways.

1.	When students are able to read longer texts, giving them opportunities to apply previously learned skills in new ways can deepen their reading and comprehension skills.
2.	Break the students into groups of five or six. Give each group various sentence strips taken from a familiar story. All groups could receive the same story, or groups could receive different stories to reconstruct. Members in each group should read the sentences aloud to one another.
3.	The group members should then work together to arrange the sentences in the sequence that best creates a meaningful story.
4.	After the groups sequence the sentences, have a member of each group read their story aloud to the class. Then, guide students on the clues that influence the arrangement. For example, a sentence that begins with the word “then” cannot be the first in a sequence because “then” indicates that something happened before. In addition, if the story is about the events of a day, events that happen in the morning should precede those that happen later.

Strategy 6 – Drawing on Student Thinking to Explore Ways of Using Literacy Concepts and Skills

Drawing on students' own thinking helps internalize their learning and empowers them to use new concepts and skills with different materials and through different activities. This helps them build mastery of the new skills.

1.	Prepare cards with the letters in words featuring consonant blends that students have already learned. Be sure to have one set per group.
2.	Break the students into groups of four or five. Give each group a basket of the same set of letter cards.
3.	Ask the groups to draw letters from the basket and create words with them. When each member of the group has used letters to create a word, have them write out the entire word on a separate piece of paper.
4.	Post the written-out words on the wall and lead students in comparing them. If the words have different spellings, ask students to think about them and try to pick the correct one. Post the correct spelling of the word and ask students to write the correct word in their books.

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