

High-Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) for Foundational Learning

Assessment-Informed Instruction: 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 assessment-informed instruction 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.

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 Assessment-Informed Instruction in 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 uses questioning and other interactive approaches to build student understanding when modeling and explaining math concepts and skills. <i>Modeling/explanation is followed by student practice.</i>
	Literacy	Teacher provides explicit models and explanations of new skills and concepts, followed by student practice of modeled skills.	Teacher adds activities to construct meaning (or build knowledge) together with students.
			Teacher provides opportunities for students to explore concepts and then draws on their ideas when modeling and explaining concepts and their application.
			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 progressive approach to supporting teachers in their professional development. A collection of strategies across three tiers is 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. The progression of tiers is not meant to be fixed or rigid. Teachers may be using strategies from multiple tiers in a single domain. The goal is to use the progression to tailor support for teachers by meeting them where they are in their professional practice. The strategies described in the tiers can be used to identify the best one to start with and focus on with teachers. Using the tiers this way will also prevent overwhelming teachers with a long list of strategies to introduce into their teaching. 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:

Assessment-Informed Instruction for Literacy

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Using assessment to inform instruction is a necessary approach for improving the quality of teaching; increasing accountability for student learning; and ensuring more equitable improvements in performance. When used constructively, assessment can help teachers understand whether and which students are achieving learning outcomes and help facilitate higher-quality instruction by providing time-sensitive information on student progress.

Assessment-informed instruction refers to the activities undertaken by teachers—and sometimes students, head teachers, and coaches—that provide timely information to track progress and modify subsequent teaching and learning activities. Both formative and summative assessments can be used to inform instruction, depending on whether the purpose is to determine the extent to which learning goals were reached (assessment of learning) or to inform the best path for achieving learning goals (assessment for learning).

Assessment-informed instruction centers on the effectiveness of the teacher’s pace and practice and, when used to its full potential, can help identify the strengths and gaps in learning for each child, thereby helping teachers teach better. The most important component of assessment-informed instruction, and perhaps the most challenging, is supporting teachers in taking specific actions in response to the information generated through assessment. This is essential because it is the piece of the puzzle that can influence teaching and learning for the better. When teachers see their use of assessment to inform instruction help their students, they may in turn value and apply these practices more.

Read more about assessment-informed instruction in the Science of Teaching How-to Guides [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

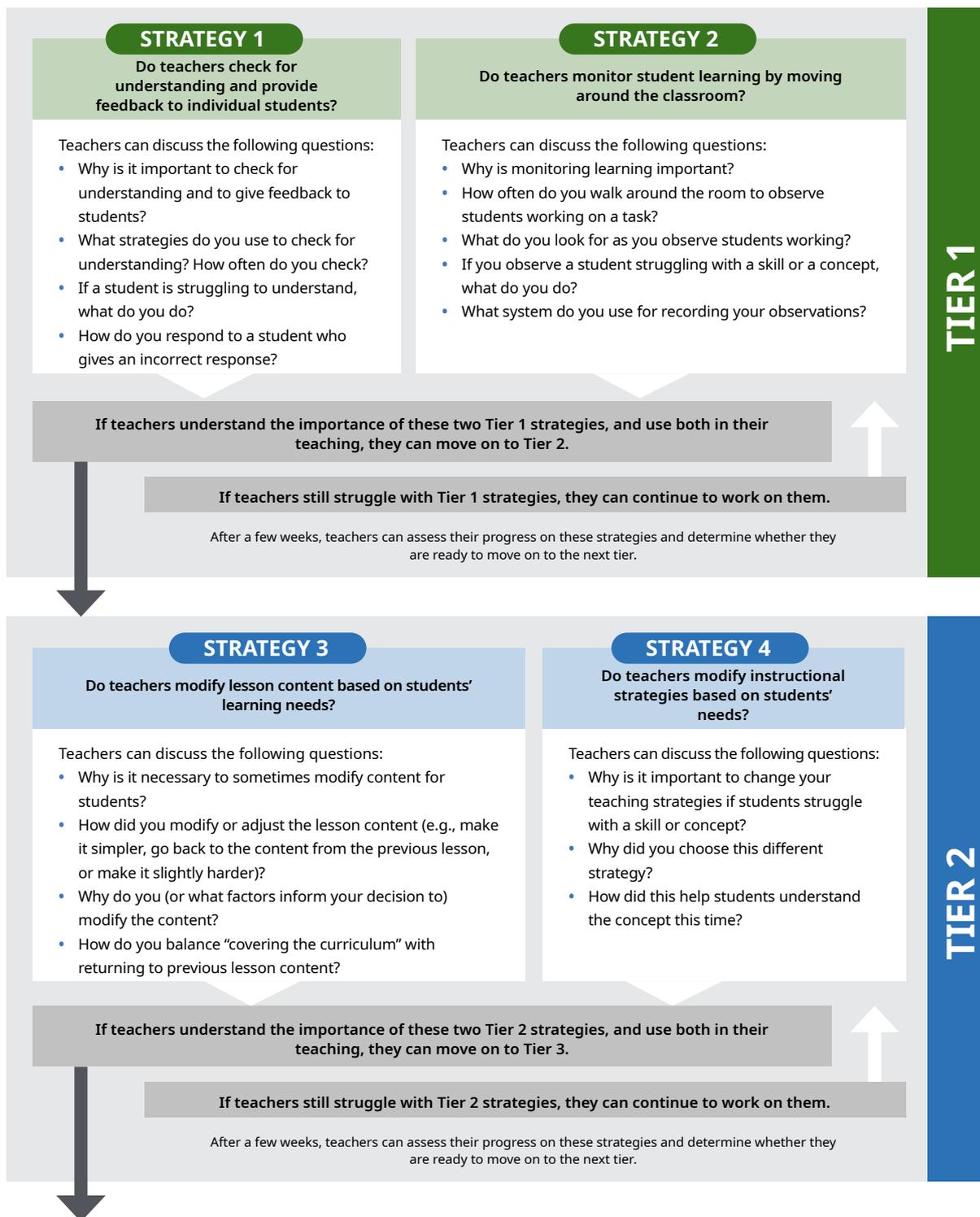


REFLECT
What
type of
assessment
strategies
do you see
teachers
using in the
classroom?

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 introduce or teach a new skill to your students?
- Do you incorporate student practice into lessons? If so, how?
- How do students apply the new skills during lessons?



STRATEGY 5
Do teachers differentiate instruction to address various skill levels?

Teachers can discuss the following questions:

- How do you decide to differentiate instruction for your students?
- How do you decide which students to group together?
- What do you do differently for each group? In other words, how do you differentiate instruction for these students?

STRATEGY 6
Do teachers provide remedial instruction for students who lack the skills necessary to keep up in class?

Teachers can discuss the following questions:

- Why is it important to provide remedial instruction?
- How do you decide which students need remediation?
- How often do you meet with these students?
- How do you adjust the content and strategies during remedial instruction?

TIER 3

If teachers understand the importance of these two Tier 3 strategies, and use both in their teaching, they can share their practices with others and continue the discussion.

If teachers still struggle with Tier 3 strategies, they can continue to work on them.

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 routinely monitors learning by checking for understanding during instruction and giving actionable feedback to students.

Strategy 1 – Checking for Understanding and Giving Feedback

Checking for understanding during and after lessons is an important part of assessing student learning. Asking questions is a simple way of checking if students are learning the skills you are teaching. Questions are an essential part of learning because they help you engage with students to keep their attention and to reinforce their participation. Good questioning helps you find out what students know and is important in assessing their progress. Questions can be used to review, restate, emphasize, and summarize what is important. They also allow you to give—and, importantly, receive—feedback at any given point in the lesson. Carefully select the questions you will ask, making sure they focus on the specific content of the lesson and the specific skill.

1. The question should be clearly understood by students. For example, in grade 1, instead of asking *What sounds do you hear?*, you can improve clarity by asking *What are the sounds in the word “pot”?*

2.	The question should be different from the task or skill modeled or worked on together and should not contain the answer. Your aim is to encourage students to think about the lesson content and give you an answer. For example, if the activity is for students to tell you the sounds in a word, do not break the word into sounds as you ask the question. Do not say, <i>What are the sounds in p-o-t?</i> Encourage students to listen for the different sounds and then say the word slowly and with natural tone and expression.
3.	Consider using a question to assess comprehension, such as <i>When do we use pots?</i>
4.	Once you have selected your questions, pose them to the students to check for understanding, making sure that you give students sufficient time to process each question (three to five seconds) before they respond. Giving students this time will also prevent you from answering the questions yourself.
5.	After you ask each question, make sure that you listen carefully to students' responses. By being attentive to students, you not only train them to be attentive but also demonstrate that you value their participation.
6.	Give students feedback that is specific to their answers. If a student gives a correct response, reinforce their answer by using a positive statement or positive nonverbal communication like smiling, nodding, or maintaining eye contact. Avoid looking at notes, the board, or the teacher's guide while a student is responding to your question.
7.	If a student gives an incorrect response, pick out parts of the answer that are correct and ask the student to think a bit more about their answer. This helps your students learn from their mistakes. Consider staying engaged with the student who stated an incorrect answer, positively correct the error quickly, and ask the same student the original question a second time after they heard the correct answer. Then provide praise. This gives the targeted student assurance that they can be successful. For example, if you are asking a student to tell you the letter sounds in a word and they get only the first one correct, respond in a supportive way by saying, <i>Yes, you were correct about the first sound of the word, but try again to tell me the other sounds in the word.</i>
8.	If a student still fails to tell you a fully correct answer, you can ask other students to help. This avoids discouraging the first student while at the same time encouraging others to participate. You should also make a mental note of the first student and plan for additional support after the lesson. Note: It is important to make sure that the correct answer is provided (if there is one correct answer), whether by the student working through with help, by another student, or by you.

Strategy 2 – Monitoring Student Learning

This strategy has a dual purpose: (1) to check that students understand the new skill or learning task and (2) to provide on-the-spot support. This is best done by moving around the room and observing students as they work. Remember to avoid standing at the front of the classroom throughout the entire lesson and to move around the classroom to monitor learning and offer immediate support.

1.	Make sure to check on different students. As students work, move around the classroom. Try to reach different parts of the classroom. Create a schedule for this, if needed. For example, in large classes, monitor the last four rows of desks on Monday and Thursday, the middle four rows on Tuesday and Friday, and the front rows on Wednesdays. Alternatively, you might select a different group of students to monitor each week.
2.	Help any students who have misunderstood the directions to a learning activity or are struggling to practice or apply the new skill.
3.	Record in brief notes what you observe a student doing or saying as they practice a new skill, so that you can refer to it later. You can use a class list to record the progress and easily identify which students need more help. Keeping a record of students' abilities will also guide your groupings of students for peer support or pair practice.

Strategy 2 – Monitoring Student Learning

4.	Use your observation notes of student progress to give specific feedback. Feedback helps students know: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what they are doing well. For example, <i>You decoded this word so well.</i> • what they cannot do yet. For example, <i>I like your effort! Let's look at the letters in this word again.</i> • how they can improve. For example: <i>Point to each letter and try saying its sound.</i>
5.	Ensure that the corrective feedback: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is focused on the specific skill you have taught and are assessing. • praises the student before pointing out areas for improvement. • is encouraging so that it builds the student's confidence and self-esteem. • is actionable and tells the student to do something that they are able to do. • is given in a language that the student can understand.

TIER 2: Teacher modifies content and instructional strategies based on evidence of learning collected through formative assessment.

Strategy 3 – Modifying Content

Although teachers strive to “cover the curriculum” to achieve the same learning standards for all their students, students have individual learning abilities that vary. Depending on the skill levels and performance of your students, you might need to make modifications to the content in order to support more students in achieving learning goals. Discuss this challenge and possible solutions for modifying content with your colleagues (e.g., in the community of practice).

1.	Use your student progress checklist or the notes taken during lesson observations to help you decide what content or skills need modification.
2.	Modifying content is a necessary strategy to address students' varying learning needs. For example, some languages (such as English) use many words that follow a consonant-vowel-consonant (cvc) structure, while others follow a consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel (cvcv) structure. If you are teaching reading to students who first learned to read in a language whose structure is different from the language of instruction, there may be language interference for the non-English speakers. Because of their language background, some students may struggle to blend words. You will need to modify the content by providing simpler words and additional practice for such students.
3.	Another content modification to consider is simplifying the spelling patterns and words used in the lesson. If you are using a three-paragraph story, rewrite it to a one paragraph story with simpler words.
4.	When it is time for practice, put students in groups according to their ability and give them as many cards as possible to blend and read; or give them the shorter, revised text to practice reading aloud.

Strategy 4 – Modifying Instructional Strategies

Teachers normally use the same teaching strategy, method, or learning activity for the entire class of students, as it makes both the planning and the delivery of the lesson easier. But since classrooms inevitably have students with different learning styles, your chosen strategy may favor some students and not others. If you observe this in your classroom, you should consider ways to modify your teaching in order to support all students in achieving the learning objectives. Consider discussing other evidence-based strategies to use with your colleagues.

1.	Use your student progress checklist, the textbook and other resources, and your personal reflection on previous lessons to decide which teaching strategies might need some modification and how to adjust them in order to reach more students, especially those who are struggling.
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2.	Consider other teaching strategies. For example, rather than reading a word out loud and asking students to tell you the sounds in the word, you can ask students to work in pairs to read several new words aloud and together identify the sounds in a word. Do the pairing yourself so that strong students are paired with weaker ones. In this way, weak students can be supported by stronger ones.
3.	Modifying a teaching strategy may include adding games to the lesson. For example, after students have practiced blending words at their ability level, you may play games in which groups work with cards to come up with as many words as they can in a given amount of time (such as one minute). The group that blends the most words wins.
4.	Using an assessment task at the end of a lesson can help you determine if the pair work helped strengthen students' understanding and use of the new skill.

TIER 3: Teacher provides differentiated instruction and remediation to address learning gaps.

Strategy 5 – Differentiated Teaching

Differentiation is a teaching strategy in which the teacher tailors instruction and content to meet individual learning needs. Differentiated instruction allows all students to access content through different entry points, learning tasks, and expected outcomes, all tailored to students' needs.

1.	Use your student progress checklist or observation notes to group students according to skill level and need areas. For example, in a reading class, there may be students who are reading at story level while others may be at word or sentence level.
2.	Tell the students that you have created groups for them to work in and that each group will be reading a different text.
3.	Be sure that you have enough copies of texts, sentences, and words for individual children or pairs of children to practice with. For example, students at word level can be given letter or syllable cards to build words or word cards to match or read aloud in their groups. Start with two-syllable words or those that follow the consonant-vowel pattern for students who are struggling. Use words with a sound or syllable in common (such as <i>bin</i> and <i>bit</i>) or words in the same word family or that rhyme (such as <i>pan, can, man, fan</i> or <i>pat, cat, fat</i>).
4.	Plan enough time during the lesson to provide as much targeted support as possible to the lower-ability groups while other groups work independently. Check in with the other groups, taking note of student performance. Use your observation data to identify children who continue to struggle, perhaps through remedial instruction.

Strategy 6 – Remediation

Remediation refers to the additional small-group instruction offered to students who have fallen behind an opportunity to catch up to their peers. These efforts are tailored to students' individual needs. (See the [Science of Teaching How-to Guide on Remediation](#).) Remediation can help students who are struggling with a particular skill or set of skills, even after differentiated instruction. It aims to bridge learning gaps by providing targeted assistance to certain students. Remember that students who master the foundational skills of reading in the lower grades will continue to make positive academic gains; therefore, it is important to address reading challenges early in the learning journey.

1.	Take time to plan for remedial instruction. Discuss with your school leaders and make decisions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when and where the remedial lessons will take place. • who will provide remediation. • how often in a week students will receive remediation. • how to ensure ongoing communication with other teachers or parents.
2.	Plan remedial lesson content focusing on learning gaps identified during the weekly lessons.

3.	Remedial lessons should focus on target skills that children need to be successful in the classroom and should provide time to practice these competences. You should establish a positive and supportive remedial classroom atmosphere to encourage and motivate students. It is also important to plan for and offer children multiple opportunities to practice target skills individually, in pairs, or in small groups.
4.	Keep close track of student progress and reassess students regularly. Modify the activities, groupings, and content based on student needs.
5.	Celebrate all student participation and progress; this category of students needs a lot of encouragement to remain motivated.

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