



Foundations of Special Education

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Chapter 13: Instructional Strategies

“Teachers teach someone something, in that order.”

– Samuel M. Natale



Image: Ver Velde, J. (2025, September 30). Education: DSC7091. Dordt University. (Used with permission)

Introduction

Well-designed individualized instruction is at the heart of special education. While laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantee students with disabilities access to specialized supports and services, it is the quality of daily instruction that ultimately determines whether students learn, grow, and achieve meaningful educational outcomes. The IDEA definition of special education is, “Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (IDEA, 2017a). Typically, the IEP will not specify particular interventions or curriculum that

must be used; however, IDEA does emphasize the importance of having high expectations for students with disabilities and using evidence-based instructional strategies, including positive behavioral supports ([IDEA, 2019a](#)).

In this chapter, we examine instructional practices that consistently improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Topics include creating positive learning environments, organizing effective instruction, implementing high-leverage and evidence-based practices, using explicit instruction and scaffolded supports, promoting active student engagement, and designing lessons that foster learning and independence. Together, these strategies help teachers create classrooms in which all students can succeed.

Evidence-Based Practices

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are instructional methods, interventions, and educational procedures that have been demonstrated to be effective through high-quality research. Effective teaching, however, involves more than simply selecting an evidence-based practice. Teachers must also use their professional judgment to determine whether a particular strategy is appropriate for a specific student and then collect data to evaluate its effectiveness. Evidence-based instruction combines the best available research with professional expertise and ongoing assessment of student learning. Several related terms are commonly used when discussing effective instructional practices. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they have distinct meanings:

- **[Best practices](#):** These are practices that are considered good by experts in the field, but which may or may not have research support. They are also called recommended practices.
- **[Research-based practices](#):** These are best practices that have at least some research evidence to support their use. They are also called data-based and empirically validated practices.
- **[Evidence-based practices](#):** These are practices which have been demonstrated to be effective through high-quality, methodologically sound research. This is the best option when available.

IDEA states that special education services should be based on "peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable" ([IDEA, 2017b](#)). Likewise, the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) emphasizes the use of evidence-based interventions to improve student outcomes. This means that teachers should select instructional practices with the strongest available evidence while also considering the individual student's strengths, needs, and preferences. Ongoing progress monitoring allows teachers to determine whether the selected instructional strategies are producing the desired results and to make adjustments when needed ([PACER Center, 2010](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [What Works Clearinghouse, 2024](#); [Effective Educator Development Technical Assistance Center, 2023](#)).

Creating a Positive Learning Environment



During instruction, students should face the teacher while also being near enough to each other to be able to participate in partner discussions and collaborative learning activities.

Holmes, K. (2020, October 26). *Teacher writing 'Good Morning' on a whiteboard in an engaging classroom environment.*
Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Positive behavior supports are evidence-based practices that have been shown to improve student behavior and increase instructional engagement ([Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023](#); [VanTol, 2026](#)). Intentionally defining, teaching, and reinforcing classroom expectations are key components of an effective positive behavior support system.

Classroom expectations are often summarized in three to six positively stated classroom rules that promote safety, respect, responsibility, and learning. The rules should be short and written using positive language that indicates what students should do rather than what they should not do. Generally, when these rule statements begin with a verb, it is easier to keep the rule short and simple (e.g., Use kind words; Work hard; Arrive on time). Routines and procedures are then aligned with the rules. Instruction is always provided on the rules, routines, and procedures and should include examples and nonexamples. These classroom expectations should also be practiced and reviewed regularly. Visuals can be an effective support for helping students follow the schedule as well as the routines and expectations. Because transitions are often associated with increased off-task behavior, teachers should explicitly teach, practice, and reinforce transition routines ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023](#)).

The physical arrangement of the classroom should create a positive learning environment, promote appropriate behavior, and support high-quality instruction. Depending on the resources available and the ages and needs of the learners, a classroom might have separate areas for whole group, small group, and individual instruction. The classroom might also have other use-specific areas such as a designated independent work area for students, a play or free-choice area, and a quiet reading area. It is important that the room be arranged in such a way that the teacher can see all parts of the room and all students at all times. If different areas in the classroom will be used for different tasks, visuals can be used to designate which areas are for which tasks. The boundaries of each separate area can be defined using classroom furniture, low partition walls, and even pieces of colored tape on the floor. The materials needed in each area should be clearly organized and easily accessible for students and the students should be taught the routines for acquiring these materials and for completing the activities and assignments ([IDEA, 2019a](#); [Archer & Hughes, 2011](#)).

In teacher-directed instructional areas, the teacher should be in close physical proximity to the students. This helps the students feel connected to the teacher and allows the teacher to more easily monitor student understanding, maintain engagement, and provide

immediate feedback and assistance when needed. During instruction, students should face the teacher while also being near enough to each other to be able to participate in partner discussions and collaborative learning activities. When planning for instruction, teachers should predetermine the partners their students will work with during the lesson, taking into consideration each student's current instructional level, behavior, and social abilities. Classroom displays, such as assignment calendars, word walls, anchor charts, and posters of learning strategies, can be important instructional supports and should be carefully chosen. It can also be valuable to have a place to display completed student work. However, excessive visual displays can become distracting, particularly for younger students and those with attention difficulties. Classroom displays should therefore be purposeful and support instruction rather than create unnecessary visual clutter. ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#)).

High-Leverage Practices

Special educators must be fluent with strategies that are highly effective when teaching learners with disabilities. They must also be flexible problem solvers, monitoring the effectiveness of those strategies for their individual students, and making the indicated changes when needed. The [Council for Exceptional Children \(CEC\)](#) is the largest international organization committed to providing information and resources for special educators. The CEC partnered with the [CEEDAR Center](#) to identify the **high-leverage practices** that have been shown to improve student outcomes when implemented successfully ([McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [High-Leverage Practices, 2024](#)).

Participants in this research sought to identify the types of high-leverage practices that promote improved outcomes for all students with disabilities. High-leverage practices are not disability specific, but rather are broadly applicable across content areas, grade levels, and student abilities. These practices are research-based and foster student engagement and learning. High-leverage practices are critical for the implementation of evidence-based instruction ([McLeskey et al., 2017](#)). "This instruction, when delivered with fidelity, is designed to maximize academic learning time, actively engage learners in meaningful

activities, and emphasize proactive and positive approaches across tiers of instructional intensity” ([McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 69](#)). The remaining sections of this chapter will review the results of this and other research on high-leverage instructional practices.

Prioritize Learning Goals

Time is an important resource. Students have a limited amount of educational time and teachers need to make choices that use that time to the best advantage for each learner. Prioritizing the long and short-term learning goals for each student is a high-leverage practice which reflects the importance of using time wisely. When determining the most important goals for each learner, consider the following:

- The grade level standards
- The scope and sequence of the curriculum and any key prerequisites
- The student’s current level of knowledge
- The student’s IEP goals

When teaching students with more significant intellectual disabilities, research shows that it is effective to combine instruction in core content areas with instruction in functional skills rather than choosing one over the other. For example, math, reading, and science standards can all be embedded in lessons on the functional skills involved in food preparation ([Collins et al., 2010](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#)).

Once the learning goal has been identified, instructional activities should be intentionally designed to help students achieve that outcome. Effective instructional design includes activating prior knowledge, making connections explicit within and across lessons, and sequencing instruction so that learning progresses logically toward the goal. Teachers should continually monitor student progress and use the resulting data to determine when to adjust the pace of instruction and when additional teaching, practice, or review is needed. Instructional materials and learning tasks should be selected or adapted to match both the learning goal and the student's current level of performance. Adaptations such as highlighting key information, reducing the amount or complexity of content, simplifying directions, or providing alternate formats such as audio recordings or large-print materials

can improve student access to grade-level curriculum. Teachers may also use content enhancements and scaffolded supports, such as graphic organizers and guided notes, to help students understand, organize, and retain new information. The next section examines scaffolded supports in greater detail ([Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#)).

Scaffolded Supports



Scaffolding provides assistance to students, allowing them to complete tasks that they could not do on their own.

Ee, J. (2020, October 20). Man in green t-shirt and green pants standing on a black metal frame. Unsplash.com (Unsplash free to use)

Students can become overly dependent on adult assistance, resulting in a type of learned helplessness. Teachers can unintentionally contribute to this by providing more help than the student needs. On the other hand, learned helplessness can also result from a loss of motivation due to prolonged periods of academic failure and frustration. Scaffolded supports and instruction in cognitive and metacognitive strategies, which support both learning and independence, can target that “just right” level of support and prevent learned helplessness while also fostering realistic optimism ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Scaffolded supports are temporary instructional supports that help students successfully complete tasks they could not yet accomplish independently. As students gain knowledge, confidence, and proficiency, these supports are gradually reduced until the student is able to perform the task without support. One important type of scaffold is the explicit teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies help students process, organize, and remember information, while metacognitive strategies help students plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. These strategies are most effective when they are integrated into content instruction, modeled by the teacher, and taught explicitly ([Guiang-Myers, 2021](#); [Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Examples of scaffolding include:

- Cognitive strategies
 - Making predictions
 - Summarizing
 - Applying grammar rules
 - Making meaning from context
- Metacognitive strategies
 - Self-management
 - Self-regulation
 - Planning
 - Monitoring progress towards one's goals
 - Evaluating performance on one's goals

The idea of scaffolded supports is based on Vygotsky's concept of the **zone of proximal development (ZPD)**. The ZPD refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what the learner can't quite do independently, but could achieve with a little help. Watch the video to learn more about ZPD.



Video: Helpful Professor Explains! (2023, October 27). *Vygotsky's zone of proximal development*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYF5HefF6wA>

By providing targeted supports, that gap can be bridged in a way that aids learning. Scaffolding allows teachers to challenge students while also providing the support needed for them to experience success. Achieving this balance can be very motivating for the learner. These scaffolded supports are a temporary form of assistance that is gradually removed as the student's performance improves. Ideally, these supports are preplanned, but skilled teachers are also capable of providing these types of supports when the need arises during a lesson. Scaffolding can be used to address learning struggles caused by attention problems, challenges with working memory, and difficulty organizing new information. Instructional practices such as modeling, questioning, guided practice, prompting, and feedback can all serve as scaffolded supports that are gradually faded as students become more independent. In addition, scaffolding can be provided to help students learn the metacognitive skill of evaluating their own performance (Archer & Hughes, 2011; McLeskey et al., 2017; NASET, 2002).

Scaffolded instructional supports can take a variety of forms. [Archer and Hughes \(2011\)](#) provide these examples of scaffolding:

- Breaking a complex skill down into steps or chunks
- Sequencing skills so they build on each other
- Selecting examples and problems that progress in complexity
- Providing demonstrations and completed models of problems
- Providing hints and prompts as students begin to practice a new skill
- Providing aids such as anchor charts, cue cards, or checklists to help students remember the steps or process needed to complete a task or solve a problem

Teachers should intentionally incorporate scaffolded supports into their lessons in a way that promotes high rates of successful responding. During initial instruction, research suggests that for optimal learning, students should be able to give the correct answer during response activities at least 80% of the time and during independent practice, students should be able to give the correct response about 90-95% of the time. Thus, scaffolding is an effective way to support learning, ensure student success, and build student confidence. When scaffolded supports are carefully matched to students' needs and gradually faded over time, they help students move from dependence on teacher support to confident, independent learning. ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is a structured, systematic approach to teaching that incorporates scaffolded supports throughout the learning process. Students are provided with a clear explanation of the purpose for learning the new content and skills, clear explanations and demonstrations of the target learning outcome, and guided practice with frequent feedback before they are expected to demonstrate mastery. Explicit instruction proceeds in small, carefully sequenced steps with frequent checks for understanding, and engages all students through frequent opportunities to respond. Although the teacher plays an active role in directing instruction, explicit instruction is much more than traditional lecture

([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

In the beginning of their book, [Archer and Hughes \(2011\)](#) identify 16 instructional elements that characterize an explicit approach to teaching:

- **Focus instruction on critical content:** teach skills, strategies, vocabulary, concepts, rules that matches students' current instructional needs and prepares them for needs in the future.
- **Sequence skills logically:** Easy skills before harder skills, high-frequency skills before those used less frequently, ensure students have the prerequisites needed before teaching the skill.
- **Break down complex skills and strategies into smaller instructional units:** Teach in small steps. As steps are mastered, practice as whole.
- **Design organized and focused lessons:** Make optimal use of instructional time.
- **Begin each lesson with a statement of the lesson's goals and your expectations:** Students achieve more if they understand the goals and outcomes expected and how the information or skill will help them.
- **Review prior skills and knowledge before beginning instruction:** Verify students have the prerequisite skills and knowledge; link the new skill to other related skills.
- **Provide step-by-step demonstrations:** Clearly demonstrate the skill and "think" aloud as you perform the skill.
- **Use clear and concise language:** Use consistent, unambiguous wording that matches the complexity of your learners' abilities.
- **Provide an adequate range of examples and non-examples:** Establish when and when not to apply a skill, strategy, concept or rule. Anticipate common misconceptions.
- **Provide guided and supported practice:** Regulate the difficulty of practice opportunities to promote initial success and build confidence, gradually increasing task difficulty and decreasing the level of guidance.

- **Require frequent responses:** Having students respond frequently (e.g., oral, written, or action responses) helps students stay focused and helps you check for understanding.
- **Monitor student performance:** Close monitoring allows you to provide feedback and make timely adjustments in instruction as needed
- **Provide immediate affirmative and corrective feedback:** This helps ensure high rates of success and reduces repeated incorrect practice
- **Deliver the lesson at a brisk pace:** It is tricky to balance a brisk pace with reasonable time for students to process. On-task behavior is a good indicator of an optimal pace.
- **Help students organize knowledge:** Make connections apparent. This helps with retrieval of skills and integration of knowledge.
- **Provide distributed and cumulative practice:** Provide multiple opportunities to practice the skill over time, including previously and newly acquired skills to promote retention and automaticity.

When teachers incorporate these principles into their teaching, they are better able to actively engage their students in instructional activities and increase both time on-task and accuracy, resulting in increased learning. Because instructional time is used more efficiently, teachers have time to provide meaningful practice, feedback, and opportunities for students to practice applying the new learning. Through the strategic use of modeling, guided practice, scaffolding, and timely feedback, students gradually develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to achieve increasing levels of independence ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASSET, 2002](#)).

Grouping

Research shows that small-group instruction is often more effective than whole-group or one-to-one instruction for students with special learning needs. Small groups provide greater opportunities for targeted instruction while also allowing students to interact with their peers and practice important collaborative skills such as taking turns, listening to others, and contributing to group discussions. Group learning activities are most effective

when teachers select tasks that require meaningful collaboration and use structures that hold all students accountable for both their own learning and the success of the group. Explicit instruction strategies can also be incorporated into small-group activities to maximize learning opportunities and promote active participation by all students. Throughout these activities, teachers should monitor both individual and group performance to ensure that students are appropriately engaged and making progress toward the learning objective ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Grouping should be flexible and change according to the instructional goals of the lesson. **Homogeneous groups**, consisting of two or three students with similar instructional strengths and needs, are often used for focused, intensive instruction. This arrangement allows teachers to provide individualized instruction at an appropriate pace and level of difficulty while maximizing opportunities for student success. **Heterogeneous groups** are typically larger, with six to eight students often being an effective size. These mixed-ability groups promote communication, problem solving, and positive interactions among students with and without disabilities. Effective classrooms use a combination of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping patterns to meet different instructional purposes. Regardless of the grouping arrangement, teachers should organize groups based on instructional purpose rather than convenience ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Student Responding



Providing frequent opportunities to respond allows teachers to monitor student understanding, provide immediate feedback, and maintain student engagement.

Image: CDC. (2020, April 28). People sitting on a blue carpet. Unsplash.com (Unsplash free to use)

Teachers should use instructional strategies that actively engage students throughout the lesson. Instruction should proceed at a brisk pace while providing frequent opportunities for every student to respond. Ideally, students should be actively responding to the lesson approximately every two minutes. Providing frequent opportunities to respond allows teachers to monitor student understanding, provide immediate feedback, and maintain student engagement ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Strategies for student responding include:

- **Choral responding:** All students respond by saying the answer together or by holding up a response card with a written answer. This works best for short responses and when reviewing factual information. This method provides scaffolding for struggling learners because they receive immediate corrective and affirmative feedback while responding with their classmates. Teachers should establish a signal that indicates when students should respond together.

- **Partner responses:** Students turn to their partner and share answers. This works well when answers are longer or more varied. Students can benefit from hearing their partner's ideas and getting feedback on their own ideas. This method also supports development of language proficiency, social skills, and cooperation. One way to scaffold partner responding is to supply a sentence starter (e.g., "The main idea of the paragraph is..."). Sentence starters provide a scaffold that supports both retrieval of information and formulation of complete responses. Students are also more likely to use full sentences to express their answer and to stay on topic when this type of scaffolding is in place.
- **Action response:** There are many ways teachers can incorporate action responses and replies, using both large motor activities as well as smaller gestures and even facial expressions. Students can act out the meaning of vocabulary words. Hand motions can be used to indicate student responses. The teacher can even ask a question and have the students simply point to the answer in their own book or on their own paper, and then partners can check each other's responses for correctness.
- **Reading responses:**
 - **Choral Reading:** The teacher and students read the material aloud together at a moderate rate with appropriate expression. This can be scaffolded by having the students preview the text silently before chorally reading it. Teachers can also provide scaffolding by prereading any difficult words in the text before having the class read it chorally.
 - **Echo Reading:** Another way teachers can scaffold choral reading is by using echo reading, where the teacher reads a short segment of the text and then the students echo read the same segment. This is particularly valuable when supporting developing readers. Choral reading and echo reading provide a model for fluency and prosody and allow all students to gain reading practice.
 - **Partner reading:** Partners for partner reading should be intentionally set up by the teacher (see "Selecting Partners" for one suggestion on how to do this). The partners alternate reading, with the more proficient reader reading a short section of the

assignment followed by the second, less proficient reader, echo reading the same section. The students continue this pattern for the entire reading selection.

- **Me or We:** One way to scaffold partner reading is to provide a “Me or We” option. When it is the second partner’s turn to read, they can say “Me,” indicating they will echo read the material, or “We,” inviting the other partner to read chorally with them.

Frequent opportunities to respond increase student engagement, provide teachers with continuous information about student learning, and allow immediate corrective feedback before misconceptions become established. For these reasons, frequent opportunities to respond is considered one of the hallmarks of effective explicit instruction ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Selecting Partners

Begin by ranking the students in the class according to their current academic proficiency. Divide the ranked list into an upper half and a lower half. Pair the highest-performing student in the upper half with the highest-performing student in the lower half. Continue pairing students in order until all students have a partner (e.g., Student 1 with Student 13, Student 2 with Student 14, and so on). Adjust the pairings as needed to ensure that partners work well together. If there is an odd number of students, leave the student in the middle of the ranked list without a permanent partner. When it is time for partner work, this student can be paired with a classmate whose partner is absent or can join another partnership to form a group of three. Within each partnership, designate one student as "Partner 1" and the other as "Partner 2." Assigning the higher performing student as Partner 1 allows that student to model responses for their partner. Change partners every three to six weeks ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#)).

Teaching a Lesson



In a lesson, teachers introduce the topic and explain why the content is important, how it connects to prior learning, and when students are likely to use it.

Quilia. (2017, October 26). *Students in classroom with teacher presenting.*

Unsplash.com (Unsplash free to use)

It is important to gain your students' attention before beginning the lesson and when resuming the lesson after directing students to engage in response activities. There is no one right way to do this, but it is important to develop some sort of consistent signal as you will need to frequently redirect the students' attention back to you throughout the lesson. Once students are attentive, introduce the topic of the lesson and explain why the content or skill is important, how it connects to prior learning, and when or where students are likely to use it. You will also want to activate prior knowledge and verify that students have the necessary prerequisite skills for the objectives you want to teach. Reviewing prerequisite skills should be brief and is not intended to reteach previously learned material. However, teaching or reteaching will be necessary for any students who have not mastered the prerequisites. Ideally, you will have a short task, such as a "bellringer" or warm up activity, that all students can do to demonstrate they have the prerequisite knowledge. Simply asking students if they remember the information or even having one or two students demonstrate the skill does not verify that all the students in the group have mastered the prerequisite skills. Another way to do this is to assign homework that uses

the prerequisite skill and then start the lesson with a review of the homework followed by an introduction of the day's lesson topic ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Although the structure of a lesson will vary depending on the content, skills, and strategies being taught, explicit instruction generally follows a predictable sequence. The teacher begins by **modeling** the target learning outcome, using clear language, visuals, and a think-aloud process to demonstrate both the steps involved and the reasoning used to complete each step successfully. Examples and nonexamples are incorporated, as appropriate, to clarify important concepts and reduce misconceptions. The modeling portion of the lesson should include several demonstrations of the learning target. Depending on the complexity of the skill or content, teachers will typically do one to three demonstrations. As the teacher demonstrates the task, students should be actively involved in responding to questions related to the content being taught. This allows the student to rehearse the content and provides the teacher with feedback on student understanding and level of proficiency with the material. Teachers should maintain a good pace during the lesson, providing just enough think time for students to respond but not enough that they get distracted or off topic. Careful observation helps teachers determine how much time students need, although approximately 3–5 seconds is often appropriate ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

The next step is **guided practice**. During guided practice, teachers guide students step-by-step to apply the strategy together before directing students to try additional practice activities on their own. Scaffolded supports for guided practice may include modeling, prompting, working with a partner, or completing portions of the task with teacher support before moving to individual practice. Throughout guided practice, teachers should monitor understanding and provide immediate feedback and scaffolding as needed. The goal is to maintain high rates of successful student responding while gradually reducing the amount of support provided. Errors should be corrected promptly and in a way that leads to the right answer. If a student makes repeated errors, that error pattern becomes learned and harder to change, so the teacher will want to set up the learning task in such a way that

learners will be unlikely to make errors. When corrective feedback is needed, it should contain enough information that the student will know what to do in the future. All correction should be done in a positive, encouraging, and respectful way. When providing corrective feedback, always end with the student giving the correct response in order to strengthen the learning and supply an opportunity to provide positive reinforcement ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

As students become more proficient, scaffolded supports are gradually faded and responsibility for learning shifts to the student. The purpose of **independent practice** is to determine whether students can successfully apply the new learning without prompts or assistance. Don't simply ask students for their opinion on whether they think they have learned or understood the content. Instead, ask a specific question that requires students to demonstrate understanding. For independent practice, it works well to begin by having students do one item at a time, receiving the necessary corrective and affirmative feedback before completing the next item. When possible, teachers should continue this pattern until the students are consistently performing the skill accurately. This process helps prevent students from practicing errors while allowing teachers to verify that learning has occurred before responsibility is fully transferred to the student ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

High-quality **feedback** increases student motivation, engagement, and independence. Feedback is most effective when it is timely, specific, and provides students with clear guidance on how to improve their performance. It can take many forms, including spoken or written comments, nonverbal responses such as a smile, nod, or gesture, computer-generated responses, and prompts or cues provided as part of scaffolded instruction. Feedback should always be age-appropriate and proportionate to the task or activity. When a student is struggling with new content, additional explicit instruction is often more effective than simply providing feedback. Although quality feedback is an essential component of effective instruction, it cannot replace good teaching. Feedback can only

build on the good foundation that has been laid through high quality instruction ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

To conclude the lesson, teachers should **review** the critical concepts and skills, check for student understanding, and preview the next lesson. If students have demonstrated proficiency with the new learning, additional practice may be assigned as homework. However, if students are not yet able to apply the new skill independently, it is generally inappropriate to assign it for homework. The purpose of homework is not for students to teach themselves new content. Instead, homework can be used to review prerequisite knowledge, reinforce previously taught skills, or build fluency with newly learned concepts. Research suggests that homework for students with disabilities is most effective when it is brief, purposeful, focused on skill maintenance or building fluency, and followed by timely feedback ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Review and Generalization

Teachers should regularly review previously taught material to strengthen long-term learning. Reviews may occur weekly, biweekly, or monthly, depending on the complexity of the content and the needs of the students. Distributed, cumulative review provides the repetition needed to strengthen long-term retention of facts, concepts, rules, strategies, and skills. Because many students with disabilities require additional opportunities for practice, systematic review is an essential component of effective instruction. Review activities should be presented as opportunities to strengthen learning rather than as tests. Teachers should briefly model or review the concept or skill before providing students with opportunities for guided and independent practice. High-quality practice builds both accuracy and fluency. As students become more fluent with component skills, those skills require less working memory, allowing students to devote more cognitive resources to comprehension, problem solving, and higher-level thinking. Practice can be made even more effective by incorporating discrimination that requires students to determine which strategy, concept, rule, or skill should be applied to each problem. For example, when

reviewing subtraction with regrouping, teachers might include problems that require regrouping alongside problems that do not, requiring students to determine which procedure is appropriate for each problem ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Regular review can also be used to help students generalize what they have learned to new situations and environments. **Generalization** occurs when students are able to apply knowledge and skills beyond the setting in which they were originally taught. Effective instructional planning includes intentionally teaching for generalization by providing opportunities to use newly learned skills across a variety of settings, activities, materials, and people. Teachers can promote generalization by using multiple examples, varying practice conditions, and creating practice activities that closely resemble the real-life situations in which the skills will ultimately be used. Skills that are naturally reinforced in everyday environments are more likely to be maintained over time ([Archer & Hughes, 2011](#); [Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017](#); [McLeskey et al., 2017](#); [NASET, 2002](#)).

Putting it All Together



CourseArc. (2015). *Gagne's nine events*. CourseArc.com (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

While every lesson is unique, effective instruction generally follows this sequence:

- **Prepare students for learning.**
 - Gain students' attention.
 - Review homework or previously taught material.
 - Activate prior knowledge and verify prerequisite skills.
 - Introduce the learning target and explain why it is important.
- **Present new learning.**
 - Teach in small, carefully sequenced steps using clear language.
 - Model the learning target through demonstrations, think-alouds, examples and nonexamples.
 - Maintain a brisk instructional pace while frequently checking for understanding.
- **Provide guided practice.**
 - Use scaffolded supports, prompts, and feedback to help students successfully apply the new learning.
 - Ensure frequent opportunities for student responding and maintain high rates of student success.
- **Provide corrective and affirmative feedback.**
 - Correct errors promptly and respectfully.
 - Reteach concepts or skills as needed.
 - Gradually fade scaffolded supports as student proficiency increases.
- **Provide independent practice.**
 - Give students opportunities to independently demonstrate their learning.
 - Continue providing practice opportunities until students demonstrate the desired level of accuracy, fluency, or proficiency appropriate for the learning goal.
- **Close and reinforce the lesson.**
 - Review the critical concepts and skills.
 - Check for understanding.
 - Preview upcoming learning.
 - Provide distributed review over time to promote long-term retention, maintenance, and generalization.

Conclusion

“Never forget that you are the one who enhances the climate in your classroom every day—through your smile, your body language, your polite words, your kind acts, your enthusiasm for teaching, and your dedication to your students. In all these ways, you make your classroom climate both orderly and positive” ([Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 130](#)).

Effective instruction is much more than presenting information to students. It involves thoughtfully designing learning experiences that actively engage students, build on prior knowledge, provide appropriate scaffolding, offer frequent opportunities for practice and feedback, and gradually foster increasing independence. These evidence-based instructional practices create learning environments in which students can experience success, develop confidence, and make meaningful academic progress.

Although the strategies described in this chapter are particularly important when teaching students with disabilities, they represent high-quality instruction for all learners. Effective teachers continually monitor student understanding, use assessment data to guide instructional decisions, and adjust the level of support they provide based on each student's strengths and needs. Ultimately, effective teaching is both a science and an art. It is grounded in research, guided by professional judgment, and strengthened through positive relationships that recognize the dignity, abilities, and potential of every learner.

Notice and Reflect

Effective teaching involves much more than presenting information. It requires careful planning, active student engagement, ongoing assessment, and the use of instructional strategies that meet the diverse needs of learners. Observe one lesson taught in either a general or special education classroom. Pay attention to the instructional practices the teacher uses throughout the lesson.

Reflect

- How does the teacher gain and maintain students' attention?

- What evidence-based instructional strategies or high-leverage practices do you observe?
- How does the teacher check for student understanding and provide feedback?
- What accommodations, scaffolds, or other supports are provided for students who need additional assistance?
- In what ways does the teacher actively engage students in the learning process?
- Which of instructional practices that you observed appeared to have the greatest impact on student engagement and learning? How might you incorporate one or two of these strategies into your own teaching?

Glossary

- **Best practices.** These are practices that are considered good by experts in the field, but which may or may not have research support. They are also called recommended practices.
- **Choral reading.** The teacher and students read the material aloud together at a moderate rate with appropriate expression.
- **Choral responding.** All students respond by saying the answer together or by holding up a response card with a written answer.
- **Echo reading.** Another way teachers can scaffold choral reading is by using echo reading, where the teacher reads a short segment of the text and then the students echo read the same segment.
- **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** A 2015 law that governs U.S. K-12 education policy.
- **Evidence-based practice.** These are practices which have been demonstrated to be effective through high-quality, methodologically sound research. This is the best option when available.
- **Explicit instruction.** This systematic method of teaching proceeds in small, carefully sequenced steps with frequent checks for understanding, and engages all students through frequent opportunities to respond.

- **Generalization.** Students are able to apply knowledge and skills beyond the setting in which they were originally taught.
- **Heterogeneous groups.** These mixed-ability groups usually have 6-8 students. They promote communication, problem solving, and positive interactions among students with and without disabilities
- **High-leverage practices (HLPs).** Research-based practices that foster student engagement and thinking. They are not disability specific, but rather are broadly applicable across content areas, grade levels, and student abilities.
- **Homogeneous groups.** Consist of two or three students with similar instructional strengths and needs. This type of group is often used for focused, intensive instruction.
- **Positive behavior supports.** Evidence-based practices that have been shown to improve student behavior and increase instructional engagement.
- **Research-based practices.** These are best practices that have at least some research evidence to support their use. They are also called data-based and empirically validated practices.
- **Scaffolded supports.** Temporary instructional supports that help students successfully complete tasks they could not yet accomplish independently.
- **Zone of proximal development (ZPD).** Refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what the learner can't quite do independently but could achieve with a little help.

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Recommended citation

VanTol, K. (2026). *Foundations of special education* (3rd ed.). Dordt University.

<https://manifold.open.umn.edu/projects/foundations-special-education>



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