

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CONTENT-READING

CLARA LEE BROWN, Ed.D.

*Assistant Professor, Theory and Practice in Teacher Education
College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN*

Content area reading is extremely challenging for English language learners (ELLs). Although their English is not fully developed, they are faced with reading subject matter content in English that is typically written in academic language. Reading academic discourse is very challenging for ELLs because it is characterized with complex syntax, technical vocabulary, and a lack of helpful context. This article illustrates the difficult nature of content area reading through examples from social studies, and suggests that there are ways subject matter teachers can help make these demanding texts more comprehensible for ELLs. The subject matter teacher, it is argued, need not wait until ELLs complete the long and arduous task of fully acquiring academic language. This article offers specific strategies for content area teachers to assist ELLs' reading comprehension and thereby improve their learning of subject matter.

The number of English language learners (ELLs) is growing exponentially. From 1991 to 2001, the ELL enrollment in public schools in the United States increased by 95 percent, while the general student population increased only 12 percent (Padolsky, 2002). Georgia reports that ELLs in public schools increased by 650 percent during the same time period (Batt, Kim, & Sunderman, 2005). Hamblen County, Tennessee reports that ELL population has increased by 600% in five years (B. Dean, 2006, personal communication). It is clear that public school teachers throughout the nation will continuously face a greater influx of immigrant children. As the ELL student population grows, its academic achievement is a great concern for educators.

Reading is considered one of the most important academic skills and is highly

correlated with student achievement (Bishop, 2003; Krashen, 1995). Reading is often exclusively associated with language arts or literature, but reading is not confined to language arts. Reading in content area such as social studies or science does not receive as much attention as the literature genre. Reading comprehension in the content areas is essential to successful learning.

In an ideal world, ELLs will have the benefit of bilingual programs that will help them gradually build the competence needed to read complex texts. But this is rare. ELLs whose English is not proficient enough to be immersed in mainstream classes are nevertheless mainstreamed, except for the pull-out English as a second language (ESL) class. While they are acquiring English, they face the daunting problem of having to read and understand demanding subject matter texts written in

a decontextualized discourse style. Reading decontextualized texts has been shown to be difficult even for native speakers of English readers due to the nature of the discourse style. Decontextualized texts are characterized with a lack of contextual cues and an expository manner of writing (Cummins, 1984, 2000). It is extremely challenging for ELLs to comprehend decontextualized subject matter texts, and the demands for reading comprehension increase as students proceed to upper grades (Brown, 2006; Chamot, 1995).

How can teachers help ELLs become proficient in reading decontextualized content area books? How can they help ELLs understand these demanding texts? Before presenting suggestions, I present a brief description of the nature of academic language and how it differs from conversation language in order to give teachers an idea of the task ELLs face.

Conversational English vs. Academic English

According to Cummins (1981; 1984; 1996), there are two different kinds of language proficiencies for ELLs to acquire: conversational or social English and academic English. Conversational English is the kind of English used for daily conversation and is rapidly acquired by ELLs. It generally takes ELLs two to three years to be on grade level for conversational English. Acquiring academic English, the language of subject matter in school, however, takes considerably longer. It takes approximately five to seven years for ELLs to reach grade level proficiency in using academic language. In other words, being able to read and write proficiently on grade

level is an arduous process as well as a long-term undertaking. Reading teachers who do not know about acquisition rates for different English proficiencies can be easily misled, thinking that ELLs have reading disabilities because they can carry on conversations as if they were native speakers of English, but have problems reading academic texts. In reality, they have simply not yet acquired academic English.

Conversational language can be described as unedited speech, full of "choppy" and often incomplete sentences. Frequently, conversational language users do not specify references being made. People who are assumed to share the same context do not necessarily explicitly or fully express their thoughts to their interlocutors. When this assumption is not warranted however, a great deal of "filling-in" happens. It is common for interlocutors to reiterate, repeat, or provide new information to each other to reach the "same page" in the conversation. This kind of back-and-forth makes comprehension easier.

In addition, instantaneous clarification or feedback is possible in conversation. If one of the interlocutors perceives that other person does not comprehend the conversation, more efforts to explain or clarify will be used to allow the conversation to continue. Also, the vocabulary used in daily conversation is somewhat limited in scope, it is devoid of technical terms, and syntax is simpler than that used in academic language. No child would say to her/his mother, 'Mom, your failure to provide me with food this morning had deprived me of the most important nutrition of the day.' Rather, something like "got so hungry

cause you didn't have breakfast for me this morning" would be much more appropriate. Finally, conversational English includes extra-linguistic features, such as facial expressions, intonation, or gestures that could provide ELLs with cues that can help in comprehending the conversation.

Academic English is fundamentally different from conversational language. First, the academic register is characterized by expository and formal language. The social studies textbook would not say, "The government really screwed up in New Orleans when Katrina hit," which would be easier for ELLs with conversational language competence to understand. Instead, it is more likely to read "The federal government's failure to provide the timely rescue to the citizens of New Orleans, who were struck by hurricane Katrina, resulted in a high death toll that could have been prevented." In addition, the academic discourse used in reading is even more difficult to understand because of the absence of features normally presented in conversational discourse (e.g. facial features, intonation, and gestures).

Challenges in Content Reading

Adequately addressing ELLs' needs in content reading requires teachers to recognize the degree and scope of struggle that ELLs encounter. Some of the complexities and difficulties of content reading are illustrated here through examples from social studies. Numerous roadblocks exist when ELLs read text, presented below, related to Western Expansion in 5th grade social studies. The excerpts used as examples were taken from <<http://www.americanwest.com/pages/wexpansi.htm>>.

Background Knowledge

"Runaway horses, stampeded cattle, prairie fire, blizzards, heat, sunstroke, Indians, lice, snakes and the pure loneliness of the open plains - all of these and more faced the western pioneers of the 1800s. Certainly there were those who gave up, moving back to the security of the East, but many more stayed and helped build and shape the West one sod shack at a time, one small farm at a time and eventually one town at a time. They traveled forth on horseback, in Conestoga wagons...some even walked. For them it wasn't a question of how long it would take, only that it had to be done. And they did it."

Study after study has confirmed the fact that background knowledge facilitates reading comprehension (Dochy, Segers, & Buehl, 1999; Krashen, 2004; Peregoy & Boyle, 2004). Textbooks, as the example shows, assume that all readers share similar cultural experiences and have the necessary background knowledge to comprehend the text. It is likely that most mainstream students grow up hearing or reading about cowboys and Indians, but the same expectation cannot be applied to all ELLs. Thus, ELLs who do not know much about the Western Expansion prior to reading the text presented above will have a difficult time making sense out of what they are reading. This means that they have to figure out what they are reading alone based on their limited knowledge of the language and the conventions of writing alone.

Vocabulary

"Jefferson's message was secret because France owned the territory in question and such an expedition would surely be considered trespassing."

"The government was shrewd enough to realize that by mandating that the land could not lay idle they could easily avoid one problem and immediately solve another."

"Today is not so different from 1888 in that land remains one commodity that can't be created by mass production or any other method."

Clearly, the vocabulary used here is not that of daily conversation. In addition, the concepts that this kind of vocabulary represents are highly abstract, which makes reading between the lines very challenging. Words such as 'expedition', 'trespassing', 'mandating', and 'commodity', used in crucial places, can result in misunderstanding the text, even for native speakers of English. Obviously, the burden for ELLs is even greater.

Syntax

"Certainly there were those who gave up, moving back to the security of the East, but many more stayed and helped build and shape the West one sod shack at a time, one small farm at a time and eventually one town at a time."

The discourse structure of these kinds of texts is very complex, often written with dependent clauses or multiple clauses that

connect a series of facts, ideas, and concepts in one long sentence as in the excerpts presented here. ELLs could easily get lost, unable to differentiate the topic sentence from supporting details.

"The stories that were related to them by explorers and missionaries, just back from the track west, and were filled with images of vast, open landscapes, abundant game and pristine rivers and lakes."

In history texts, sentences are often written in the passive voice when describing events or explaining cause and effect. This can be troubling for ELLs since the passive voice is not used often in daily conversation.

Densely Packed Ideas

"Mexico to the south harbored small gangs of Bandidos who, regardless of the 1848 treaty, still coveted parts of Texas and California and saw the areas as morally belonging to the Mexican government."

Ideas are often densely expressed in one sentence packed with relative clauses, inserted adverbial clauses/phrases, or appositive phrases. When a series of ideas or facts is presented in such a convoluted manner, it not only slows down ELLs' comprehension, but it can also distract ELLs from getting the main idea.

Time Lines

"Traditionally, when one thinks of the expansion of the American West, the event most likely to come to mind is the California Gold Rush of

1849. While that profitable discovery did boost California's population by 80,000 eager prospectors, there remained an awful lot of land between the Pacific Coast and, say, St. Louis, Missouri. "Why mention St. Louis?" you might be asking. Because in actuality the young United States started exploring the vast land mass to the west from that very point and almost fifty years before those gold nuggets started hitting the pan in California."

In social studies, historical facts as well as their sequential time-line are important for comprehending the text. Historical event time-lines, however, are different from following the plot of stories because there is a less predictable sequence as compared to narratives that include a sense of "what will happen next". In social studies, numerous facts are intricately related and cause and effect relationships of events can be complex. Thus, it is difficult for ELLs to follow all the events in a timeline or comprehend the relationships among the events. This makes conceptual understanding harder for ELLs.

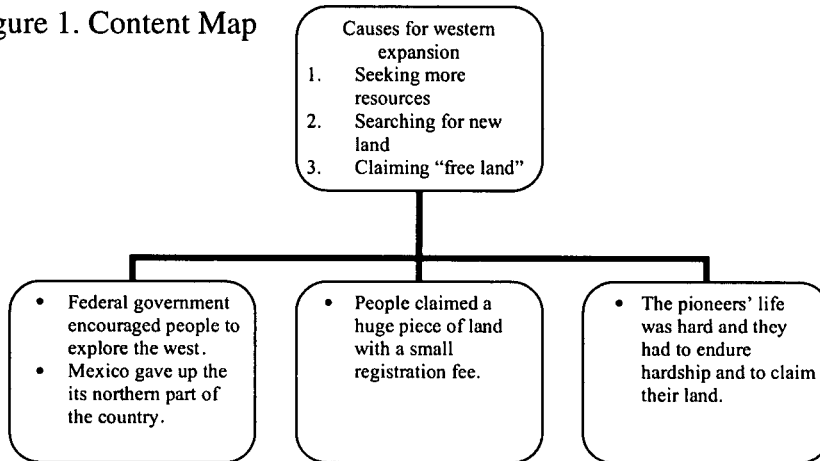
The excerpts used to illustrate the points being made are considered to be appropriate for the 5th grade. It is easy to see that the written discourse presented to fifth graders is quite complex. For ELLs, comprehending content area texts can be overwhelming when these barriers add up. While ELLs are in the process of developing their reading ability and competence in academic English, teachers in the content area can do several things to help ELLs better comprehend the text.

Recommendation One: Content-Maps

After the teacher introduces the content that students are about to read, a helpful step in making text more comprehensible is to provide a content-map of the material covered in the text. Content maps help make content transparent by showing how parts of the text are related. This can be done in various ways depending on the cognitive maturity of ELLs, but graphic organizers that illustrate the hierarchical relationship of the facts can be very effective. Since the discourse structure is complex, teachers can point out the location of the main idea and draw students' attention to it.

The content-map (Figure 1) following illustrates the way a teacher can introduce the key points of the content in simple language. This activity will scaffold ELLs' reading comprehension, that is, make the text more comprehensible. As the teacher and students read along in the text, the teacher can stop and point out relevant facts from the content-map. In this way, ELLs will not be lost in the densely written text while reading, and they will comprehend what they are reading thanks to their teacher' explanation and the visual aid of the content map. ELLs might not understand every word of the text. The important point is that they will be able to follow the main ideas regarding the Western Expansion. Details can come later, but getting the gist is of more immediate importance for their academic language development. Each box of the graphic organizer can be made simpler or more detailed depending on the level of the ELLs' English.

Figure 1. Content Map

*Recommendation Two: Guiding Questions*

To make content reading more manageable, it is advised that teachers present ELLs with a set of guiding questions before students tackle the text. This will help ELLs pay selective attention to the parts of the text that contain the pertinent information, and it will prevent them getting mired in minute details. ELLs might feel less overwhelmed knowing they are not responsible for understanding every detail in the text and at the same time feel confident when they are able to answer the questions.

Recommendation Three: Read a Simpler Version

Teachers can allow ELLs to read a text written in simpler language on the same topic (e.g., a social studies textbook written for a lower grades level). This is acceptable because the content is similar: Descriptions of the Western Expansion written for the 5th grade are not signifi-

cantly different in terms of content from the descriptions written for the 8th grade. If ELLs can handle the language of the lower grade level text books, the knowledge they gain will help them access the content of grade level texts. In addition, extensive reading of comprehensible texts will help ELLs acquire the academic language they need (Krashen, 2004). It should be noted that getting background knowledge by reading about the topic in the first language will help fill the knowledge gap as well.

Content Teaching and Reading Instruction

When teachers teach content area subject matter, they are not usually concerned with teaching reading, since their task is content delivery. As discussed so far, ELLs need reading support beyond that of language arts. All teachers clearly have to expand the role of reading teacher to all content areas for ELLs and provide needed support for content reading. This will

not only help ELLs gain more knowledge in the content area, but also help ELLs acquire more language in general, academic language in particular. Language is best acquired when ELLs comprehend the content being taught. When dealing with content-specific subjects, teachers need not remain passive until ELLs gain full proficiency in English. There are concrete steps to take, as discussed in this article. While teachers provide ELLs with comprehensible reading materials that stimulate their intellectual interests and help them develop competence in academic reading, they can also assist ELLs in meeting the challenges they face right now. The most important thing is that teachers make reading instruction an integral part of content area delivery. With better comprehension of the textbooks, ELLs understand more content area knowledge. An added dividend is that activities designed to accommodate ELLs often benefit fully English proficient students whose reading is below grade level. Thus, it is critical for the teachers of content area subject matter to take on a reading teacher role.

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