Leveling Up for English Learners

By Dr. Diane August

Managing Researcher, English Language Learners at American Institutes for Research

Introduction

New College and Career Readiness Standards reflect the knowledge and skills that all students —including English learners (ELs)—need for success in college and the workplace. Although these standards present challenges, they also create opportunities to accelerate the advancement of ELs through the proficiency levels, because they reinforce the idea that all students, including ELs, should meet grade-level standards and be supported to do so. To help ELs "level up," there are routines and scaffolds that can be used to give them access to core course content delivered in a second language.

In this white paper, we discuss the characteristics of text that make it challenging for ELs, as well as instructional routines and scaffolds that might be used during guided reading and writing in an English language arts class to support ELs. Using an excerpt of text from a *Wonders*® fifth-grade reading selection from McGraw-Hill Education entitled "Creating a Nation" (pp. 4–5, Unit 2), we provide examples of challenging text features and model some of the routines and scaffolds that might support ELs.

> *In 1765, King George III of Great Britain needed money to rule an empire. He decided to raise taxes. As a result, the British government passed a new tax called the Stamp Act. So when colonists bought any type of paper, the paper had a stamp. Then the colonists had to pay a tax on the stamp!*
>
> *Most colonists thought the Stamp Act was unfair. They did not have representatives to vote or make decisions for them in the British government. The colonists did not want to pay the tax because they did not vote for it.*
>
> *The colonists held protests against the Stamp Act. As a result, the act was canceled but the government put taxes on other things.*

Text Selection

The central focus of English language arts lessons is the text. Various systems have been used to assign numerical difficulty levels to text. A popular system is the Lexile® Framework for Reading system that assigns difficulty levels to texts based on such factors as the number of different words in the text and the length of sentences. However, text with similar Lexile levels (or numerical ratings used in other systems) can vary in difficulty for ELs. In choosing text for ELs, teachers should consider the attributes of text that make it challenging. Understanding these

attributes also helps teachers provide support where it might be needed. Some of the features of text that create challenges for ELs include a high percent of unfamiliar words and phrases, complex syntax, and, at the discourse level, referential chains. Text is also challenging if students have not acquired the requisite background knowledge to understand the topic at hand.

Attributes of Text That Create Challenge

Greater percentage of unfamiliar words and phrases – ELs tend to have much smaller English vocabularies than do their English-proficient peers (Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux, 2010), so they are more likely to encounter words and phrases in the text that they do not understand. They are also less likely to know all the meanings of English phrases, such as meanings associated with phrasal verbs (e.g., *take on, take over, take in, take off*). In the passage above, words important for understanding the text that might challenge ELs include *colonist, act* (as in a law), *unfair, representatives, decisions, government, tax, vote, protests, against, canceled*. Some of these words may be challenging because ELs have not been exposed to the same course content as their English-proficient peers (e.g., *colonist, act, representatives*); others may be because they have multiple meanings (e.g., *act, against*) or are conceptually complex (e.g., *protest*). However, ELs whose first language shares cognate status with English will have an advantage if they know word meanings in their first language (e.g., *colonist, act, representative, decision, government, vote, canceled*). **Connectives** – Connectives link ideas, like coordinating conjunctions (e.g., *for, and, nor, but, or, yet*) or conjunctive adverbs (e.g., *also, anyhow, besides, consequently, furthermore, however, instead, meanwhile*). Connectives can be difficult for ELs because they tend not to be taught and are hard to define. Connectives in this passage include *or, because, as a result, but*.

Complex syntax – Sentences with complex syntax can be confusing, especially for ELs. Complex syntax includes compound sentences, which have two or more independent clauses, and complex sentences that have one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. An example of a compound sentence is "They did not have representatives to vote or make decisions for them in the British government." An example of a complex sentence is "The colonists did not want to pay the tax because they did not vote for it."

Reference chains – English texts make frequent use of references to earlier people, topics, and ideas through the use of reference chains. Readers must pay careful attention to what each referent refers to, a task that can be especially difficult for ELs. A common type of reference chain is anaphora, which is the use of a pronoun to refer to other words in a sentence. In the passage above the pronoun *they* is used several times to refer to the colonists; the pronoun *it* is used to refer to the stamp tax. In other reference chains a person, place, or thing is referred to in diverse ways.

Instructional Routines and Scaffolds

ELs benefit from methods that are effective for all students but provide additional support for ELs (August and Shanahan, 2006; Baker et al., 2014). They also benefit from methods that capitalize on their home language knowledge and skills. We model several of the methods using the text excerpt above.

Building Foundational Skills

Scaffolds and routines are used to support ELs in their development of code-related skills. These include decoding and word reading, (which include modeling of phonemic awareness and phonics routines), defining words and using gestures and visuals to make word meanings clear, and providing opportunities for additional practice in making sounds not present in their home language.

Guided Reading

Before reading

Post standards – By posting and reviewing standards, teachers make students aware of the knowledge and standards-based skills they are expected to master during a lesson. Standards for ELs include content standards as well as English proficiency standards. Scaffolds for ELs include glossaries for challenging vocabulary associated with the standards.

Use the title to introduce the text – Students are asked to infer what the text is about from the book, chapter, or section title. Scaffolds include definitions for target words in the title that might be challenging for ELs and visuals associated with the title if there any handy.

Create *means to make something. The title of this passage is "Creating a Nation." What do you think the passage might be about?*

Develop background knowledge – Before engaging with the text, students may need to acquire background information (e.g., US culture and history) to help them understand the text. The background information teachers provide should be applicable to the specific text being studied, rather than general information related to the text. The background information provided should neither be a summary of the text nor eliminate the need for a close reading of the text. For the text above, developing and making available to ELs a brief passage that described the relationship between England and the colonies at the time of King George III would be helpful. There are a variety of materials that can be used to develop background knowledge, including auxiliary texts; short video clips; and other types of visuals such as pictures, photos, maps, time lines, tables, and graphic organizers. Scaffolds for ELs that make background materials comprehensible include glossaries for challenging words and phrases, as well as sentence frames and starters to help ELs at lower levels of proficiency answer questions about the background materials. Methods for developing background knowledge that use visuals and graphic organizers support ELs' comprehension.

Have students read and listen to the passage in their home language. For struggling English readers, have students listen to the passage in English as they read along. Note: Wonders *provides summaries in 14 languages.*
Provide short selections and questions related to King George III, Parliament, the concept of representation (having representatives that are elected speak for the people), and taxes.
Provide a short selection and questions related to the problem-and-solution text structure, and provide a graphic organizer students can use to note problems and solutions as they read the text.

During reading

Work with smaller chunks of text – To help ELs comprehend text, chunk it into smaller segments and engage students in multiple readings of each segment of the text, each for a different purpose. In this way, students will understand prior sections of text before they tackle new sections.

Engage in multiple readings of the same section of text – During the first reading, teachers might read the text aloud to model fluent reading while students listen and follow and/or read along. During this first reading, teachers can define challenging words and phrases. In a second reading, students might work in pairs to respond to questions inserted in the text, which are intended to help students uncover the meaning of the text. All students answer the same questions (e.g., King George III had a problem, what was it?). However, ELs with entering and emerging levels of English proficiency are given word banks, sentence starters, or sentence frames to help them respond
to the questions. In a third optional reading, students can be given opportunities to annotate the text, identifying words that they still do not understand and/or parts of the text that they still find challenging. Following this annotation, the teacher can engage students in a discussion so they can help each other figure out word meanings and clarify challenging sections of the text.

King George III had a problem. What was the problem and how did he try to solve it?

1. King George III had a problem. What was it?
Advanced [no starters for frames]: King George III had a problem. What was it?
Intermediate [starters]: King George III's problem was _____. Beginner/low intermediate [frames]: King George III _____ money to _____ his _____.

Advanced: How did he solve the problem?
Intermediate: The British government passed _____.
Beginner: The British government passed a new _____ called the _____.

Advanced: As a result of the Stamp Act, what did every piece of paper have on it?
Intermediate: Every piece of paper _____.
Beginner: Every piece of _____ had a _____ on it.

Advanced: The Stamp Act required that colonists do something. What was it?
Intermediate: The colonists had to _____.
Beginner: The colonists had to _____ a _____ on the _____!

Throughout reading

Support vocabulary development – Throughout the lessons, there are many opportunities for ELs to learn vocabulary. Words and phrases are selected for instruction based on three criteria: 1) importance for understanding the text, 2) frequency in texts across content areas, and 3) importance for acquiring the skills indexed by the language standards (e.g., learning about figurative language).

Scaffolds for ELs include comprehensible definitions for target words, examples familiar to students that illustrate word meanings, visuals to make word meanings clear, home language definitions for target words, opportunities for partner talk to give students practice using words, and additional opportunities for reinforcement through engaging activities like dramatization. A word-learning strategy particularly beneficial for ELs whose home language shares cognates with English is to draw on home language knowledge to understand words in English text that are cognates.

Provide a glossary that presents each target word, its translation, a comprehensible definition, and an example.

Strengthen written expression

Scaffolding techniques prior to writing include providing ELs with opportunities to generate ideas and organize their thoughts using graphic organizers aligned with the genre they are writing in. They can be given opportunities to discuss their ideas with a partner (in their home language or in English) before they begin writing. ELs with entering, emerging, and transitioning levels of proficiency can be given access to genre-aligned graphic organizers and sentence starters or sentence frames to help them write. Teachers help ELs edit their writing to improve both craft and structure.

Extend learning

Wide-reading – Provide incentives for students to read text closer to their zone of proximal development outside of class. Help students choose books at the right level that they are interested in reading.

Home connections – Send home activities that older siblings or parents can help students complete. Provide opportunities for students to work in their home language(s).

References

August, D., and Shanahan, T. (Eds.) (2006). *Developing literacy in second language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.*

Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C. P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M. J., Linan-Thompson, S., and Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school* (NCEE 2014-4012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education. Retrieved from the NCEE website: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications_reviews.aspx

Mancilla-Martinez, J., and Lesaux, N. K. (2010). Predictors of reading comprehension for struggling readers: The case of Spanish-speaking language minority learners. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 701–711.