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Back to Basics: Rethinking Thematic Reading Instruction for English Language Learners

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By

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Puzzled, Tan is watching his classmates who are laughing while trying to explain and demonstrate a word that is written on the board behind him. “What can it be?” And then the biggest grin appears on his usually reserved face. “Ancient!” he declares with pride. The boys put their thumbs up and Tan chooses the next person to go. Playing Hot Seat with new vocabulary words was one of student favorites during the ESL Book Club conducted at their school.

For young or inexperienced readers, exposure to texts is critical for developing keen interest in reading. However, some students, including those who are learning English as an additional language (EAL), have limited content and vocabulary knowledge, sometimes causing them to struggle with those texts. By engaging students with in-depth thematic reading, a practice based on Krashen’s “Narrow Reading” (2004), educators can increase focus on vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension in complex content-area

topics, scaffolding students comprehension to access the types of texts needed for academic success. In this article, we describe and review an in-depth thematic reading approach in light of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). We illustrate the potential benefits of narrow or thematic reading by describing our work with an after-school book club we organized for multilingual students at suburban elementary schools in the southeast.

The Common Core and Academic Language

Common Core State Standards have now been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia (Core Standards). Surveys conducted in school districts in states that have adopted the standards indicate that they are indeed perceived as more rigorous

(Kober & Rentner, 2011). Part of this is that the standards call for changes to both the types of reading and the focus of reading instruction in K-12 classrooms. Specifically, they require a greater balance of fiction to non-fiction reading, as well as continuously increasing levels of text complexity. This is based on CCSS research identifying a lack of non-fiction reading in the lower grades (Hiebert & Grisham, 2013) and research which suggests that ability to comprehend complex texts is a “high impact indicator of future success” (CEP, 2013). The emphasis on non-fiction reading, or reading in the content areas in the elementary grades is particularly significant, as it places importance on academic vocabulary and knowledge building activities that lay the foundation for academic success in upper grades.

While the CCSS has brought a concern with Tier 2 vocabulary (general academic words such as *formulate* and *periphery*) and Tier 3

vocabulary (domain-specific words such as *carburetor* and *lava*) to the fore in terms of meeting standards, academic language has been a focus of second language research for quite some time (e.g., Chamot & O’Malley, 1996; Cummins, 1979). Academic language is privileged in educational contexts and students must be able to use it successfully to survive in school (Cummins, 2000). Further, it takes significant time to develop. Linguistically diverse students may take five to seven years to develop grade-level proficiency (Cummins, 1992) and complicating factors such as poverty may increase this figure (Hart & Risley, 2003). Knowledge of academic language varies relative to developmental and educational levels attained (Scarcella, 2003; Stahl & Nagy, 2006) and based on familiarity with a topic. And in some sense, academic language is always developing, even for native speakers. There are also many elements to understanding and using

academic language. It is comprised of social practices used to complete communicative goals (Scarcella, 2003), facility with content-specific vocabulary (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008), complex grammatical structures (Cummins, 2003; Stahl & Nagy, 2006), recognition of morphological word parts (Echevarría et al., 2008), and the ability to identify linguistic features particular to various academic disciplines (Cummins, 2000; Scarcella, 2003).

Proficiency in academic English enables students to become part of a “culture of literate English” (Stahl & Nagy, 2006, p. 139).

Academic Language and Reading

Reading is the main way that academic language can be developed. In fact, research has shown that simply reading alone, without any other interventions, can be a valuable source of input for second language learners (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989;

Lituanas, Jacobs & Renandya, 2001; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997). However, for linguistically diverse students, reading comprehension is often hindered by English vocabulary knowledge that is limited in both breadth and depth (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Verhallen & Schoonen, 1993; Valencia & Riddle-Buly, 2004). In fact, even English language learners (ELLs) who exit supplemental ESL programs often lack the academic vocabulary needed to succeed in their grade-level classroom without intensive language support. For ELLs, the right *kind* of reading can therefore become an invaluable source of language input that not only provides opportunities for vocabulary acquisition but may also help them to become independent learners.

“Wide” Reading

One of the most frequently discussed approaches for providing additional reading instruction is “wide” reading. Most wide reading programs involve large amounts of

voluntary reading on any subject that appeals to the readers. Independent wide reading programs come under various names, including extensive reading, uninterrupted sustained silent reading (SSR), drop everything and read (DEAR), and silent uninterrupted reading for fun (SURF) (Renandya, 2007). All of these programs have the same purpose, which is to provide students with a large quantity of high-interest self-selected reading material that is on or below their reading level (Renandaya, 2007).

Wide reading has also been utilized in ESL classrooms in the US and related research shows students who participate in the programs often “develop positive attitudes towards books” (Elley, 1991, p. 375). This is might be due to the fact that, as students read a large amount of material they have chosen for themselves, they experience success and become intrinsically motivated to continue reading. In fact, one researcher

theorized that this positive exposure to books might lead not only to greater amounts of reading, but also to improved reading proficiency (Anderson, 1996).

When independent wide reading programs are set up, the freedom of choice may keep students interested, but it may also negate valuable learning opportunities, such as increased content familiarity and repeated exposure to vocabulary that can arise from reading a series of more closely related texts. One possible weakness of using wide reading alone may be the lack of repeated opportunities for seeing the same vocabulary and content, known as vocabulary recycling (Nation, 2001). Research into vocabulary recycling shows that students typically need to see a new vocabulary word in context multiple times in order for the reader to recognize it. Nation (2001) argued that “repetition is very important for vocabulary learning [...] because vocabulary items must not only be known; they must be known

well so that they can be fluently accessed” (p. 74-76). To know vocabulary well, students need multiple exposures to the same words in various settings. Gardner (2004) thus hypothesized that not only the volume of reading, but also its nature and quality, would affect vocabulary growth and second language acquisition. Indeed, if teachers want to offer ELLs a fair chance to succeed in the rigor of the CCSS, wide reading must be complemented by in-depth thematic reading, especially reading in content themes that are aligned with the Standards.

In-depth Thematic Reading

Common Core State Standards call for increased levels of strategic academic vocabulary instruction and development of content knowledge. Some of the practices associated with the CCSS include close reading, relying on multiple exposures to a short complex text, and an increased focus on non-fiction. We believe that the high

expectations of the standards may be met by taking a more focused approach to reading with ELLs through in-depth thematic reading. Although wide reading and in-depth thematic reading are both currently in use to some degree, an in-depth thematic approach has received less attention until now (but see Bryan, 2011 for one recent review).

Available empirical evidence suggests the potential benefits of in-depth thematic reading are great enough that this approach deserves additional attention. In particular, it can be an effective way to assist ELLs with increasing vocabulary knowledge and improving comprehension of complex content-area topics, both heavily emphasized by the Common Core State Standards.

We define in-depth thematic reading as using a collection of texts focusing on a specific topic or a theme as characterized by identifiably interconnected ideas and concepts. One example of this type of

reading can be found in Krashen's (2004) notion of Narrow Reading. Narrow reading can be defined as repeated reading of thematically related texts (Min, 2008) or reading in one genre, area, or author (Krashen, 2004). Krashen and colleagues found this method scaffolds readers' background knowledge, making texts more comprehensible (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005). Furthermore, native speakers frequently engage in Narrow Reading, even if unintentionally, as they tend to read books by one author or in one genre. For example, as we find an author we enjoy we tend to read numerous works by this author or series' of books in one genre, (e.g., detective stories). Thus, Narrow Reading may simply reinforce a habit already acquired in students' first language practices.

The following three tenets are essential to Narrow Reading. First, by using a single topic, author or genre, Narrow Reading offers extended exposure to a single theme.

This increases background knowledge and provides necessary scaffolds for making sense of the text. Second, as with repeated content, repeated exposure to vocabulary may "facilitate incidental vocabulary acquisition" (Lee, 1996, p.13). Finally, as Narrow Reading focuses the reader's attention to a single topic or style of writing, it eases the mental processing load for the learners, enabling them to focus their attention on other aspects of reading, such as fluency. Thus, the sustained content in Narrow Reading helps increase topic and text structure familiarity, improves reading confidence, and facilitates vocabulary acquisition.

Potential Benefits for English Language Learners

In a recent review of the literature on narrow reading, Bryan (2011) found that indeed this approach was useful for second language learners. We believe that in-depth thematic reading works particularly well with the

CCSS because as vocabulary and academic content reoccurs, it allows for acquisition of Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary, repeated exposure to similar or related concepts, and increased familiarity with the topic for greater comprehension.

Building Background

Knowledge

Sustained content can support multilingual students as they are reading. While these students may initially lack background knowledge due to unfamiliarity with content vocabulary, sustained content provides the familiarity needed to allow them to focus on the other

aspects of the text. According to Ponder and Powell (1989), “reading at length and in depth about a single topic enhances the ability to deal with the linguistic elements of

a novel text; as more and more texts on the topic are attempted, vocabulary and associated structures become increasingly familiar” (p. 7-8). Sustained content may in

fact allow students to “accrue information, without which they are less able to compare, question, synthesize, and evaluate what they read” (Pally, 1997, p. 294). Further, Willingham (2006) argued that background knowledge allows readers to chunk information in the text, allowing working memory “to sort through the implications of a text” (n.p.). In other words, this style of reading has the potential to

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increase background knowledge enabling students to focus on other critical thinking skills, better preparing second language

students for success in academic content areas.

Learning Domain-Specific Vocabulary

Through bypassing the initial adjustment period usually required to develop familiarity with new content, in-depth thematic reading may afford students the opportunity to focus on other areas, such as vocabulary, comprehension, reading strategies, metalinguistic knowledge, and critical thinking skills. One major advantage of in-depth thematic reading is that there is a great chance of vocabulary reoccurrence, and this repeated exposure can lead to greater vocabulary acquisition (Hwang & Nation, 1989; Min, 2008; Schmitt & Carter, 2000). Not the breadth, but the depth of reading materials provide rigor for ELLs' academic success. As the students read a number of books on the same topic, they repeatedly encounter a similar set of vocabulary words associated with a particular content topic. Over time, through

multiple exposures, content terminology, in which the meaning is concentrated, becomes a part of a student's active vocabulary.

Furthermore, teachers can be more strategic about the vocabulary instruction they offer to students, as the theme lends itself to a particular focus on domain-specific words.

Enhancing Reading Comprehension

Though more research is needed in this area, we do know that typical comprehension instruction is limited to a number of disconnected strategies that equate reading comprehension to a graphic organizer.

Dozens of basal readers offer so called thematically organized texts that often lack depths and ask students to utilize a given strategy (e.g., find cause and effect, predict, summarize) to comprehend a story.

However, as teachers, we saw first-hand that the comprehension strategies may or may not transfer from text to text. What carries over is students' knowledge of a particular topic and the vocabulary associated with it.

As Hirsch (2006) noted, “[...] cognitive scientists agree that reading comprehension requires prior "domain-specific" knowledge about the things that a text refers to, and that understanding the text consists of integrating this prior knowledge with the words in order to form a "situation model." Constructing this mental situation model is what reading comprehension is.” In other words, through in-depth study of a particular theme or a topic, students accumulate content knowledge, as well as vocabulary, and as a result enhance their reading comprehension.

Implementing In-depth Thematic

Reading: an After-school Book Club

In our teaching practice, we incorporated in-depth thematic reading both during and after school. For the purposes of this paper, we chose to focus on our experiences with an after-school book club that allowed students to read narrowly over an extended period in a safe and comfortable environment.

Context

We conducted ESL book clubs for three consecutive years with four different groups of children at two elementary schools (one urban and one suburban) in a mid-sized southeastern city where we (the authors) taught. In all, 26 total students participated in the book clubs, which each lasted for approximately four months. To begin, we invited any student receiving ESL services in the upper elementary grades (3rd – 5th) to join the club, which met for one hour, one day a week, after school. It is therefore important to remark that the students in this project were willing participants who volunteered to attend the meetings outside school hours, and this motivation may in fact have been a positive factor in terms of the improvements we were able to observe. Students’ language proficiency levels ranged from Level 2 through Level 4 on the ELDA (English Language Development Assessment) test. This also reflects the range in our daily ESL pullout groups. Data

collected included planning documents, student work, student interview recordings, and informal observation notes. In this article, we will include examples from just one of the book clubs, which was conducted with 3rd and 4th grade ESL students at one of the participating elementary schools. When we began our unit on Ancient Greece, our book club consisted of four third and two fourth grade boys who spoke Japanese, Spanish or Vietnamese as their first language.

In our after-school implementation, we used a set procedure, yet these steps are modifiable for any teacher's plans, whether using in-depth thematic reading during school hours or after school, as part of a tutoring program or voluntary book club. Our three planning stages for getting started were selecting a theme, choosing texts, and planning activities.

Step 1: select a theme. In-depth thematic reading hinges upon deep exploration of a

topic, therefore we wanted to select a theme that would remain interesting to students over a span of several months. When choosing the theme, we also considered the CCSS and other standards to which our district adheres. We wanted to use this book club time to enrich students' knowledge of topics related to their grade-level content work. Keeping an academic focus to the theme allowed us to relate the work the students did in the book club to their experiences in the classroom. For example, one of the themes we worked with was Westward Expansion, which fit easily within the fourth grade state social studies standards for recognizing and understanding American territorial expansion. For the book club described in this article, we chose the topic of Ancient Greece, which offered numerous connections to the world the students live in today (e.g. the Olympics and the governmental systems). The theme was linked to such third and fourth grade

social studies standards as understanding “diversity of human cultures” and “identifying the contributions of individuals and people of various ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic groups to the development of civilizations” (Tennessee Department of Education Social Studies Curriculum Standards).

Step 2: select books. After selecting a theme, we began to search for age and reading level appropriate books on that topic. We found that this took a little more time at the start than we originally had planned because locating high-interest low-complexity level books for the initial sessions was challenging to find. After selecting a theme, we began looking for books in our local and school libraries. At this point, we were considering the theme, the students’ interests, and their reading levels. We found that it helped to be creative when selecting reading materials. In our own search for books, we also found various

reading sources available through the Internet. We used these to supplement the books students were reading.

We were able to provide one copy of each book for each student. However, in the classroom setting it was often difficult, but also unnecessary, because we had students read in small groups, selected sections of the books to read whole group, or had several selections on one narrow topic (e.g. three different texts about discovering King Tut’s Tomb) for each small group to read before passing their book to the next group.

Further, this kind of thematic focus allows for meaningful differentiation in the classroom. While students might read texts at different levels, they all become valuable contributors in the content discussion.

In our book selection, we were particularly focused on ensuring the students would find the content interesting, both to encourage them in their desire to read and because the project took place after school, in their own

time. We purchased four books that were engaging and content-rich, while at the same time remaining conscious that the language needed to be simple enough for our students to grasp. To ensure that the books would be comprehensible to our students, we conducted FRY readability tests on each of the texts under consideration. We initially had to reject several texts as being much too difficult, which is one potential problem with using authentic literature. However, we chose to stick with authentic books because of the way it “automatically recycles language (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) as it represents coherent characters and settings and a particular time” (Gareis, Allard & Saindon, 2009). Eventually, we chose texts with reading levels about one to two grade levels above that of the participants. Although we would not recommend providing students’ sole reading instruction from texts this far above their reading level, the recreational nature of the book club,

coupled with the scaffolded support we provided, made the use of these texts possible. It is also pertinent to note that the selected texts were still much closer to the students’ actual reading levels than the school social studies texts, which we found after conducting FRY readability tests were written at roughly an 8th grade level. Table 1 shows some of the books we used in our book clubs.

Step 3: reading and vocabulary activities.

The structure of our book club meetings was consistent throughout in order to ensure that the focus remained on reading and vocabulary, and to promote learner autonomy. We started each session by discussing the previously read material and by reviewing the vocabulary on the word wall. We regarded the word wall as an invaluable opportunity for students to take ownership of new vocabulary, as well as to provide additional practice with the words.

Table 1. Examples of Text Sets by Theme

| Texts used in Narrow Reading Project | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| Ancient Greece | Ancient Egypt | US Westward Expansion | Dinosaurs & Fossils | Energy Resources |
| Curious Kids Guides: Ancient Greece by F. MacDonald | Mummies, Pyramids and Pharaohs by Gail Gibbons | Towns of the West, from Boom to Bust by D. Furey | The Day of Dinosaurs (First Time Books) by S. Berenstain | Oil by C. Ditchfield Oil and Gas by N. Morris |
| DK Readers: Greek Myths by D. Lock | Who Was King Tut by R. Edwards and T. Kelley | William F. Cody: Showman of the Old West by E. West | What Ever Happened to the Dinosaurs? by B. Most | Oil Spill! by M. Berger and P. Mirocha |
| Ancient Greece by P. Connolly | The Curse of King Tut's Mummy by K. W. Zoehfeld and J. Nelson | The Lewis & Clark Expedition: Join the Corps of Discovery to Explore Uncharted Territory (Kaleidoscope Kids Book) by C. A. Johmann and M. P. Kline | Discovering Dinosaurs with a Fossil Hunter (I Like Science) by J. Williams | Oil, Gas, and Coal by T. Benduhn Oil (DK Eyewitness Books) by J. Farndon |
| You Wouldn't Want to be a Slave in Ancient Greece by F. MacDonald | The Egyptian Mummy (History Detectives) by F. MacDonald | Daily Life in a Covered Wagon by P. Erickson | Fossils (Early Bird Earth Science) by S. M. Walker | Generating Wind Power (Energy Revolution) by N. Walker |
| Magic Tree House Research Guide #10: Ancient Greece and the Olympics: A Nonfiction Companion by M. P. Osborne, N. P. Boyce, and S. Murdocca | Egyptian Mummies: People from the Past by D. Pemberton | If You Traveled West In A Covered Wagon by E. Levine Trail of Tears (Step-Into-Reading Seires) by J. Brucha | The Best Book of Dinosaurs by C. Maynard | Harnessing Power from the Sun (Energy Revolution) by N. Walker |
| | Tut's Mummy: Lost...And Found by J. Donnelly and J. Watling | They Came Around the Horn by R. V. Phelan | Dinosaurs!: The Biggest Baddest Stragest Fastest by H. Zimmerman | Our Earth: Clean Energy by P. Hock |
| | National Geographic Readers: Mummies by E. Carney | | Eyewitness Book: Dinosaur by D. Norman and A. Milner | Energy Makes Things Happen by K. Bradley and P. Meisel |

Image 1: Word Wall

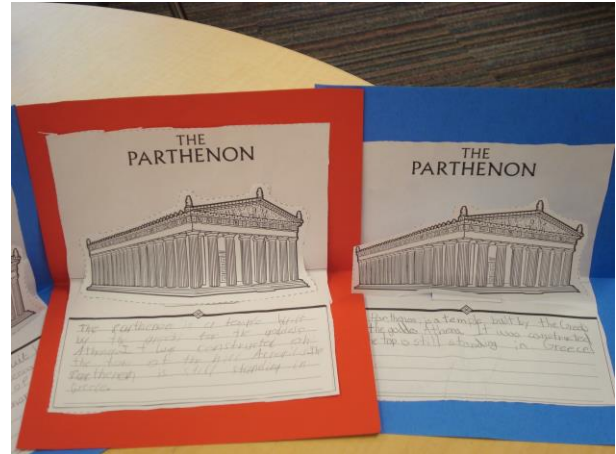


Brief new vocabulary introduction followed, and we assisted the students as needed in working out the vocabulary, which was then written on index cards by students for review at the beginning of the next session. Students also entered new vocabulary words into their personal dictionaries, which included a student-created context specific description of the word meaning, an illustration and an example sentence using the vocabulary word to help students recognize the part of speech. The students then formed smaller groups, read and discussed their book, and brought a few pertinent ideas or questions to share with the whole group. Students were also allowed to

take the texts home, and invited to read or re-read passages to their family members or for their own enjoyment if they wished. Though students spent the majority of the book club time sessions actually reading and discussing, in accordance with Min's (2008) research into the effects of vocabulary enhancement activities indicated that additional focus on vocabulary words may be necessary to ensure that students are acquiring this language, we conducted a number of vocabulary-enhancing activities. Students discussed new vocabulary words, looked for cognates in their native languages, created personal vocabulary notebooks, word walls, participated in collaborative projects and vocabulary games such as Hot Seat, as illustrated by the vignette above. All of these ensured that we did not leave vocabulary acquisition to an incidental chance, but focused students' attention to key words most meaningful to the theme.

Students also participated in additional enrichment activities to reinforce the content and encourage their interest in the topic. For instance, students created their own shields when talking about Grecian army, then they explained why they chose their particular design and what meaning it had; students also created a paper Parthenon before journaling about the construction of the Greek Parthenon. Additionally, we incorporated mini-projects and student-directed activities weekly to keep students' interest high. We often used these activities as the basis for journal entries or other student writing. During most sessions, students completed journal entries related to that week's particular reading and activities that yet again focused students on the content vocabulary of the topic.

Image 2: The Parthenon Journal Entry



The Results

Over an average span of 16 weeks, students read an average of four individual texts under a unified theme. Across each theme, vocabulary words were selected by the students and given additional attention through the word wall, games, and personal dictionaries. In other words, over the span of the book club, students were actively engaged in repeated reading and close study of texts written on or slightly above their grade level – all practices that are emphasized in the CCSS. Furthermore, we observed that students were able to take increasing ownership for their study as the book club progressed. This may indicate that the routine was useful to students, but it may

also indicate that as the theme continued, students became more familiar with the vocabulary associated with that theme and were able to read and work more independently. Ultimately, while we cannot make claims that this approach increased vocabulary learning in statistically significant way, anecdotally, we saw evidence of increased topical familiarity and more use of the key content vocabulary. In particular, we noted growth in the students' ability to use domain-specific vocabulary words in context in their journal assignments and in their discussions related to Ancient Greece during the book club. We also noticed this, in some cases, carrying over to their regular ESL classes.

Additionally, we informally interviewed the students to gather feedback related to the structure, content and their overall perception of the book club. One of the students' favorite aspects of the book club was the word wall, which they created with

almost no assistance from us. This remark indicates that, at least for this student, our goal of encouraging student ownership of the project was met. Furthermore, in spite of our initial concerns, the students did not seem to feel that reading materials on one topic over an extended period was boring and clearly expressed a desire to participate in a similar project in the future.

Conclusion

We present our experience with in-depth thematic reading with ELLs in light of the new Common Core Standards, but all struggling readers can benefit from extra support in reading to increase their comprehension. Without it, students often reach upper-elementary or middle school with limited exposure to the topics in the texts, yet they need to be able to read and comprehend this information and ideally should be learning to do this on their own. The increased emphasis on strategic academic vocabulary instruction and content

knowledge development mandated by the CCSS underscore the significance of this. By introducing in-depth thematic reading, we suggest it is possible to provide all students with opportunities to build background knowledge and recycle Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary – essential components for achieving reading comprehension.

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