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Matching books and readers: Selecting literature for English learners

This article offers suggestions on how to choose books to aid English learners with language acquisition and comprehension.

Students learning English as a new language are the fastest growing group in U.S. schools today. These learners come from a multitude of countries and backgrounds. They speak many languages, and their reading levels range from preschool to high school. These students do not have the luxury of an extended time frame to become accustomed to their new language. They experience great cognitive demands as they are asked to quickly learn both language and content in order to participate fully in the school curriculum.

The term *English learner* is used here to represent individuals who are in the process of learning English after learning a first or other language. Although *second-language learner* is another term often used to refer to English-language learners, it is not always an accurate label because English may not be the second language to be learned by the individual. As Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri (2002, p. xiii) have noted,

> In the past, we have referred to students who do not speak English as their first language as "second-language learners" or "bilingual learners".... However, we have become uncomfortable using these terms since we are aware that many English language learners are, in fact, adding a third, fourth, or even fifth language to their repertoire.... The term we currently use is "English language learners" or simply "English learners." Even native speakers of English are English language learners in a sense, but students for whom English is not the native language face the specific task of learning English.

Literature can play a critical role in immersing children in their new language. Both school and classroom libraries are integral parts in this process because access to books has been shown to encourage more frequent reading (Krashen, 1998; McQuillan, 1998; Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Indeed, students in classrooms with libraries read 50% more books than students in classrooms without them (Morrow, 2003). Access to classroom libraries may be even more important for English learners (Chambliss & McKillop, 2000). Placing meaningful books in English learners' hands helps them develop and practice as readers and writers in a new language (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002c). English learners need extensive practice with their new language—opportunities to hear and use English in a variety of purposeful, authentic contexts. To accomplish this, teachers can use read-alouds, book talks, story retellings, literature circles, book buddies, author studies, and other reading response projects (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pennington, 2002). A study conducted in six elementary schools in Texas on the U.S.–Mexico border with 78 teachers and 2,500 English learners (Roser, Hoffman, & Farest, 1990) focused on the integration of literature and related instructional strategies into the language arts block. As a result of this integration, statistically significant growth in scores on the state-mandated basic skills test was noted in five of the six schools. As librarians and teachers begin to think about their English learners and select appropriate books for their libraries and classrooms, some general considerations emerge. The purpose of this article is to offer some guidelines and beginning booklists for selecting literature that can facilitate the

language development and reading comprehension of English learners.

Where to begin

Books selected for English learners should be appropriate for the age and interest level of the children. This task is more complex than it sounds. Especially with English learners, the typical grade-level suitability may not apply. The maturity, backgrounds (family, cultural, language, and knowledge), and interests of English learners vary tremendously from totally non–English-speaking immigrants to native-born students who have a general knowledge of English. In addition, English learners come to school speaking many different languages. Thus, choosing books in Spanish only, for example, neglects the needs of students whose first language may be Russian or Hmong. Given these considerations, picture books in English may often be the most appropriate literature choice, even with older students. Many picture books have broad accessibility across grade levels and age ranges. Indeed, the sophisticated illustrations and controversial content and themes of some recently published picture books make them more suitable for older audiences. For example, Karen Hesse's *The Cats in Krasinski Square* (2004) describes a true story of Jewish resistance during WWII and Walter Dean Myers's *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam* (2002) describes the experiences of a young soldier at war, neither of which is necessarily intended as bedtime reading for a young audience.

Highly visual books help provide scaffolding as students begin by "reading the pictures." This method can build confidence and independence—clearly, an important consideration in building a "just right" library for English learners (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002a). In addition, teachers might want to try a stairstep approach with picture books that address the same topic or theme at various levels of complexity. Repetition of vocabulary and ideas is an excellent technique for language development. For instance, when studying wolves, teachers might begin with Jim Arnosky's *Wolves* (2001). This book provides a simple introduction to wolves with one line of text per two-page illustrated spread. Moving up to more elaborate information, Sandra Markle's *Growing Up Wild: Wolves*

(2001), with its short paragraphs for each one to two pages of text accompanied by photographs, provides visual support for the reader. Finally, a short step beyond Markle's text is Seymour Simon's *Wolves* (1993) with one page of text opposite vivid photographs.

When matching English learners with books, teachers and librarians must consider specific language factors that influence comprehension. The more the book material deviates from these criteria, the more teaching support will be needed to assist English learners with the obvious language and structural difficulties. The goal is always selecting quality literature that is well written and illustrated. But what questions should be considered in guiding potential classroom and library selections for English learners? Here are a few essential elements.

Content accessibility. Is the story or topic familiar or helpful? When students already know about a concept in their own language, transitioning to a book in English about the same concept is not so overwhelming because they have a knowledge base upon which to build.

Language accessibility. Is the language of the book simple and direct? Simple phrases or sentence patterns, a limited amount of text on each page, and predictable, repetitive text offer a reader-friendly experience for English learners at a beginning proficiency level.

Visual accessibility. Are there abundant illustrations? When word knowledge is limited, readers rely on other cues to help figure out the meaning of text. This utilitarian function of illustration is extremely helpful.

Genre accessibility. Are there a variety of genres available? Just as the classroom reflects diversity, the school and classroom library should, too—through a rich array of genres and topics. From the poetry of Douglas Florian to the nonfiction of Gail Gibbons or the fiction of Allen Say, English learners need exposure to various styles of writing and patterns of text organization.

The bibliographies included in this article reflect variety, which is a critical dimension in working with English learners (especially at the beginning levels of English proficiency). These are

just a few suggestions for selecting literature for English learners, with a focus on the genres of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Consider how each of these genres meets the various accessibility criteria.

Fiction for English learners

Reading fictional stories aloud is the usual way of introducing students to literature. Children of all backgrounds enjoy escaping in or identifying with a good story. Considering the special needs of English learners is important in choosing books more selectively and successfully. Fiction titles that spring from the students' cultures are ideal in providing familiarity for ease of comprehension as well as for identifying with story characters. Thus, there is an impetus for seeking quality multicultural literature reflecting many cultures. Students

also enjoy stories with direct, linear plot lines communicated in language that is clear and concrete. Stories full of flashbacks or colloquial expressions can be challenging for beginning English learners to understand. Finally, themes in contemporary picture books and novels such as fitting in, being different, moving and adjusting, separating from family, or seeking one's place in the world are appealing to English learners.

Content accessibility. Teachers and librarians should choose from "survival" topics and vocabulary that are needed quickly by students new to English and perhaps new to the United States. Books with subjects such as time and money, school, colors, days of the week, months of the year, signs and symbols, foods, weather, clothing, family, homes, occupations, and animals comprise essential initial reading material. These types of books provide engaging and "literary" texts for learning basic information and for coping with day-to-day routines in a new language. Because they are also well written and well illustrated, they are enjoyable even with repeated readings and close examination.

Language accessibility. In terms of simple language that students can deal with as beginning language learners, Eric Carle's books are excellent examples. They reflect predictable text, enabling the reader to guess what happens on the next page.

Visual accessibility. Do the illustrations aid in conveying the story line and relaying information, or are they largely decorative? Illustrations done for aesthetic appeal are not substantive enough to aid the English learner.

Cultural accessibility. Finding books that are culturally connected to the lives of students is an important variable in building a beginning library that is both reassuring and relevant for English learners. However, it can be challenging to select books that are authentic representations of the culture. For example, the many aspects of migrant work and Hispanic family life are beautifully depicted in *Tomás and the Library Lady* (Mora, 1997), while *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (Friedman, 1984) and *This Next New Year* (Wong, 2000) celebrate the rich traditions of families from several different

cultures. It can also be challenging to locate quality bilingual or dual-language books in English or other languages, as well as books that include another language within the English text, such as the interlingual use of Spanish in *Canto Familiar* by Gary Soto (1995). Just because a book may be translated into Spanish or contain a few Spanish words, it may not be a culturally authentic work of literature. For example, *Clifford El Gran Perro Colorado/Clifford the Big Red Dog* (Bridwell, 1994) is not an authentic story drawn from Latino culture just because it may be in Spanish. These are sensitive issues in selecting culturally rich books for children.

The focus shifts next to nonfiction books, which provide current information on a multitude of topics, in varied and innovative formats, using appealing illustrations and language. In short, they provide excellent support for students with diverse language proficiencies and reading levels, assisting them in actively participating in class instruction.

Nonfiction for English learners

The gap between English learners' language facility in everyday settings and their verbal skills in content areas such as science or social studies poses a big problem. In addition to encountering subjects with which they may have no prior knowledge or experiences, English learners find the structure of textbooks confusing and the level of new vocabulary—especially technical terminology—almost paralyzing. Teachers need supplemental materials that extend concepts, offer additional explanation, and use simpler vocabulary.

There are many kinds of nonfiction books that can supplement the content area curriculum (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002b). Concept books and survey books present basic information about a single topic simply and in an interesting manner with wonderful visuals that help students learn English terms for concepts they may be familiar with in their native languages. Author Gail Gibbons offers nonfiction with colorful, cartoon-style illustrations, helpful captions, and exposition on nearly 200 different subjects. Photo essays by a variety of authors document and validate the text with photographs on nearly every page. Depending on their language proficiency level, students can

browse through the many photographs, read only the captions, or give more attention to the main text.

Teachers and librarians can model how nonfiction authors use reference aids (for example, maps, tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries) as well as how the text is organized with headings and subheadings, boxes and sidebars, and illustrations and graphic aids (including charts, graphs, and timelines). The teacher can explain what each of these text elements is, providing identification ("This is called a glossary."), actual examples, and explanations ("A glossary is a list of words and their meanings that pertain to this subject."). As the teacher models using an index, for example, he or she shows students how to read only relevant material. English learners, not realizing that skimming and scanning is appropriate and necessary, may need permission not to read the entire page. In this scenario, students can help clarify their

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SIDEBAR 2

A nonfiction sampler

1. Arnosky, J. (2001). *Wolves*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.
2. Carle, E. (2004). *Mister seahorse*. New York: Philomel Books.
3. Crews, D. (1984). *School bus*. New York: Greenwillow.
4. Gilley, J. (2005). *Peace one day*. New York: Putnam.
5. Gibbons, G. (1990). *Weather words and what they mean*. New York: Holiday House.
6. Hoban, T. (1987). *26 letters and 99 cents*. New York: Greenwillow.
7. Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. (2001). *Celebrating Ramadan*. New York: Holiday House.
8. Jenkins, S. (2004). *Actual size*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
9. Krull, K. (2001). *Supermarket*. New York: Holiday House.
10. Markle, S. (2001). *Growing up wild: Wolves*. New York: Atheneum.
11. Morris, A. (1989). *Bread, bread, bread*. New York: HarperCollins.
12. Simon, S. (1993). *Wolves*. New York: HarperCollins.
13. Simon, S. (2003). *Hurricanes*. New York: HarperCollins.
14. Sobol, R. (2004). *An elephant in the backyard*. New York: Dutton.
15. Steckel, R., & Steckel, M. (Eds.). (2004). *The milestones project: Celebrating childhood around the world*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

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understanding of all these pieces of text (Vardell, 2003).

Choosing literature for the content areas

To choose books that link to the content areas, teachers should consider how they fit the lesson, as well as how they facilitate student learning and language development.

Content accessibility. Is the topic familiar? If this is an introduction to new content area concepts, the book should be very basic with only a few concepts and terms presented in clear, simple language.

Language accessibility. Is the terminology familiar? New content area vocabulary should be highlighted in boldface type or brightly colored type, sidebar explanations, explicit visuals, and so on. There should be an economy of new terms; a common mistake made in textbooks is presenting too many new words too quickly.

Visual accessibility. Are there illustrations or graphics that help students understand the content? Visuals are critical, especially for the difficult conceptual and vocabulary load of the content areas. Visuals can include graphic organizers, labeled illustrations, diagrams, maps, and timelines. Tana Hoban's concept books, in particular, are driven by vivid photographs that depict spatial relationships, shapes, and antonyms. For science, in particular, there should be a direct correlation between the terminology and the photo or illustration. The abundant use of large color photographs in Seymour Simon's many nonfiction science titles helps students unlock the meaning of the text. The visual aspect of nonfiction books is especially helpful as a link to a more difficult textbook that covers the same topic.

Accessibility through accuracy and organization. Is the book accurate and well organized? Obviously, one needs to choose nonfiction books that reflect up-to-date information. For English learners, it is also essential that the book have a clear and well-organized layout. In fact, many of the best selections have two layers of information— see Steve Jenkins's *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest* (1995) or *Hottest, Coldest, Highest, Deepest* (1998) as examples—usually a single narrative

thread serves as an initial introduction, while boxed insets or thumbnail sketches that provide further elaboration comprise a second layer. Through small-group or paired sharing, students can extract this information through multiple readings. Some of our favorite nonfiction titles for English learners are included in the sidebar. After gathering these initial titles, teachers and librarians can create text sets linked by a common theme or topic but written at varying readability levels. This themed emphasis helps English learners encounter the same vocabulary and concepts multiple times.

In selecting literature rich in information, one can also consider the range of options in the poetry genre—from humorous to serious, content-related to multicultural options, brief to longer works, informal to formal language—which afford teachers an opportunity to meet almost any instructional and proficiency level. The diversity of poems, poetic picture books, and poetry collections is ideally suited for English learners to meet their varying language proficiency needs and backgrounds as well as increase their word knowledge, familiarity with English syntax patterns, and even conceptual background.

Choosing and sharing poetry with English learners

When considering poetry for children, many people assume that students who are learning English as a new language are not ready for it. But nothing could be further from the truth. As a genre, poetry offers many benefits for English learners (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001). Rhyming poetry, for example, provides the sound qualities helpful for predicting words and phrases. Concrete or shape poems use the visual layout of the poem along with words to describe an object or experience. Even free verse poetry helps students focus on the arrangement of words on the page and on the description and emotion that those words can provide.

Listening to the spoken word is an important first step in learning any language. Poetry is an ideal entry into language learning for English learners because of its rhythm, repetition, and rhyme. Through listening to, reading, and rereading poetry, students can increase their exposure to language. The brevity of poetry appears manageable and not

so intimidating to English learners. Poetry can be a powerful vehicle for developing students' oral language capacity, which is so critical to functioning in the real world (Vardell, Hadaway, & Young, 2002).

Using poetry for reading aloud and choral reading promotes oral fluency and lays a strong foundation for reading in a new language. As students participate in choral reading, they practice their word recognition and pronunciation and experience their new language in a fun, supportive, and appealing way. Poetry, in particular, can span the grades because of its unique form and use of language. For English learners, this is a connection that can help them learn words and concepts, stay motivated and interested, and even participate more fully in class. Like song lyrics and television commercials, poetry can "stick" in the mind long after other lessons and experiences have faded. Whether we rely on classroom anthologies of poems by a variety of writers, one collection by an individual poet, or a single poem in a picture-book format, we can look for poetry that speaks to the needs of our budding language learners, as well as to all students within our reach.

Some do's and don'ts for choosing and sharing poetry with English learners

Content accessibility. Select poems that connect with English learners. Choose poems that have some relevance in children's lives and experiences. Topics such as school, seasons, weather, and animals all have some degree of familiarity, which makes the poems easier to understand. Poetry that is deeply symbolic may be too abstract for beginning English learners. Further, share the poems when they connect with something that is already going on—a lesson, a special event, or a shared experience. Invite students to search for and share poems that have personal meaning for them. Making these connections through poetry helps students understand the concepts, vocabulary, and meaning of the poem—as well as enjoy the use of language.

Language accessibility. English learners especially enjoy the sound of poetry—the rhyme, the rhythm, the music of the English language. This suggests two things. In selecting poetry to share with English learners, start with poems that rhyme and have a

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SIDEBAR 3

A poetry sampler

1. Alarcón, F.X. (1997). *Laughing tomatoes and other spring poems / Jitomates risueños y otros poemas de primavera*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
2. Crew, G. (2003). *Troy Thompson's excellent peotry book*. La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller.
3. Florian, D. (1994). *Bing bang boing*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
4. Florian, D. (1998). *Insectlopedia*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
5. Grimes, N. (2000). *Shoe magic*. New York: Orchard Books.
6. Hopkins, L.B. (Ed.). (1997). *Marvelous math: A book of poems*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
7. Hopkins, L.B. (Ed.). (1999). *Spectacular science: A book of poems*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
8. Hudson, W. (Ed.). (1993). *Pass it on: African-American poetry for children*. New York: Scholastic.
9. Livingston, M.C. (1996). *Festivals*. New York: Holiday House.
10. Mora, P. (1996). *Confetti: Poems for children*. New York: Lee & Low.
11. Prelutsky, J. (1984). *The new kid on the block*. New York: Greenwillow.
12. Silverstein, S. (1974). *Where the sidewalk ends*. New York: HarperCollins.
13. Soto, G. (1995). *Canto familiar*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
14. Wong, J.S. (1994). *Good luck gold and other poems*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.
15. Wong, J.S. (2003). *Knock on wood: Poems about superstitions*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.

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strong rhythm. This enables students to use their developing language skills to guess how words and phrases should sound. Also, read poetry aloud and invite children to read along out loud. Poetry needs to be heard and spoken, especially if English is not the students' native language. Choral reading is a wonderful, nonintimidating way to practice English and improve oral fluency—for all students.

Visual accessibility. Concrete poems, or shape poems, provide an element of visual support as the poem reflects the shape of what is addressed in the poem.

Cultural accessibility. Unlike previous research findings on children's poetry preferences, English

learners may not enjoy the same hilarious, slapstick, tongue-in-cheek poems that native speakers do. Why? Humor is culturally specific, and English learners may not have experienced humor in that way before. Puns, parodies, irony, and sarcasm are communicated differently in different languages. Do not be surprised if some English learners don't laugh when you are sharing a funny poem. Beginning English speakers are not going to understand the humor even with an explanation. It might be best to share poetry for the words, sounds, rhythm, and meaning first.

A final caveat: Provide opportunities for English learners to respond to poetry. They may be uncomfortable sharing their thoughts in front of a large group (as are many people). Instead, allow small-group discussion of poems, or better yet, provide materials for artistic response. Many students enjoy creating illustrations in small groups for a poem, making a collage, developing a mural, or even creating a poetry picture book as a way of responding to and interpreting a poem. Students may also appreciate the opportunity to create native-language responses to a poem. Some students may even be brave enough to try writing poetry, often by imitating the formats of their favorite poems; bilingual list poems about the seasons, for example. Encourage written and oral self-expression in English learners, even with their occasionally limited vocabulary; it may be surprising how poetic their developing grasp of English can be.

All set for reading

Once teachers and librarians have enhanced their library collections, they need to call students' attention to the many options available for reading and language learning. This can be accomplished through a variety of techniques. The teacher or librarian should begin by reading aloud regularly to provide a fluent model of reading as well as an implicit invitation to the "literacy club" so essential to English learners' ongoing development (Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Hadaway et al., 2002c; Smith, 1988). Draw attention to featured authors or books with bulletin board displays or spotlight a book of the week through a book talk or by reading aloud selected portions of a title.

After teachers and librarians have sparked student interest, they need to step back and provide a regular time and freedom of choice for students to enjoy the books in the library and continue to add to the collection as students' language proficiencies develop and their reading tastes mature. With such variety in the classroom and library and time to pore over these books, English learners will notice the many powerful ways the written word can be used—to inform, to entertain, or to persuade. In short, they can discover the power and pleasure of their new language through good books.

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