Highlighting nonfiction literature: Literacy development and English language learners

Nancy L. Hadaway
University of Texas at Arlington, TX

Sylvia M. Vardell
Texas Woman's University, TX

Terrell A. Young
Washington State University, WA

Children experience reading and writing in many forms including expository writing in textbooks and the introduction of new concepts in math, science, and social studies. As students move through the grades, they are increasingly called upon to process text from standardized tests, newspapers, reference materials, and online sources. This lineup of required reading is daunting for a native English speaker; for those learning English, it can be overwhelming.

More than 7.5 million school age children in the United States come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, and these students account for 35 percent of all schoolchildren across the nation (National Association of Bilingual Education, 1992, p. 3). For these students, the printed page symbolizes another hurdle to their progress in their new language. In this article, we examine the particular needs of English language learners and the special appropriateness of organizing to teach language through content using nonfiction literature to spur literacy development.

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH NONFICTION LITERATURE

The ability to comprehend and work with textual information is the primary emphasis of schooling. Yet, this emphasis on print puts English language learners at peril. They don’t have the luxury of a long silent period to acclimate to their new language or an extended time frame for the normal trial and error period of language acquisition of early childhood. “ESL kids bring meaning and schemata from their experience and their first language. Their struggle is in joining the concepts and the literacy skills they have to the sounds and the meanings of a new language—its melody, structure, organization and vocabulary” (Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 1999, p. 26). They experience greater cognitive demands when asked to learn both language and content and to learn them quickly to meet the mark on high stakes tests and to proceed through the grade levels. The considerable gap between English language learners’ ability to communicate and their ability to use reading and writing for academic purposes poses a problem (Cantoni-Harvey, 1987; Crandall, 1987). How can teachers most effectively support these students’ comprehension and development of academic language?

Supportive environments provide optimal input for English language learners—input that approximates their current proficiency (Krashen, 1985). “If the input is too easy, the student won’t learn anything new about English, but if the input is too hard to understand, it will be beyond the student’s grasp” (Scarcella, 1990, p. 77). Textbooks rarely fall into the category of optimal input. Vacca & Vacca (1999) note several criticisms leveled at textbooks, including their encyclopedic nature, lack of specificity, avoidance of controversy, datedness, and use of abstract, technical vocabulary, and
unfamiliar text structure and styles.

Nonfiction literature, on the other hand, can be an outstanding literacy tool, presenting vocabulary and concepts in a concrete manner (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001). The intent behind nonfiction literature is to provide readers with information about the world around them. Utilizing nonfiction literature to lay a foundation with information about the world around them. Various researchers have noted the many benefits of using literature across the learning English. Various researchers have noted the many benefits of using literature across the curriculum including the following:

- Through nonfiction literature, students encounter concept-related vocabulary terms in more authentic contexts that aid in understanding vocabulary at a deeper level, especially for English language learners (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994).
- Informational books offer models of many organizational structures, language styles, and techniques used by writers to describe, instruct, persuade, generalize, demonstrate solutions, and trace events (Moss, 1992).
- Because changes in science and social studies are ongoing, nonfiction literature offers more current, relevant, and interesting information than textbooks which generally take several years to develop (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994; McGowan & Guzzetti, 1991).
- The visual format of nonfiction picture books especially benefits English language learners (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994; Moss, 1992).

Despite these benefits, fiction use still predominates in the classroom. According to our survey of 120 ESL and grade level teachers working with English language learners in grades K-12, the use of fiction is at least double that of nonfiction. However, we have only to look at standardized test passages used to measure student academic achievement to see that nonfiction passages far outnumber fiction passages. Perhaps, our focus on fiction actually works to the students’ disadvantage, particularly English language learners who need the academic language that nonfiction literature selections could provide.

Many people think of nonfiction as simply FACTS, but a close investigation of the genre reveals that there are several kinds of factual books within the general category of nonfiction, such as concept books, photo essays, and life cycle books to name just a few (Hepler, 1998). Concept books present basic information about a single topic in a simple and interesting manner. For instance, Tana Hoban uses photographs illustrating groupings of objects in larger and smaller numbers to help beginning readers understand quantity concepts in More, Fewer, Less. While these books are often thought of as books for young children, teachers find them a source of wonderful visuals for helping students learn English labels for concepts they are familiar with in their own languages. Much like a documentary film or an issue of National Geographic, photo essays document and extend the text with photographs on nearly every page. In one example of a photo essay, Lacrosse: The National Game of the Iroquois, Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith describes the game of lacrosse, its origins, and both historical and contemporary connections to the Iroquois peoples. Books such as these help students gain an overview of a topic without focusing on every single idea presented. Expanding on information from science textbooks, life cycle books present the life of an animal in more detail and with more appeal. In the 1998 Orbis Pictus Award winner for nonfiction literature, An Extraordinary Life: The Story of a Monarch Butterfly, Laurence Pringle introduces readers to the life cycle, feeding habits, migration, predators, and mating of the monarch butterfly through the observation of one particular female monarch named Danaus. As students express interest in particular subjects, the teacher can seek out more books for further reading. Beverly Kobrin’s guide, Eyeopeners II (1995), is a helpful guide to choosing quality nonfiction by subject.

FRAMEWORKS FOR LINKING LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

Once teachers become familiar with the many quality nonfiction literature choices available, they must next determine how they will incorporate them into their literacy instruction. Teachers who best meet the needs of their students—especially their English language learners—apply certain principles and practices in organizing their students’ literacy learning. “The practices are based on research-informed, effective instructional strategies. Though all kids benefit from them, children learning a second language depend on these practices. Without them, school can be a confusing and frustrating place. With these practices, school makes sense for second language learners, and they join their classmates in learning throughout the day” (Cary, 1997, p. 25).

Utilizing nonfiction literature is just such an effective instructional strategy. The use of a core book, interdisciplinary teaching, and independent reading are three approaches teachers may consider as they organize the literacy instruction
in their classrooms with English language learners so that all curricular areas remain integral to student learning.

The use of a core book
As we incorporate more and more trade books in our teaching, teachers are experimenting with replacing or supplementing the “one size fits all” basal reader and content textbook with alternative reading material more suited to the needs and interests of their students. In the older grades, this is often in the form of class sets of novels. What is not often considered is using class sets of quality nonfiction books in the same way—for whole class reading, discussion, and response and comprehension building activities.

From a literacy instruction standpoint, informational books offer models of organizational structures, language styles, and techniques used by writers. Also, nonfiction literature is also special in its incorporation of graphic organizers, charts, tables, maps, timelines, etc. These “extra” features have become standard equipment in the best nonfiction writing, and for the student learning English, these access features can be explained and modeled “a la carte” in trade books before they’re encountered en masse in textbooks.

There are many excellent nonfiction titles that bear close study including People by Peter Spier, a picture book full of details celebrating cultural diversity across the globe or Leonardo da Vinci by Diane Stanley, a richly illustrated biography which brings this great mind and talent vividly to life. Other recommended titles are provided in Box 1. With each student reading the same title, teachers can feel confident in planning learning activities based on a common knowledge base, and students, particularly English language learners, can feel more confident in their reading as they revisit the text as often as needed.

BOX 1

Some Suggested Core Books
✓ People by Peter Spier
✓ Leonardo da Vinci by Diane Stanley
✓ A tree is growing by Arthur Dorros
✓ Safari beneath the sea: The wonder of the North Pacific Coast by Diane Swanson
✓ Buffalo hunt by Russell Freedman
✓ Give me liberty!: The story of the Declaration of Independence by Russell Freedman
✓ Shadows of the night: The hidden world of the little brown bat by Barbara Bash
✓ The first Thanksgiving by Jean Craighead George
✓ Children of the dust bowl: The true story of the school at Weedpatch Camp by Jerry Stanley
✓ Come back, Salmon: How a group of dedicated kids adopted Pigeon Creek and brought it back to life by Molly Cone

Interdisciplinary teaching
Organizing instruction around specific topics or themes is also a popular teaching approach. One popular theme for study, for instance, is animals. Box 2 suggests a variety of books about animals. These books and the concepts and vocabulary included in them can be used across subject areas, not just in science class. For instance, Nancy and Sylvia used a sampling of these books in third grade classes, and the students worked in pairs to collect facts about a specific animal. Then they created list poems to share in their language arts class. The theme can be further utilized throughout the subject areas as students collect various statistics about animals for math class and examine the various geographic areas where these animals live. The repetition of concepts and vocabulary fostered by this approach is especially powerful for English language learners. Krashen and Terrell (1983) support the topical or thematic presentation of vocabulary for English language learners arguing that such a strategy offers the student an immediate network of relationships linking new words and concepts.

BOX 2

Suggested Titles for a Thematic Unit on Animals
✓ South American animals by Caroline Arnold
✓ Bright beetle by Rick Chrustowski
✓ Animal dads; Do they scare you?: Creepy creatures; & Making animal babies all by Sneed B. Collard
✓ Big blue whale by Nicola Davies
✓ Growing Frogs by Vivian French
✓ Bats; Gulls; & Penguins all by Gail Gibbons
✓ Chameleons are cool & The emperor’s egg by Martin Jenkins
✓ Slap, squeak & scatter: How animals communicate by Sieve Jenkins
✓ Interrupted journey: Saving endangered sea turtles by Kathryn Lasky
✓ Panther: Shadow of the swamp by Jonathan London

Highlighting nonfiction literature

18
Indeed, as students become familiar with the basic formula in nonfiction options such as alphabet, counting, and concept books, creating original class books becomes a natural extension. For example, each student chooses a letter of the alphabet, researches a vocabulary word or concept for that letter which is relevant to the topic of study (e.g. "P" for a dinosaur unit might be "prehistoric" or "pterodactyl"), and creates a page with the word, a picture, and a caption or definition. When all the pages are combined, a class-created book becomes popular reading and review for everyone. For instance, one third grade class we worked with created an alphabet book all about Texas after reviewing several nonfiction books about their state. The same activity can be done with basic counting books (incorporating math) and with concept books.

Independent reading
Margaret Mooney emphasizes that independent reading “should be an integral part of the daily program of every class, even kindergarten. Providing for independent reading at every stage acknowledges children as achievers as well as learners, and allows children to confirm as well as extend their roles as readers and writers” (1990, p. 72). One essential factor in getting students to read independently is providing access to books. Students are likely to spend more time reading when they are in classrooms with adequate classroom libraries (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Krashen, 1998). Moreover, it is important to have multiple copies of some books and to offer books appropriate for English language learners at varying stages of proficiency. Box 3 offers some books for English language learners at the beginning proficiency level to teach them about basic vocabulary and concepts.

For the English language learner at the intermediate or advanced proficiency level, there are many options as well. Each year, one outstanding nonfiction book is recognized with the Orbis Pictus award. In addition, several honor books and recommended titles are noted by the Orbis Pictus committee as well. Collecting a sampling of these books for a classroom library provides the English language learner with the best in nonfiction literature. Box 4 furnishes a list of recent winners of the Orbis Pictus award. A quick look at this list demonstrates the diversity of these award winners in terms of topic and curricular areas highlighted.

**Box 3**
Creating A Classroom Library With Independent Reading
For Beginning English Language Learners
✓ This is soccer by Margaret Blackstone uses short sentences with very simple structure and repetition to describe the basics of soccer.
✓ Eating the alphabet: Fruit and vegetables from A to Z by Lois Ehlert is a wonderful example of an alphabet book that provides illustrations and labels of various fruits and vegetables.
✓ Count and see by Tana Hoban is a counting book with numbers opposite photos of familiar objects.

**Box 4**
Stocking The Classroom Library With Recent Orbis Pictus Award Winners
2001 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ Hurry freedom: African Americans in gold rush California by Jerry Stanley
2000 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ Through my eyes by Rudy Bridges and Margo Lundell
1999 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ Shipwreck at the bottom of the world: The extraordinary true story of Shackleton and the Endurance by Jennifer Armstrong
1998 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ An extraordinary life: The story of a monarch butterfly by Laurence Pringle
1997 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ Leonardo da Vinci by Diane Stanley
1996 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ The great fire by Jim Murphy
1995 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ Safari beneath the sea: The wonder of the North Pacific Coast by Diane Swanson
1994 Orbis Pictus Winner
✓ Across America on an emigrant train by Jim Murphy
A growing body of nonfiction books provides the supportive structure, in depth coverage of new concepts, and visual cues to assist with comprehension for the student learning English (Greenlaw, Shepperson, & Nistler 1992). Teachers can organize their classrooms in several ways to highlight nonfiction. They might use a core book for whole class instruction. In addition, they can use a variety of nonfiction titles throughout an interdisciplinary or thematic unit. Finally, teachers need to consider nonfiction literature as they build their classroom libraries and provide time for independent reading.

CONCLUSION

Nonfiction literature offers a rich source of meaningful text to spur literacy development with countless choices that approach students' varied levels of language proficiency. A wide range of nonfiction has emerged in the last twenty years, and the publishing world continues to deliver a good variety of nonfiction for children as reflected in the growing list of outstanding recipients of the Orbis Pictus award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. (See the award Web site at http://www.ncte.org/elem/pictus/). In addition, nonfiction literature lends itself to a variety of instructional approaches and comprehension building strategies. The range of nonfiction books adds to their appeal as sources of scaffolds for literacy and concept development for English language learners. As an increasing number of student struggle to learn English, we can accelerate their progress in acquiring the needed academic vocabulary and content base by choosing quality nonfiction books as top priority teaching tools.

REFERENCES


CHILDREN'S BOOKS CITED
Boston University and Former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky to Host Second Annual Poetry Institute for Educators this Summer

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

The Boston University School of Education, in cooperation with former United States Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, is accepting applications for its second annual summer poetry institute for educators in New England, July 8-12 at the Boston University Charles River Campus.

Robert Pinsky, a renowned poet and translator and professor of English and creative writing at Boston University, will lead the institute, building on the principles of his Favorite Poem Project, which is committed to celebrating and documenting poetry’s place in American culture and improving its place in American classrooms. Four professional, award-winning poets will serve as the “faculty” for the institute. Last year’s visiting poets were Mark Doty, David Ferry, Rosanna Warren and Louise Glück. The institute encourages a dialogue among teachers about past successes, failures and insights they’ve had in bringing poetry to students in their various communities. Teachers work in groups throughout the week to develop lessons inspired by the institute’s presentations. The institute seeks to demonstrate poetry’s power as a learning tool and will offer participants an energizing approach to poems, invaluable materials for teaching, and refreshed skills to invigorate their instructional habits and practices. Participants will be awarded 30 professional development points.

The program invites teachers and teacher/administrator across grade levels at elementary, middle and high schools to apply. The program seeks a balance between experienced and less experienced teachers, between teachers who love to teach poetry and those who’ve shied away from it. Preference will be given to teacher/administrator teams. For more information, or to request an application, contact Professor Lee Indrisano, Boston University School of Education, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215 or e-mail her at <leeindri@bu.edu>.