

# Generating Enriched Literacy Experiences For Older English Language Learners

by Dr. R. Cipriani-Sklar

**M**eeding the needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse student populations in today's classrooms, especially in the upper grades, poses a special challenge for veteran and novice teachers alike. English language learners (or ELLs, as they are commonly known) have an increasingly difficult time understanding the printed word and achieving on today's high-stakes standardized tests. As a result, these struggling readers, who are new to the English language, face considerable obstacles not only in literacy classrooms but also in content-area classrooms; these students' difficulties prevent their academic advancement in areas such as science, social studies, math, and the arts.

To meet the diverse needs of these students, the role of the literacy teacher (as well as that of content teacher) must expand beyond traditional definitions of how information is presented to ELLs. A print-rich learning environment in all classrooms, complete with flexible groupings and a varied exposure to literature in the content areas, can meet the interests, abilities, and learning needs of ELLs.

Here are just a few ideas to consider when teaching both literacy and content curricula to the ELL student.

## **Tap into Students' Background Knowledge**

Students need to connect with literature on three basic levels: text to text, text to self, and self to the world. All students bring something to the classroom. Becoming familiar with the backgrounds and/or prior knowledge of ELL students

allows a teacher to begin engaging students in literacy experiences that connect with their diverse backgrounds, thereby building on this knowledge.

### **Match Books to Readers**

Nonfiction is arguably one of the most important elements needed for success in content-area classrooms and on standardized tests. Nonfiction is difficult to comprehend because of the vast amount of technical vocabulary used and because of the lack of familiarity with content many ELLs have. Content-area teachers face great challenges when trying to teach the core curriculum to students with limited English literacy skills. Selecting high-interest/low-vocabulary nonfiction books can provide students with valuable, content-embedded information at a comfortable, comprehensible reading level, thereby allowing learning to advance while reading skills are developed.

*The Landmark Books Series* by Random House provide this type of content-area literacy development. In addition, they can easily be used by literacy teachers to teach specific, nonfiction literacy skills, such as summarizing, sequencing, text structure, and core-vocabulary recognition.

### **Read aloud**

Listening to stories provides the ELL student with many opportunities to develop new language skills. Reading aloud is a valuable tool that allows students to hear a good model for oral language; to develop capacity vocabulary (which usually develops at a faster rate than sight vocabulary); to become part of a group listening experience; and to initiate the practice of accountable talk. Books to be read aloud should be chosen for specific skills purposes or for content learning. Pictures and drawings within the book assist in the ELL student's understanding of the oral language and content instruction. Especially enjoyable read alouds are books such as *Hatchet* (a favorite among students) by Gary Paulsen. *Hatchet* is a great book to read aloud when teaching visualizing, predicting, inferencing, and setting.

### **Use Traditional, Culturally Diverse Tales and Legends**

The ELL students are drawn to books that depict tales and legends with cross-cultural themes. This genre is sorely neglected in classrooms with older ELL students. Many ELLs have heard similar stories in their own countries. (After all, tales and legends spread because people travel.) Many students will connect with this genre, which will eventually open up a world of comparison/contrast literacy skills and an appreciation of a shared cultural genre.

### **Promote the Home/School Connection**

Don't forget about involving the parents of ELLs. Family literacy will help sustain the progress made by these students. Schools that provide family literacy nights, lending libraries for parents, and classes in English as a second language for parents provide a solid bridge between school and home and generally have greater success in helping the struggling ELLs. Such activities are relatively easy to organize during the school year. Book- publishing companies are more than eager to supply schools with appropriate books for young adult students and parents who are just learning English.

The ELLs in today's classrooms may pose great challenges to teachers, but in return these students offer an enriched classroom experience for the other students. Our ELLs are thus like windows to many parts of the world. We owe it to them to provide an equally enriched classroom experience, one filled with a truly varied, print-rich environment in both literacy and content-area classrooms.

### **About the Writer**

**Dr. R. Cipriani-Sklar** is Principal of the Fairview School in Corona, NY, and was named Principal of the Year in 2001. She was selected for *Who's Who among Professionals and Executives* in 2006. Dr. Cipriani-Sklar has taught English in secondary schools, and her educational research interests include gender issues and the education of girls.