How To Make English Language Arts Accessible For Multilingual Learners

Every student deserves a powerful English language arts curriculum, including multilingual learners. Read more to learn how carefully curated texts and inclusion of fine art make *Wit & Wisdom®* accessible for all learners.

After spending many years teaching grade 4, I took a leap into a middle school English learner teaching position. Within a week, I had a grade 5 student who spoke no words of English and many grade 5 teachers asking me how to help him. This was an unusual situation in my Ohio school district, and we were frantically searching for solutions. We cycled through some of the traditional ideas for language learners—pull-out time, online programs, simplified work—but we still felt like we were letting him down. I dug deep into the research and came to the conclusion that to best serve his needs, we needed to stop taking him out of the classroom and figure out how to bring him into our core ELA program.

The aforementioned old-fashioned approaches to language learning have no basis in research. There are many areas still to explore in multilingual education, but these principles have emerged as non-negotiable:

1. Language development happens most effectively in the context of meaningful content learning.
2. Oral language development is essential for second language literacy.
3. Language learners need to work with grade-level, complex texts.

A note about language before we move on: In this piece, we use the term *multilingual learners* (MLLs) to describe students who speak more than one language. They include students who enter school already proficient in English and another language, students classified as English learners, and students who have been reclassified as English proficient. Multilingual learners are an incredibly diverse group of students. They have a range of English proficiency levels, academic backgrounds, native language proficiencies, and cultural backgrounds. Most multilingual learners in the United States are born in the United States and speak Spanish, but even within that category there is a variety of home and school experiences. The principles discussed in these sessions

apply broadly to all language learners; however, it is always important to consider your school and your students' context.

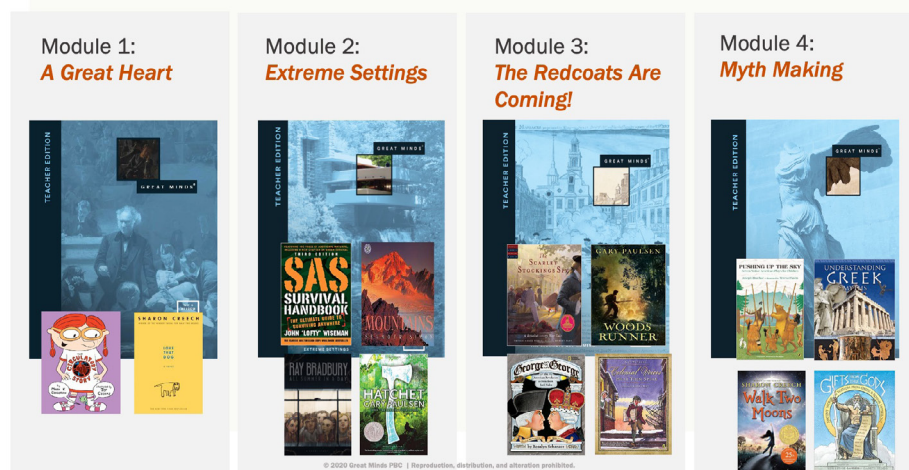## Why Integrate Language and Content, and What Does That Look Like?

The first non-negotiable principle is that language development happens most effectively in the context of meaningful content learning. Bunch, Kibler, and Pimentel (2013) assert that "language development and cognitive development are interrelated and mutually dependent; ELs [English learners] learn language as they learn content." The California English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework (2015) summarizes research on the importance of content knowledge in language development, highlighting that "reciprocity is pivotal" and that "focusing on language arts or strategy instruction to the exclusion of content instruction does not result in better readers and writers." The English Learners Success Forum echoes this importance in their ELA curriculum development guidelines. This deep research base establishes that content and language are most effectively taught in an integrated manner.

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How does this look in the classroom? First, teachers should use knowledge-building text sets. Willingham (2006) explains why background knowledge is essential for reading comprehension, and Goldenberg (2020) emphasizes that knowledge building should be a priority for all students, including multilingual learners. It is important to build knowledge deeply and systematically. This approach supports students in developing content knowledge, content-area vocabulary, and understanding of the structure of a variety of texts. In *Wit & Wisdom*, each grade has four modules built around an interesting topic and an engaging essential question. Here are examples from grade 4:

Grade 4 Module Topics and Texts

Module 1: *A Great Heart*
Module 2: *Extreme Settings*
Module 3: *The Redcoats Are Coming!*
Module 4: *Myth Making*

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☐ In Module 1, students build knowledge about science and literature as they read an informational text and a poignant novel to learn what it means to have a literal and figurative great heart.

- In Module 2, students explore nature and science as they read informational and literary texts about surviving in extreme settings.
- In Module 3, students read historical accounts of and historical fiction about the American Revolution.
- In Module 4, students read literary myths and informational texts to learn about the relevance of mythology and the power of stories to impart important life lessons.

Within these knowledge-building units, ensure that students receive integrated language development. The video below provides an example of language development integrated into this grade 4 lesson, part of the *Myth Making* module. Students have been reading Greek myths and informational resources to answer this question: What are myths, and why do people create them? In the video, you see integrated content and language development through speaking and writing about rich content, vocabulary and morphology instruction, explicit writing instruction, and linguistic supports with sentence frames.

Many researchers also claim that students learning English benefit from designated English language development time (Saunders, Goldenberg, and Marcellett, 2013). A common practice is to use this time to focus only on grammar and word lists that are divorced from content. For English learners to develop language skills and content knowledge at the same time, it is essential that designated language development also centers on content. A recent UnboundEd (2020) concept paper emphasizes that "the equitable way to ensure the efficiency and rigor of supplemental instruction is by providing it in service of the current or upcoming work of the grade." The following lesson offers a deep dive into language while remaining grounded in the content of the language arts class. ELD lessons are often done in a small group setting.
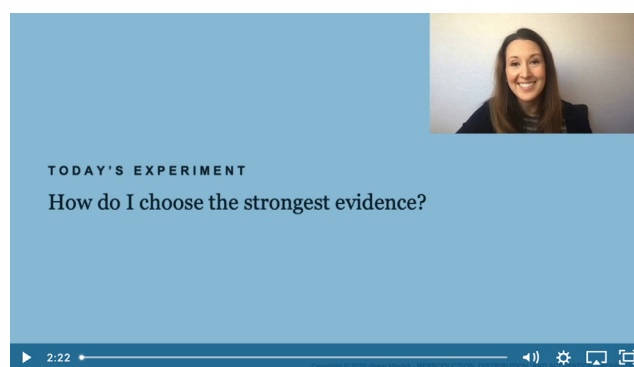
DESIGNATED LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

⬇ Lesson 2 Deep Dive: Vocabulary

Content Vocabulary: *Moral/morals/morality*

TIME: 15 min.
TEXT: *Understanding Greek Myths*, Natalie Hyde
Vocabulary Learning Goal: Explain the meaning of the words *moral, morals,* and *morality* and their opposites, and how they relate to a purpos...

Display example sentences such as the following to illustrate each form in context:

- The ancient Greeks created many myths about <u>morality</u> and <u>immorality</u>.
- People created and passed down these myths to learn how to live a <u>moral</u> life.
- Some people in stories and real life seem to have no <u>morals</u>.
- There is often punishment in myths and stories for <u>immoral</u> behavior.

Have students Think-Pair-Share, and ask:

"Why do you think the Greeks wrote some my...
Why is morality important? Practice using the...
responses. Try also using their opposites, *imm...*

Land

✓ Students complete an Exit Ticket: For what purpose did the Greeks create myths? Use the word *morals, moral,* or *morality* in your written response. Use also one of the opposites, *immoral* or *immorality.*

- *Many myths were written to teach morality, which is about telling right from wrong. This was supposed to help turn people away from immorality.*
- *Many myths are about instilling morals in the people who hear them.*
- *Myths often include heroic efforts to stand up for what is right, or moral, and punishments for what is wrong, or immoral.*

This deep dive lesson explores the content vocabulary word family: moral, morals, morality, immoral. This is connected to the text *Understanding Greek Myths*. The teacher explicitly explains the words and the word parts and then reviews example sentences. At the end of the lesson, students use the words in a sentence related to the content. This lesson supports multilingual learners because of the focus on speaking and writing about rich content bolstered by rich vocabulary and morphology instruction.

### Why a Focus on Oral Language Development, and How do You Support It?

The next non-negotiable principle is that classrooms should be focused on oral language development, which is essential for second language literacy. The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (2006) found that multilingual learners receive sufficient instruction to develop foundational skills but not text-level skills and that "well-developed oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills for these students" (August and Shanahan, 2006). The panel recommended that literacy programs provide instructional support of oral language development in English, aligned with high-quality literacy instruction that builds background knowledge and vocabulary.

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One way to support oral language development while students engage with high-quality texts is through interactive read-alouds. It is important to offer students opportunities to talk about the rich texts and topics they are exploring. This allows them opportunities to practice both oral language in a low-pressure situation *and* new vocabulary. Reading aloud is an important part of primary classrooms and can be a great opportunity to provide more oral language development by inviting students to stop and respond to the story. This can even be accomplished in virtual settings: In the video below, a grade 1 teacher performs a first read of a core text. She invites students to pause, think, and share throughout the reading. Multilingual learners also have additional support through explicit instruction of question words with a question cube.

We know that our multilingual learners need to build their oral language fluency as well as expand their vocabulary. So let's combine these ideas and get them talking about words! The video below shows a minilesson previewing some key vocabulary from the unit, and it shows the teacher making sure students have time to talk about it. The teacher first introduces the word *sea horse* and then explains the word *feature* and asks students to practice using these words. The words are also defined in Spanish to support Spanish-speaking students. Building vocabulary and oral language proficiency like this will transfer to reading and writing proficiency.
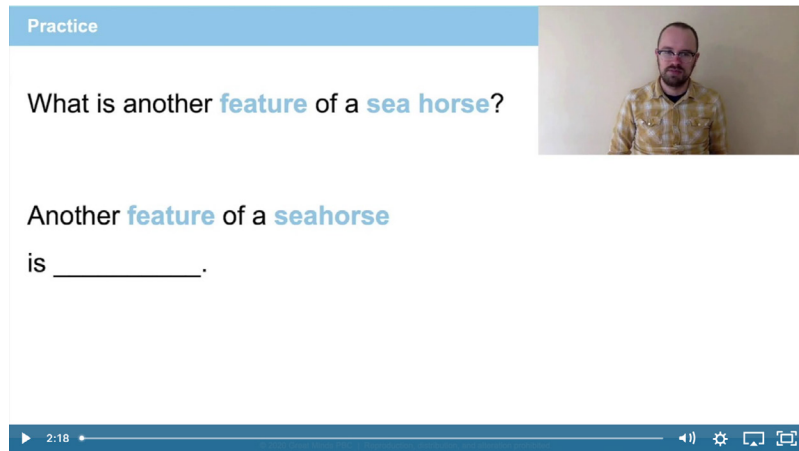
In addition to interacting with texts and the teacher, multilingual learners must have ample opportunities to interact with their peers (National Academy of Sciences, 2017). The English Learner Success Forum guidelines provide numerous recommendations for ways teachers can support students in engaging in productive conversations. Meaningful tasks, careful grouping, and clear directions are important for accountable talk that helps students negotiate meaning. In addition to partner and small group discussions, students benefit from whole group discussions, especially when they have built collective knowledge to discuss, have language supports, and have a chance to rehearse. This grade 1 lesson continues the *sea horse* exploration with a Socratic Seminar.

The teacher previews the speaking and listening goals they have been working on. Then she previews Sentence Frames the students can use to stretch their language use. Next, she shares the question that builds on several lessons of exploring the core text about sea horses: In what different ways does *Sea Horse* teach readers about the *sea horse*'s unique features? Students Think–Pair–Share before entering the whole group discussion.

Goldenberg (2020) points out that oral language proficiency actually plays an increasing role "as students progress through the grades and English-language demands of reading and writing increase." The Socratic Seminar is a routine integrated into all K–8 *Wit & Wisdom* modules, continuing to offer students rich discussions, oral language practice, and adequate supports such as shared knowledge building, small group rehearsal, and academic language models.

## Why are Grade-Level, Complex Texts so Important, and How Can They be Scaffolded?

The final non-negotiable principle is that multilingual learners need to work with grade-level, complex texts. In 2018, Student Achievement Partners published an annotated bibliography synthesizing research on English learners into instructional objectives, and Objective 1 is to provide opportunities for MLLs to work with grade-level text. In an article for the English Learner Success Forum, Fillmore and Assiraj (2019) assert, "The use of leveled readers for differentiated reading instruction is a controversial practice for all students, but is especially problematic for English learners (ELs)." They explain that the simplification of texts often removes the context and makes them more difficult to understand. Furthermore, using simplified or leveled texts means that students don't get the exposure to exactly what they need. Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) explain that complex texts are especially difficult to comprehend because "[l]inguists and language analysts who have studied the language of academic texts have identified grammatical structures and devices for framing ideas, indicating relationships, and structuring arguments, that create substantial differences between spoken and written language." Without instruction using complex texts, students will never be exposed to the linguistic patterns that they need to advance their literacy skills. Rather than restricting language learners to watered-down content, teachers should provide scaffolds so that students can access the grade-level content. "In order to develop the ability to read complex texts and engage in academic conversations, ELs need access to such texts and conversations, along with support in engaging with them" (Bunch, Kibler, and Pimentel, 2013).

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One of the most effective ways to scaffold to grade-level texts is by using knowledge-building text sets. Not only do text sets build background knowledge, which we know is essential for reading comprehension, but they are also extremely effective at building vocabulary (Cervetti and Wright, 2015). Repeated exposure to the topic and repeated discussion of the topic build a core vocabulary about the topic. You can also supplement this study with visual art, videos, music, and other resources that will help students

develop an understanding of the topic. Text sets provide an opportunity to bring in home language support. García et al. (2017) explain that home language use in the classroom also allows students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to engage with complex texts and access ELA and word knowledge. Teachers can help students build background knowledge in their home language, which would support their overall development and the variety of resources they bring to the classroom.

In *Wit & Wisdom*, each module has a variety of core complex texts and supplementary resources that address the same topic and essential question. Here you can see the collection of resources that help students unpack the grade 7 module called Americans All. Students are supported to engage meaningfully with Farewell to Manzanar and Code Talker.
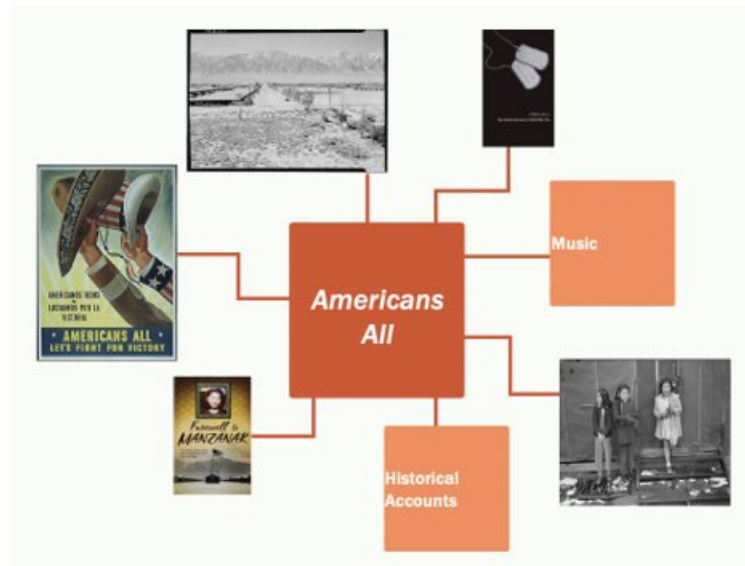
Another strategy to support students in accessing complex texts is purposeful reading. All students, including multilingual learners, benefit from using strategies such as questioning and summarizing the text through multiple encounters (August et al., 2008). *Wit & Wisdom* uses a series of lessons that invite students to proceed deeper and deeper in their understanding of a text. The five Content Stages—Wonder, Organize, Reveal, Distill, and Know—enable students to access, understand, and analyze texts.

1. The Wonder stage builds students' confidence with new texts and offers an entry point into the text for all readers—especially striving readers and multilingual learners—without fear of being wrong.
2. The Organize stage ensures literal comprehension of the text's people, events, and setting and the historical facts on which it is based.
3. The Reveal stage requires purposeful close reading and critical thinking to unlock deeper meaning. Students zoom in on a particular text element or section.
4. In the next lesson, students zoom back out to the Distill stage. They take all that they have learned up to this point to consider the text's essential meaning or theme. This stage reinforces a larger purpose of reading: to grasp the big ideas of a text and why it matters.
5. The Know stage asks students to reflect on how the texts contribute to the overall knowledge they are building in the module.

Used over time, the Content Stages build readers' transferable habits of mind so that students build the lifelong skills to access complex texts. You can see the Wonder stage of a grade 7 art lesson below. This lesson provides visual support, builds knowledge of the topic, and serves as an entry point into the text for all readers.

To support students in understanding how complex text works, multilingual learners also need explicit attention to the features of disciplinary language. Some areas that can be particularly challenging are dense sentences, discipline-specific text structures, pronoun referents, appositives, and nominalization. Below is an example of a *Wit & Wisdom* lesson that helps students understand how the author of the core text uses transition words. The students consider the function of the words and then continue to explore types of transition words and apply them to their own writing.

Examine Transitions ⏱

SMALL GROUPS

Display the Craft Question:

Why are transitions important?

Display the last paragraph from page 67, with the transition words underlined:

"That day, <u>for the first time</u>, I realized several things. The <u>first</u> was that bilagáanaas are not born knowing everything. The <u>second</u> was that in many of the most important ways, white men are no different from Navajos. The <u>third</u>? That no matter who they are, people can always learn from each other" (67).

Instruct students to Think-Pair-Share, and ask:

"What is the function of the underlined words in the paragraph?"

- *They show the order of the things he realized.*
- *They connect the sentences.*
- *They are transition words and show how one idea is related to another.*

If no student mentions the word, explain that these words function as transitions. Incorporating students' responses, remind students that transitions are like bridges across sentences and paragraphs that show the reader how ideas connect.

Once my grade 5 student got the instruction he deserved, he thrived. He wrote paragraphs with text-based evidence from *Bud, Not Buddy* in grade 6, debated the role of manipulative language in *Animal Farm* in grade 7, and successfully navigated hybrid learning in grade 8. He's now poised to enter high school and continue to succeed, despite some difficult odds. While the number of English learners in US schools continues to grow, educators still struggle to meet their needs. "The achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students—about 40 percentage points in both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math—has been essentially unchanged from 2000 to 2013" (McMurphy, 2015). In 2016, the high school graduation rate for English learners was 67 percent, compared to 84 percent for all students (US DOE). Multilingual students

are often working twice as hard as their peers, learning a new language on top of content. They deserve our best instruction and materials, and we can't afford to use old-fashioned practices when we know what the non-negotiables are and when we have high-quality materials available.

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