Imagine Reading:

Supporting Middle-Years English Learners in Accessing Grade-Level Content

Introduction

Reading proficiency is a critical skill for school success and for learning new material across various disciplines. As students advance in school, they need to acquire not only reading skills but also content knowledge to comprehend rigorous grade-level texts. This can be especially challenging for English learners (EL students), as they must simultaneously develop English-language proficiency, build reading proficiency, and acquire the academic language necessary for understanding classroom texts.

Although EL students may face specific challenges with language acquisition and reading proficiency, EL students in grades 3–8 have varying degrees of skill in language and reading, as well as varying levels of literacy development in their first language. Some students are fully literate in their first language, while others may have limited ability to read, which requires different instructional approaches to meet their needs. At times, the disparity between students' grades and their English-language and reading skills causes inappropriate assignment of materials that are not grade level and do not promote a deep understanding of content knowledge. This limits opportunities for students to access rigorous grade-level content. As Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2012) point out, "easier work is less likely to make readers stronger. Teachers need to motivate students to keep trying, especially when the level of work is increasing" (p. 62).

As stated by the Council of the Great City Schools (2014), it is essential that "Districts … ensure that EL students across all levels of language proficiency can access and fully engage with a more rigorous grade-level English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum called for in educational standards." EL students in grades 3–8 need support in understanding vocabulary in grade-level texts, and in comprehending texts with more complex language structures. "EL students often struggle to understand the features of academic language: the sentence structures, text organization patterns, and common academic words and phrases (e.g., therefore, as a result) that are found in textbooks and other academic texts" (Lesaux, Galloway, & Marietta, 2016, p. 31).

Experienced teachers provide scaffolding to support students as they access rigorous grade-level texts. Scaffolds are designed as temporary supports that help students access grade-level content that they might not otherwise be successful in accessing without such support (August, Fenner, & Snyder, 2014). Research-based scaffolding for EL students include activating prior knowledge and capitalizing on students' first-language skills, explicitly teaching comprehension strategies and close reading, teaching academic language and vocabulary, integrating oral and written language in instruction, and providing opportunities for peer interaction (Baker et. al., 2014).

Activate Prior Knowledge and Preview New Concepts

Before reading grade-level texts, EL students need support to understand new vocabulary and concepts included in selections. Previewing or explaining unknown words or concepts, and activating prior knowledge before reading, helps EL students create schemas for new content and prepares them to comprehend reading materials (Cisco & Padron, 2012; Colorín Colorado, n.d.; Hererra, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015). Activating prior knowledge enables Imagine Learning Research Department EL students to apply what they already know from their experience to new learning. It helps them make learning relevant in terms of their socio-cultural background and experience (Colorín Colorado, n.d.; Herrera et al., 2015).

Imagine Reading is designed to assist teachers in previewing new concepts and activating prior knowledge. Each Imagine Reading unit begins with a Focus Question that teachers use to activate prior knowledge related to specific subjects. For example, in the *Dance: A Cultural Tradition* unit, the Focus Question is: *Why is dance culturally and historically significant to people around the world?* Asking this question allows EL students to engage in a wholeclass discussion and connect what they already know or have experienced related to cultural dance traditions to the instructional unit. Teachers can further frame introductory discussions with statements provided in lessons, and with questions specific to each reading selection such as, "What are the purposes of dance? How would the world be different if people didn't dance?" (see example included in text box).

> **Teacher Resource Framing Statement.** *Dance: A Cultural Tradition*
> There are many styles and purposes of dance, but it is usually performed to music and often has particular clothing or costumes worn by the dancers.... A dance can also be spontaneous and creative as people move however the music makes them feel — at prom, on a stadium Jumbotron, at home doing chores, anywhere. Many cultures have specific dances — with national, traditional costumes and music — that are performed at festivals and celebrations. These traditions support cultural identity and help connect generations.

Comprehension Strategies and Close Reading

Comprehending grade-level texts requires the use of a variety of comprehension strategies, such as identifying main ideas and story elements and finding evidence and reason for arguments presented in informational texts. EL students benefit from models of the authentic use of reading strategies, and from having teachers provide explicit instruction for specific strategies and approaches for reading (Cisco & Padron, 2012; Herrera et al., 2015).

Imagine Reading's instructional sequences help EL students learn new comprehension strategies. With Power Sentence Lesson activities, teachers explicitly model how to comprehend and analyze complex sentences. Power Sentences are intentionally designed dense, meaning-rich statements pulled from rigorous grade-level texts. During Power Sentence activities, teachers ask guiding questions and provide feedback as students unpack and engage with rich academic text. The purpose of the discussion is to help students understand the relationship between sentence structure and meaning.

Following the Power Sentence Lesson activities, grade-level lessons include engaging instructional videos that feature peer modeling of comprehension strategies, such as applying background knowledge to new learning. For example, the video for *Maps and Navigation* uses peer modeling to illustrate how students connect background knowledge and understanding as they prepare for new learning. The characters in the video explore their perceptions of maps and how maps represent the world. Their interchange illustrates how prior knowledge is a helpful way to approach new academic content.
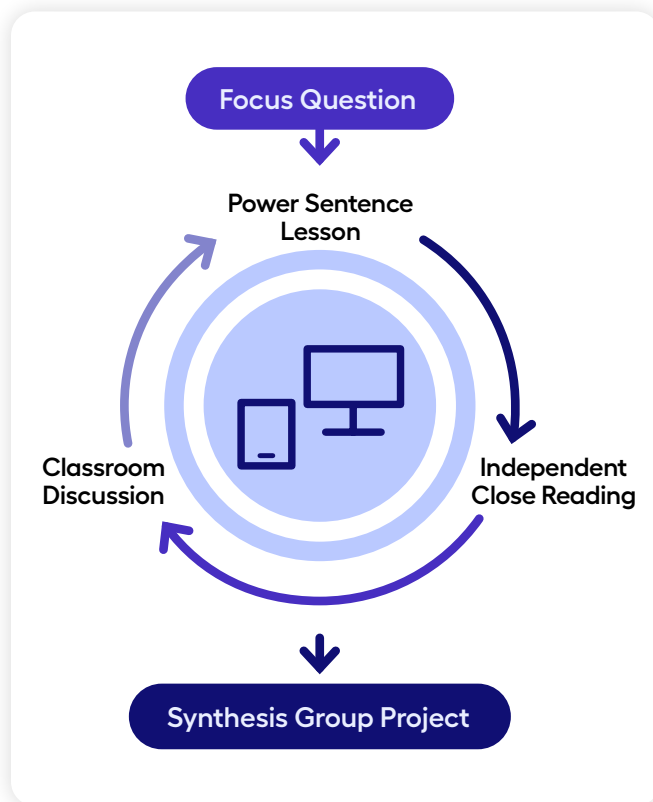
In addition to providing comprehension-strategy instruction, Imagine Reading is designed to facilitate the development of close, engaged, critical thinking and reading. As students read texts, they can highlight sentences and annotate texts with comments and questions, which helps them organize their thinking for written responses and classroom discussions. These tools support engaged, deep learning across all grades, and are available to all EL students.

Teach Academic Language and Vocabulary

All students need to acquire academic language to succeed in school. Academic language is used in textbooks, essays, assignments, class presentations, discussions, lessons, and assessments. Academic language encompasses various expressions of language including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It is used at all grade levels and the frequency of use increases as students progress in school (Breiseth, 2014). Academic language development should be a key instructional goal for all EL students as they advance in content learning (Gersten et al., 2007).

Focus Question → Power Sentence Lesson → Independent Close Reading → Classroom Discussion → Synthesis Group Project

Imagine Reading was designed to build strong academic language skills among students in Grades 3–8. The instructional sequence for each lesson focuses on the development and use of academic language. Focus Questions, Power Sentence Lesson discussions, Close Reading with Scaffold Support, and the Synthesis Project all center around academic discourse. As EL students engage with each instructional element, they learn to communicate their thoughts effectively through speaking and writing. By closely examining complex sentences and rigorous grade-level selections, students learn how grammar, vocabulary, and syntax — key components of academic language — affect meaning.

Teacher-facilitated discussions and project-based learning provide ample opportunity for students to talk about texts and practice the conventions of discourse, including clarifying, elaborating, identifying common ground, and respecting others' opinions. These robust discussions support the development of academic language for all participants.

Integrate Oral and Written Language in Instruction

EL students increasingly need to comprehend dense informational texts and respond in writing as they advance in school. Instruction should include strategic scaffolding to support their comprehension. Integrating short video clips, using visuals, and providing graphic organizers helps anchor instruction for EL students and creates a shared experience grounded in language expression (Baker et al., 2014). Visual scaffolds are particularly effective when material is engaging and interesting to students.

In upper-elementary and middle-school grades, students are expected to not only read rigorous grade-level content, but to generate well-organized written responses and essays that are progressively longer and more complex related to subject matter (Baker et al., 2014). For EL students, writing assignments should be anchored in content and support students in developing writing skills and using academic language.

All Imagine Reading units and lessons are supported with multimedia materials that enhance comprehension. Lessons begin with videos that illustrate concepts in specific passages. Students can access maps, videos, audio clips, photos, and graphics that provide background knowledge and visually represent content when they interact with reading selections. Unfamiliar words and phrases are annotated with contextual, student-friendly definitions. Additionally, students can access an embedded dictionary, complete with audio support, by clicking on any of the words in the passage.

Synthesis Projects are anchored in lesson content and are designed to support EL students in applying learning to produce written, academic artifacts. In producing various artifacts, students demonstrate how they synthesize information and use language to communicate understanding to others.

Peer Interaction

English learners need the opportunity to practice language and obtain feedback. Working in small groups or in pairs increases EL students' exposure to language, and supports language development and content learning (Colorín Colorado, n.d.). When grouping students, groups should be heterogeneous to provide EL students the opportunity to interact with peers with stronger English-language skills (Baker et al., 2014). For discussions with peers to be productive and successful, teachers must structure and actively monitor pairs and groups to ensure focused, targeted discussions occur (Baker et al., 2014).

The Imagine Reading units of instruction begin with teacher-led group discussions and end with the Synthesis Project. The Synthesis Project is a collaborative project that allows EL students to work with peers to synthesize their learning across six related texts to respond to the unit's Focus Question. As students collaborate to complete Synthesis Projects, final products should include an explanation of concepts, examples, and articulation of the group's shared response to the question. Teachers can monitor students' progress and provide feedback as students are completing the project to ensure that groups are focused and engaged in completing the project.

Conclusion

Equitable instruction for EL students includes additional support in accessing grade-level standards. Given the critical role reading proficiency plays in allowing students to learn new material across various disciplines, it is essential for EL students to acquire both grade-level reading skills and academic language to understand and engage critically with grade-level texts. By intentionally incorporating proven instructional methods such as activating prior knowledge and previewing new concepts; teaching strategies for comprehension and close reading; teaching academic language and vocabulary; integrating oral and written language into instruction; and providing opportunities for peer interaction, Imagine Reading is designed to assist EL students in Grades 3–8 in accessing and engaging with a rigorous grade-level ELA curriculum.

References

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