

Shanahan on Literacy

Wednesday, November 21, 2012

Prereading and ELLs: Let's Take off the Training Wheels

I received this recent question from a teacher in Tennessee:

I have had many questions from my ESL teachers regarding the role of frontloading with ELLs. We have been reading and learning about the importance of minimizing frontloading in the general education classroom, per Common Core recommendations. However, we still feel that ELLs benefit from frontloading. Can you please give us some insight on the role of frontloading for ELLs, either in or out of the general education setting? Also, we would greatly appreciate some advice on where to look for scaffolding models to use with ELLs to help them access the complex text that CCSS demand.

Frontloading or prereading preparation can definitely put English Learners on a more even footing with their native English peers. Sometimes a text presupposes knowledge that children from a very different culture don't have, and providing this ahead of time can give them heightened access to the text. An author might describe something that would be culturally unfamiliar or even emotionally uncomfortable in terms of family structure (e.g., divorce) or child behavior (what is considered respectful can differ).

Nothing wrong with bringing kids up to speed ahead of time on such gaps so they can make sense of what they read.

Unfortunately, what many teachers mean by "front loading" is that the teacher will tell what the text says before the kids get a chance to read it. If the information that you plan to provide is in the text then you are not helping the student to read, you are helping him not to (if the student already know what it says, then why bother to try).

It is sort of like translating too quickly... if someone keeps telling you what was said in your home language, there wouldn't be much purpose for learning the new language. At some point, the training wheels have to come off. You may fall down more often without them, but you will be riding the bicycle. (The first principle of bicycling: Riders fall.)

Your question makes it sound like the job of the teacher is to protect students from falling down; you and frontloading are the training wheels. But what if a teacher is more like a bicycle helmet; your job isn't to prevent them from falling down, but to make sure that they don't get hurt.

In the past, we tended to read a text once in classrooms, so the reading had to be maximally productive. We had to make sure the kids got the information. It wouldn't be fair otherwise. The

premium was on the information and teachers were just making sure that students at least heard the information.

In contrast, the idea being stressed these days is that students SHOULD read the text more than once. What you don't get the first time, you might get the second. Instead of front-loading the first reading, you could try front-loading the second or third—after the kids had a chance to pedal the bike themselves. If they ask a question about what they don't understand, by all means answer. But don't always assume that they won't get it... give them a chance to fall... who knows they might just surprise you.

Be the helmet—not the training wheels.