

Scaffolding and
vocabulary-building
techniques: "to kill a
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Description of Classroom Demographics

Last year, I was an ELL teacher in a Sino-Canadian International high school. The instructional environment of my 10th grade ELL class – an integration of both ESL-specific class and regular English language arts class – consisted of 22 students: three fifteen years-old and fifteen sixteen-years old students. Among these, there were also four seventeen-years old students repeating the 10th grade ELL due to unsatisfactory academic performance the previous term. Mandarin Chinese was the students' first language and the class had a good attendance rate but relatively low levels of motivation. Overall, the class make-up showed a low level of diversity in languages, developmental levels, and culture.

Challenges Facing ELL Students

“ Who is Andrew Jackson?”

“ Anything special for being a Southerner?”

“ Why is it a source of shame that they had no recorded ancestors on either side of the Battle of Hastings?”

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There were at least 15 students in my ELL class who asked me similar questions when they started to read the first two chapters of the classic American novel “ To Kill a Mockingbird.” Some students nodded their heads and said, “ Ok, I got it”, after I superficially explained what happened in the American Deep South back in 1930s. Other students were less optimistic,

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telling me that the book was too difficult for them or that “ I can’t understand it from page two.”

It is not surprising that ELL students struggle with reading literature. There are variety of reasons: the lack of background information, unfamiliar vocabulary, and general issues with comprehension can all be overwhelming factors that frustrate the ELL students. This frustration can also result in a lack of motivation, possibly leading the students to become dependent readers who rely on others to make sense for them. Dependent readers, based on Beers’ (2003) definition, rely on an outside-of-themselves source not only to tell them what to do, but in many cases, to do it for them; this definition perfectly fit the situation I observed in the ELL class. What’s more is that ELL students who lack sufficient English vocabulary tend to struggle with communication, choosing instead to speak in their native language, all while exhibiting a fear of genuine participation with the class. All these factors contributed to an overall negative effect on the ELL class’ learning.

I believe it is my duty as an educator to facilitate the learning of my students in terms of familiarity with background information and the necessary vocabulary, interpreting the meaning of the text, and maintaining a high interest and engagement level for participation in the class. Just like Vygotsky (1978) states, “ what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87).

Engage in Reading Through Scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky (1978), a Russian psychologist, introduced the concept of a zone of proximal development in the late 1920s, as the “ distance between <https://assignbuster.com/scaffolding-and-vocabulary-building-techniques-to-kill-a-mockingbird-ell-instruction/>

the learner's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The zone of proximal development relies on the concept of scaffolding – developed by David Wood, Jerome Bruner, and Gail Ross (1976), three cognitive and educational psychologists – which describes the kind of assistance, help or guidance given by the teacher or more knowledgeable peer in order to achieve what would have been too difficult for learners, thus moving learners into the zone of proximal development. Scaffolding includes all the things that teachers do already when they predict what kinds of difficulties the class or individual students will have with a given task. As Balaban (1995) puts it, " Scaffolding is the way the adult guides the child's learning via focused questions and positive interactions." (p. 52)

As part of the scaffolding process, visual texts that include images and words are an excellent way to provide comprehensible information to ESL students. Visual information makes it so that not only will students learn the essential subject content that they will also make progress in their acquisition of English. The graphic novel version of texts can often be used as a supplement instruction in ELL class. As Kaileen Chilauskas and Chali Davis (2018), two experienced reading coaches suggest, ELL readers should use pictures to read first, combining words with something that is visual. This can help them build confidence while not getting overwhelmed with the texts; it can also make the texts more emotionally-resonant with the readers.

Students can benefit from the clues that pictures provide to reinforce the

story's meaning, thus enhancing comprehension and vocabulary development.

Most ELL students are not intrinsically motivated towards reading, which leads them to become disengaged or bored in class. Stephen Krashen(1981), a researcher of second language acquisition, suggests that comprehensible input is a sufficient condition for language acquisition. However, Krashen (1982) further claims that no language will be acquired in the presence of the affective filter. In other words, because of their anxiety or boredom, students can struggle to learn either subject content or language even if the input is comprehensible. Moreover, Graves (1996) claims that the learning task should also be engaging and interesting to keep learners involved. One of the most prevalent reasons for lack of motivation is the learning tasks being uninteresting and not sufficiently engaging. The graphic novel version of the book, as well as fun activities during and after reading, should allow students to study certain passages in-depth and also help retain the students' interest in the novel.

The concept of scaffolding also includes the activation of background knowledge or brief review of key vocabulary at the beginning of each class.

ELL students are overwhelmed and frustrated when they lack background knowledge during reading. It is my role as the teacher to determine what background knowledge students need in order to master the material. In doing so, it is also important for me not to assume that ELL students' background knowledge matches that of other students who were raised in this country. In order to build background knowledge, my strategies to create

interest in the subject are through using pictures, maps, or documentary films. In cases where the text is difficult or requires understanding of text-specific knowledge beforehand, it is my responsibility to provide it to them before they are asked to do independent reading. I need to also help students develop conceptual background, as well as establish the purpose of the reading, in part through explaining difficult concepts using keywords that ELL students can remember.

The majority of ELL students have a hard time with unknown vocabulary found in the text. Fluent readers recognize and understand many words, and they read more quickly and easily than those with smaller vocabularies (Allington, 2006; Samuels, 2002). ELL students with smaller vocabulary pay more attention to searching or determining the meaning of words, rather than interpreting the deeper contextual significance of those words. As such, the students who lack fluency read slowly with many pauses, often in a monotone, while making mistakes and ignoring punctuation (Beers, 2003). Therefore, it is important to teach students the prefixes, roots, and suffixes that appears most often in English and are constant in their meaning and pronunciation (Bromley, 2002). Furthermore, when students store new information by making links to their existing schema or network of organized information, there is a better chance that the new information can be more easily recalled at a later time (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). It is also essential to assign fewer words and be sure to use them in my speech, which helps students link the words with real life experiences. We often assign too many words and we never use those words. Ideally, when we assign fewer words and use those words in our speech the week or so before we introduce

them, the students will recognize them and be more likely to remember them after studying them (Beers, 2003).

Essential Questions and Course Texts

It is important for students to understand why showing kindness to others is necessary, especially in this current competitive society. Injustice and racism are existing along with the intense competition that students are facing. Even though the climate of racism has been changed since last century, it still exists in various ways in society. Students should know that compassion is a powerful tool to accelerate the positive change on the path of civilization. It is my hope that the text I choose; “ To Kill a Mockingbird”, the lives of characters and themes will inspire students to recognize the vital to use compassion in their daily lives. This six weeks unit plan which focuses on courage, compassion, racism, and historical awareness by using the classic novel “ To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee along with a variety of supplements texts.

The main questions that inform these goals include “ How do power dynamics influence the ways we see ourselves and the choices we make?”, “ How do people create and/or challenge the written and unwritten rules?”, and “ Who benefit from them?”. My goal is to shift the conversation from just the social issues in the novel to a more human one – about admirable human qualities such as courage and compassion. As such, I also believe that doing this kind of critical reading of the novel can empower individuals to challenge enduring stereotypes around race, class, gender, and geography.

The first class I choose to build students' background knowledge is " An Overview of the Great Depression". This class discusses the various causes and effects of the Great Depression, as well as how America's economy eventually recovered in order to provide context on the period in which the novel is set. The students will be asked to take in new information, such as new characters and themes in the novel, with the social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances of the Great Depression in mind. This approach is meant to give students an adequate level of prior understanding about the history and social settings relevant to the novel.

Before reading the novel, students will also watch the documentary " The Central Park Five" (2013) – this generation's " To Kill a Mockingbird", which documents a legal case that happened in 1989. Race and social status are key features of why the five boys known as the Central Park Five became suspects, and introduction of this documentary to the class can allow me to highlight the themes of race and responsibility with an example that is more contemporary. I will ask students to reflect on what the public reaction to the death of unarmed black men says about the history of race relations in America.

Following the students' studying of the background knowledge and immersing students in the historical setting by watching the documentary, the unit will shift to its central instructional text, " To Kill a Mockingbird", a graphic novel version adapted and illustrated by Fred Fordham (2018).

Harper Lee's novel is through the eyes of a child, whereas the graphic novel adaptation features richly drawn depictions of all the main characters –

Scout, Jem, Boo Radley, and Atticus Finch – along with speech bubbles that <https://assignbuster.com/scaffolding-and-vocabulary-building-techniques-to-kill-a-mockingbird-ell-instruction/>

bring to life their dialogue and interactions with each other. Fordham's novel is not only visually appealing, but because of the multitude of perspectives within it, highlights the hidden behavioural norms of beliefs of Maycomb Country in a more easily understood and visually-appealing way than the novel. The unique features of the graphic novel make it a great means of motivating students, especially ELL students, to read. Once students finish reading the graphic novel version, it is much more likely that they can read the Harper Lee novel to a greater level of understanding and enjoyment.

The book is a perfect fit for this unit for a variety of reasons. First of all, the protagonist is young, which can mean that students will feel more connected to her. Second, even as this book is questioned for its suitability for the high-school classroom, Susan Arpajian Jolley (2002) describes how Harper Lee's novel retains its prominent place in the high-school curriculum because it is "rich in thematic material and accessible enough and moving enough to open the eyes of many an American high-school student to worlds and perspective they need to see" (p. 34). Finally, the hope is that through personally connecting with the novel's narrative and characters, students will discover more about themselves in relation to their larger environments learn about the historical events that shaped society and understand how history affects their lives today.

As supplement material, students will read the nonfiction text, "Scottsboro: A Tragedy of The American South," in which Dan T. Carter (1975) discusses the historic events in which nine black boys were wrongfully accused and convicted of assault. The reason I would like to link the case with Harper

Lee's novel is because the trial of the Scottsboro Boys was a source of <https://assignbuster.com/scaffolding-and-vocabulary-building-techniques-to-kill-a-mockingbird-ell-instruction/>

inspiration for “ To Kill a Mockingbird.” I will hand out the reading after reading chapter 21, when the jury returns a verdict, and ask students to write a paragraph comparing the trials between the two texts and be prepared to discuss similarities and differences between the two trials.

Vocabulary

A majority of ELL students struggle with unknown words while reading. I will assign fewer words each day, and instead of making students memorize the words I will instead encourage students to use those words in conversation as much as possible.

Furthermore, students need to complete the daily vocabulary handouts by writing the word, its definition, and drawing a picture that will help them remember the meaning of the word. This activity is based on Beers’ (2003) suggestion for vocabulary teaching using logographic cues as a tool for remembering words.

To better assist students’ ability to recognizing and understand unfamiliar words by themselves, I will spend several classes on “ Teach Word Parts,” which teaches students the prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Instead of memorizing those prefixes, roots, and suffixes, I will encourage students to use a graphic organizer called a vocabulary tree (Beers, 2003). I will have students draw a trunk of a tree and write down a root. Then, in the branches, the students will write as many other words as they can that have that particular root. In this manner, students will build new vocabulary not only to read the specific novel, but in a way that is useful for their future study as well. This is one strategy that is centered on teaching student how to use <https://assignbuster.com/scaffolding-and-vocabulary-building-techniques-to-kill-a-mockingbird-ell-instruction/>

context as a clue to figure out the meaning of unknown words. The hope is that with practice, the number of times that students are interrupted during reading because they need to look up new vocabulary can decrease significantly.

Before, During and After Reading Activities

While this section will not outline every activity that we will do with every text, it will give a general idea of the various ways in which students will be engaging the course texts. The central goal of my unit to help ELL students fully understand the text and engage students in reading and also build students' ability to transfer contemporary issues of injustice to historical issues of injustice.

The pre-reading activities, anticipation guide, is designed to provide students with an opportunity to bring issues to their awareness. Beers (2003) states that an effective anticipation guide presents students with pertinent issues that are worth discussing. The statements for anticipation guide can be: " People should never judge a person based on their appearance.", " Girls should always act like girls.", and " If someone is on trial for murder, they are guilty." These are not clear-cut questions, and students will vote for agree or disagree with each statement. In doing so, students will gain a sense of characters and setting through the in-class discussion. This strategy is an effective means to help students to connect ideas and make predictions about characters and setting about the text.

After the first class, " An Overview of the Great Depression", and watching the documentary " The Central Park Five," students will complete a mini <https://assignbuster.com/scaffolding-and-vocabulary-building-techniques-to-kill-a-mockingbird-ell-instruction/>

group museum exhibit project to reinforce the background knowledge about American Deep South, using their research skills and prior knowledge.

Students will be working in small groups to create a one-day “ Mini Museum” about the United States, specifically Alabama in the early 1930s. Each group will be responsible for creating an “ exhibit” about one element of life at the time. Examples of exhibit topics include “ Images of daily life in Alabama from 1929-1935”, “ Gender Roles and Expectations from 1929-1935”, or “ US and Alabama economy and jobs from 1929-1935”. Students can create different exhibit topics based on their interests. On the museum day, students will walk through the gallery, visit other groups’ exhibits, and come away with a sense of life in the United States and Alabama during the early 1930s. This is an interesting activity that will make sure students are equipped with the required background knowledge to understand the novel.

Struggling readers often move their eyes over the words while their minds drift to their social plans and other events. To help students be completely mindful with their reading, I will use the strategy of “ Say Something” that is suggested by Beers (2003). Groups of two or three students take turns reading a text aloud and occasionally stop to “ say something” about what they have read – they can comment, predict, ask a question, or make a connection. Then the reading partners respond to this “ something” that was said. I will hand a poster in the room with potential sentence starters to model the strategy in case students have nothing to say or to share. The potential sentence starters will provide suggestions to students what specific things they should try to say in order to start expressing a thought.

Moreover, after their reading, the “ Whose Phone Is This” activity will be a good way to assess students’ understanding of the characters and setting. Students will choose one of the characters and complete the three steps to show what would be on this person’s cell phone; wallpaper, email and movie playlist. The first step is where students sketch the character’s cell phone wallpaper with colored pencils and explain why this image choice would appeal to this character. In the second step, students imagine that this character just received two emails. Students need thinking back over the reading, explain which other characters just send messages to this character and what is the content of each email. Third step is where students write three film titles that would likely be on this character’ playlist and explain the reasoning behind those choices as well.

Hopes and Concerns

My unit on “ To Kill a Mockingbird” is rooted in the idea of a zone of proximal development and the importance of scaffolding. According to Wass and Golding (2014), challenging students with difficult tasks and pushing them, as a part of a scaffolding process, can lead to the greatest learning gains. In my unit of ELL instruction on Harper Lee’s novel, I have incorporated a good mix of challenge and fun, but my biggest concern remains that students will feel overwhelmed with the volume of preparation that they are doing, viewing the readings and activities – such as “ The Central Park Five” – as a means to an end (to study the novel) that they find tedious and uninteresting. As mentioned before, the manifestations of students’ boredom are lack of engagement, mind wandering, and low levels of involvement. In order to help address these potential issues, I have designed my unit to have <https://assignbuster.com/scaffolding-and-vocabulary-building-techniques-to-kill-a-mockingbird-ell-instruction/>

learning tasks that are stimulating and also have variety. My overarching hope is that because of this the students can, as a result of the positive qualities of my unit, take joy in the process of learning, not only about the novel and its historical backdrop but also about the process of learning an unfamiliar language. I strongly believe that a multi-faceted approach such as what I described can be an effective contrast to type of routine instruction and classroom learning that students have been used to. Consequently, there should be sufficient motivation for ELL students to work hard at overcoming their language-specific challenges.

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