

# Do's & Don'ts



ENGLISH  
LEARNERS  
SUCCESS  
FORUM

## of EL Instruction

| SUBJECT | AREA OF FOCUS | GUIDELINE | SPECIFICATION |
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GRADES 3-8

## ELs Reading in the Content Areas: An Urgent Equity Issue

As students get older, content learning becomes more abstract and students need to develop comprehension skills particular to nonfiction texts. This information from text is often the foundation for students evaluating and communicating new information. This kind of deep engagement with texts can be particularly challenging for ELs whose background knowledge may be different from their native English-speaking peers, and who are often reading below grade level in English as they are in the midst of acquiring a new language.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, ELs are often faced with the challenge of comprehending content-area texts that are routinely written at or above grade level.<sup>2,3,4</sup> These challenges facing ELs highlight an urgent equity issue that further draws attention to the achievement discrepancies between ELs and their native-English speaking peers and compels us to ask, what experiences do ELs need to have with disciplinary non-fiction texts to support this critical skill development?

### Reading Protocol Steps:

To support ELs in grappling productively with texts, we developed a 3-step reading protocol as part of a 5th grade science curriculum designed to support the science learning and language development of ELs.<sup>5</sup> Although this reading protocol was designed for a science unit, the purposes and instructional strategies are applicable to non-fiction texts in all content areas.

#### Step 0: Before working with texts

What makes the reading protocol work for students is that it builds on a set of shared experiences. In the case of our science units, these experiences include viewing videos and hands-on experiences with phenomena. The texts serve to augment the learning and exploration students have done in these concrete experiences, not replace them.

#### Step 1: Previewing the text

Step 1 in the reading protocol prepares students to read by establishing a purpose for reading and surfacing and/or building relevant context and schema. During Step 1 students discuss the text's figures, images and headings in triads. This supports students in making predictions and generating schema which are important pre-reading strategies. Predicting and schema-building are particularly important for ELs as their background knowledge can be different from what is being asked of the particular task.

#### Step 2: Reading the text

Step 2 supports students in reading texts that reflect grade-level content. The readings are formatted with margin questions that focus students on learning from text, rather than understanding every word. Students read the text independently, responding to the margin questions and underlining supporting evidence in the text.

#### Step 3: Returning to text as a source of evidence

Step 3 supports students in using text as a source of evidence for their conversations and writing. This third step reinforces steps 1 and 2 and makes it clear that there is a specific purpose to reading the text in the course of students' investigation. This last step is also critical in that it gives students the opportunity to integrate what they have read with what they have learned through hands-on exploration.



### Featured Authors



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**Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:**

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|  Create intentional opportunities for ELs to have collaborative conversations to unpack and negotiate text meaning.   |  Don't exclusively rely on whole class discussions for comprehension conversations.  |
|  Teach ELs to read strategically. It is critical that ELs explicitly learn strategies to engage with grade level nonfiction text, such as reviewing headings, graphics, pictures, and titles to build schema and activate prior knowledge.  |  Don't expect ELs to know every word of a text. ELs don't need to know every word of a text to learn from a text. They do have to learn how to read strategically, and carefully placed questions can support the development of this strategy.  |
|  Make changes to grade level text for newcomers (students who have been in the country for 1 year or less). Removing analogies and idioms or replacing content vocabulary with more accessible language can help newcomers make sense of text that is covering grade level content. |  Don't change texts for ELs who are not newcomers. Instead of making the text easier for ELs, we need to provide them with support, such as pre-reading experiences, margin questions, and small group opportunities for discussion about texts. |
|  Engage ELs in reading texts multiple times. Multiple reads give ELs the opportunity to build on their understanding over time.   |  Don't depend on non-fiction texts for all content. It isn't enough for ELs to read about science or math, they need to do the work of scientists and mathematicians.  |
|  Create opportunities for ELs to check for understanding. Questions in the text margins and opportunities to check-in with peers are important ways to support ELs reading for meaning.   |  Don't tell ELs what they are going to read. Instead, tell ELs <i>why</i> they are reading a text. For example, "We are now going to read this text to learn more about X."  |
|  Teach ELs how to make use of cognates. Cognates are words that have similar spelling, meaning, and pronunciation across two different languages. Cognates can support comprehension as well as encourage ELs to use their L1 as a resource.                                      |  Don't pre-teach a list of vocabulary before students read. Instead, use strategic questions to support them learning new vocabulary through context.  |

It is recommended that these practices be part of a comprehensive approach to EL instruction and not in isolation as laid out in our [Guidelines for Improving English Language Arts Materials for English Learners](#).

**Endnotes**

- 1 Goldenberg, C. (2020). Reading wars, reading science, and English learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(S1), pp. S131 - S144.
- 2 Allington, R.L. (2002). You can't learn much from books you can't read. *Educational Leadership*, 60(3), 16 - 19.
- 3 Brown, C.L. & Broemmel, A. D. (2011). Deep scaffolding: Enhancing the reading experiences of English language learners. *The NERA Journal*, 46(2), 34 - 39.
- 4 Chall, J.S. & Conard, S.S. (1991). Should textbooks challenge students? New York: Teachers College Press.
- 5 <https://sisleducation.stanford.edu/>