

Do's & Don'ts



ENGLISH
LEARNERS
SUCCESS
FORUM

of EL Instruction

GRADES K-12

GUIDELINE KEY

This resource is related to the following ELSF Guidelines:

SUBJECT

ELA

AREA OF FOCUS

II

GUIDELINE

6

SPECIFICATION

6A

Do Leveled Readers Hurt or Help My ELs?

What We Know About Leveled Readers

The use of leveled readers for differentiated reading instruction is a controversial practice for all students, but is especially problematic for English learners (ELs). How so?

Consider the simplified texts leveled for emergent readers; these are often prescribed for ELs on the grounds that they lack the English required for working with more complex texts. They are often lacking in content, excitement, and challenge for the reader. Compare, for example, the following two short excerpts from texts about raptors and their prey:

- A. Owls are birds of prey. They catch rats and mice. They have good eyes. They can see in the dark. They hunt at night. They have sharp claws. They are good hunters
- B. Imagine you are a small animal, minding your own business, scurrying low to the ground, going about your day. Suddenly, you sense that something is watching you. You look around, but you don't see anything. Scary, isn't it?¹

In example A, besides the lack of intellectual richness and interestingness of this text, the information is conveyed in a series of simple sentences. The relationships between sentences can be inferred, provided the reader recognizes that the information conveyed by each sentence may be related to the others. The problem with this is that they depend on the reader to impose coherence on the pieces of information provided and to make sense of them together. Some readers may realize that the ideas add up to a larger meaning, but others do not.

When sentences are presented as unrelated items in a list then the act of reading lacks stimulation and is a mere exercise one does in school; there is little incentive to do it except as a school assignment. Even more crucial to educational progress is that such texts actually prevent ELs from having access to the linguistic data they need in order to become more proficient in English.

How do children learn the academic register of English that is required progress in literacy? About the only place they are likely to encounter the forms, structures, and grammatical devices that are used in written English is in authentic texts, which are, by their very nature, relatively complex. We see that in Text B, the sentences are longer, with each containing more than one clause. The grammatical devices that allow clauses and phrases to be linked together into more complex sentences constitute some of the many means for building cohesion—making relationships between ideas more explicit, and allowing the reader to access meaning in the text more readily.²



Featured Authors

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The point is that complex texts are a necessity for ELs, if they are to gain any traction in reading, become engaged in literacy, and acquire the language that is the outcome of literacy, rather than a prerequisite for it. But ELs cannot do it without help however. They need the help of teachers who can provide them the scaffolding and the guidance necessary to get the process underway. In what follows, we offer some do's and don'ts in providing such help.

Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:	
<p>DO Find texts that are grade level appropriate, or as close to grade level as possible for the ELs in your class.</p>	<p>DON'T Don't use different materials for ELs on the grounds that the ones used for the rest of the class are too difficult for them.</p>
<p>DO Select grade level appropriate texts that are sufficiently rich and interesting for students who might find it a stretch to understand, and then provide scaffolds to allow them to access their meaning.</p>	<p>DON'T Don't assume that materials that ELs do not understand easily will turn them off. Children like a challenge, and if the materials are sufficiently compelling, and they are given some help, they will work to make sense of them.</p>
<p>DO Include ELs in all ELA instructional activities you plan for the rest of the class. Do create an inclusive learning environment and access to rich and grade level appropriate texts for all students!</p>	<p>DON'T Don't create separate instructional experiences for ELs where it is obvious that the materials and activities they are asked to work on are less demanding than that given to their classmates.</p>
<p>DO Provide ELs with read-aloud previews of text passages, with attention to vocabulary and discussion of the meaning of the passage prior to lesson on it.</p>	<p>DON'T Don't give texts or materials for ELs to work on cold, i.e., without appropriate instructional support. Prior read-alouds and discussion help students gain entry into the world of the text and to make sense of the ideas it covers.</p>
<p>DO Consider the meaning of a given passage as a whole, then break it down into digestible chunks for closer reading. In that context, guide students in figuring out what the meaning of each chunk is.</p>	<p>DON'T Don't present or talk about the passage in bits and pieces in the expectation that ELs will find connections between them. Previewing the whole text before you work on chunks allow ELs to see how ideas go together!</p>
<p>DO Spend time and effort engaging students in discussions of the meaning of sentence-level chunks and within the sentence, phrasal chunks, each day. The focus here is to have structured conversations in which children learn how academic discourse works.</p>	<p>DON'T Don't leave students out of the discussion about the meaning and interpretation of the text at hand. Don't simplify, or lose opportunities to amplify the meanings of words and phrases.</p>
<p>DO Call attention to the phrasal contexts of words. For example, compare the difference "only" makes depending on its phrasal context in "I eat eggs only at breakfast," and "I only eat eggs at breakfast."</p>	<p>DON'T Don't teach words as if they have one and only one meaning or interpretation. Most words have multiple meaning elements, and their interpretation depends on the phrasal contexts in which they appear.</p>
<p>DO Find additional texts that cover the same information of a given text that give ELs more practice reading using familiar vocabulary and concepts. Each work then provides background knowledge for the ones that follow. These might include leveled reading texts, but the choice of levels and specific texts should be made by the ELs.</p>	<p>DON'T Don't focus on teaching series of isolated or unrelated topics. ELs especially profit from reading multiple texts about similar or related topics, especially when they are linked into larger thematic, conceptual or semantic frameworks.</p>

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 From *Raptor! A Kid's Guide to Birds of Prey*. Christyna M. Laubach, René Laubach.
- 2 Wong Fillmore, L., & Fillmore, C. (2012, January). *What does text complexity mean for English learners and language minority students?* Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA. <https://ell.stanford.edu/publication/what-does-text-complexity-mean-english-learners-and-language-minority-students>