

READ-ALOUDS HELPFUL IN HIGH SCHOOL ESL CLASSES

BY ALEJANDRA VARELA

Some high school English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers express quite a bit of skepticism about using read-alouds in their classrooms. Their doubts about the usefulness of read-alouds center mostly on the lack of time educators have to teach English-language learners (ELLs). Not only do educators have to teach English, also they must teach content area knowledge and critical thinking skills to prepare students to meet graduation requirements and help them in their lives after high school.

An overlooked strategy

When do ELLs, who are mostly taking content area classes in their native language, have the opportunity to hear a piece of literature read by a person in real time? When do ELLs have the opportunity to hear literary pieces read with excellent intonation and pronunciation, and with the appropriate pauses to allow them to cognitively process what they have heard?

The importance of read-alouds in my classroom became apparent when I read the poem "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe to beginning ELLs. I knew the language in this poem was challenging for my students, so I decided to introduce the following words before beginning: *kingdom*, *heaven*, *tomb*, and *sepulcher*. This took about two minutes. As I read the poem, I made sure my intonation and pauses helped my students understand its mood and focus.

After reading the poem, I asked the students if they wanted me to read it again. They all said, "Yes." After reading it a second time, I simply asked, "What was the poem about?" They all answered, "Annabel Lee." Then I asked, "What is the mood of this poem? Is it a happy or sad poem?" Almost in unison they answered, "Sad." I then asked, "Why is it sad?" Four students out of the 10 in my class raised their hands and answered, "She is dead." This was a beginning ESL class, and many of the students are newly arrived immigrants. In spite of this, most of them were able to understand who the poem was about, the mood, and what had happened to the main character. All of this from just one brief read-aloud.

How do you begin introducing read-alouds to your ELLs? The following steps are intended as a guide:

- Select books, stories, or poems you can read in a short amount of time.
- Read the story before reading it to your students. Introduce words you know they will find difficult and use synonyms or cognates as necessary.

- Enhance the reading experience by introducing a few vocabulary words.
- Do not miss the opportunity to teach a grammatical point through a read-aloud.
- Select read-alouds that are connected to the subject you are covering that week.
- Have your students bring books they would like you to read. (Provide them with clear criteria for this.)
- Be flexible. Read-alouds can be done over a two- to three-day period for longer stories.
- Select read-alouds that allow ELLs to use their prior knowledge by brainstorming and scaffolding. Fairy tales work well for this.
- Use read-alouds as a starting point for other activities including answering open-ended questions, teaching reading comprehension strategies, generating writing prompts, and launching mini-projects.
- Use the Internet to find short stories that can be printed out and read.
- Be on the lookout for possible read-alouds. Do not limit read-alouds to fictional stories. Select interesting current events articles.
- Show your passion for literature by reading aloud enthusiastically; this can be contagious.

The benefits are clear

Read-alouds are important for ELLs. Listening to the target language helps students sharpen their listening skills and hear the phonetic variations of the English language, which in turn helps them improve their reading, writing, and oral skills. Teachers who read aloud to ELLs can help facilitate changing secondary schools' perceptions of its usefulness in helping students achieve higher order thinking skills. It is imperative that high school ESL teachers stop thinking of read-alouds as a pedagogical strategy limited to elementary school students. It is time to recognize that our role as language teachers is not only to teach linguistic competency in the second language but to help ELLs acquire reading comprehension skills that will be valuable for them in their future academic endeavors. Here are some useful websites to help you get started:

<http://wiredforbooks.org>

www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/childrenindex.html

www.everythingsl.net/in-services/elementary_sites_ells_71638.php

www.penguinputnam.com/static/packages/us/yreaders/aesop/index.html

www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/fimbles/comfycorner/story10.shtml

www.magickeys.com/books/index.html#books

www.goodnightstories.com/stories.htm ❖

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WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

BY ELITE BEN-YOSEF

As a mother of a son who went through school labeled "learning disabled," as a former special education teacher, as a current professor of literacy, and as an advocate for marginalized students, I would like to suggest we rethink the negative labels we assign to so many of our students. Within our good intentions of helping children who learn differently, we inadvertently chose a negative descriptor that has become so natural I lived in peace with it myself all these years until recently while I was teaching a sociolinguistics course, when the injustice of the label suddenly hit me.

All humans are capable of learning and do so throughout their lives, albeit in different ways. Think about learning to cook—how did you learn? By watching someone at home cook as you grew up? By reading cook books? By watching the Food Network? By taking classes? Or by trial and error and clues you picked up over time? I still can't make a soufflé, but no one has labeled me "cooking disabled."

The "learning disabled" label was created as an administrative tool in the process of trying to help children who were struggling with school literacies. The purpose was to indicate to these students that their difficulties were not "their fault" and that we had created for their benefit a whole system of resources to allow them to succeed in their educational pursuits. But, in hindsight, a process of reification set in. Just as special education services in schools have become, in many cases, self-serving systems that represent dead-end trajectories for many children of poverty, children of color, and English-language learners, the labels that go with the system have taken on a derogatory life of their own.

Labeled students very often *become* their label; they are regarded in schools only as that which their negative label designates. These students are considered problematic for classroom teachers and many times are ridiculed by peers

("Going to the 'retard room'"). The system considers them to be deficient and in need of remediation, but can a "disability" be remediated? Meanwhile, all other facets of their lives and identities—their abilities, their strengths, the non-school literacies they know and are learning constantly—fade from view because of the strong light shining on their school-related disabilities.

Think of the injustice here: Kids who are lucky enough to be able to write, read, and do math according to school expectations have the right (as all people should) to be seen as whole human beings and be described as such. But students who fall short in the 3Rs lose this right; they lose the dignity of being accepted as whole, healthy, and able. They *become* "those who *can't*," and we all know the cycle of consequences: a feeling of inadequacy leading to low self-esteem leading to giving up on school work and/or disruptive behavior leading to failure.

Negatively labeling children because of a perceived weakness in school literacy is a discriminatory act implying power and privilege differentials. I am addressing this letter to teachers who care and are aware of the direct connection between self-esteem and learning, teachers who see negative labeling as disenfranchisement and the denial of a basic human right.

I am bringing up this issue as a challenge for all of us to find a better, more positive way of describing those children who have difficulties learning school literacies within the normative curriculums. Maybe we can come up with a better way of describing these children, because they *can*, just differently. ❖

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P.S. One of the ways this is being addressed in the literature as well as in sporadic practice is the use of the concept of "2e—twice exceptional" (see the work of Susan Baum and Linda Silverman, among others).

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