**[Common Core and ELLs](http://blog.colorincolorado.org/%22%20%5Co%20%22Common%20Core%20and%20ELLs)**

**What the new standards mean for English language learners**

**Background Knowledge: A Key to Close Reading with ELLs**

February 22, 2013 by [Diane Staehr Fenner](http://blog.colorincolorado.org/author/dstaehrfenner/)

This post is my second of two about how the shifts of the English Language Arts CCSS are playing out in classrooms with ELLs. My first post was about [teaching informational text to ELLs](http://blog.colorincolorado.org/2013/02/13/teaching-informational-text-to-ells/), and this post will focus on close reading for ELLs. The concept of close reading has not been without [debate](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2012/02/english_companion_ning_debate.html), and so I will first provide an overview of what close reading is and could mean for ELLs, including some definitions of close reading. Then I’ll present the role of background knowledge, which is a major consideration with teaching ELLs close reading, and share some recommended resources.

**Definitions of Close Reading**

There are several prominent voices that have emerged when it comes to defining the concept of close reading as it pertains to the Common Core. One is Tim Shanahan, Professor of Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and expert on ELL literacy. He describes close reading on [his website](http://shanahanonliteracy.com/) as “an old, widely known and specific concept that indicates where meaning resides (in the text) and what readers must to do gain access to this meaning (read the text closely, weighing the author’s words and ideas, and relying heavily on the evidence in the text).” Shanahan stresses that close reading is not a teaching technique per se, but rather a way to place emphasis on readers figuring out a high quality text and grapple with it.

He states that close reading plays out in the classroom by shifting instruction off of strategies and skills and onto the texts themselves and ideas presented in texts. Instead of having students focus on their own personal connection to a text (e.g., How did the story remind you of a similar time from your childhood?), instruction instead focuses students’ attention on reading, interpreting, and evaluating text. So, close reading becomes an intensive analysis of a text in order to comprehend what it says, how it says it, and what it means. By engaging in close reading throughout their education, Shanahan says students are poised to develop a rich body of knowledge about the world, and their reading practices will become ingrained “habits of mind.”

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) offers their own definition of close reading:

*Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. (PARCC, 2011, p. 7)*

A third view comes from a recent brief authored by the Aspen Institute titled “[A Primer on ‘Close Reading’ of Text”](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/pubs/CR.Primer.print_.pdf) (whose authors are featured in [this webinar](http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-dec-19-2012) hosted by the Alliance for Excellent Education) which points out that the ten anchor standards for reading in the English Language Arts CCSS are bookended by a focus on the close reading of complex text:

* Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
* Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently

While Shanahan [disputes](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/10/help-we-cant-use.html) some claims made by the Aspen institute in his blog (e.g., all texts read must be brief), both Shanahan and the Aspen Institute agree that students need to read complex texts multiple times to unlock their multilayered meaning. Shanahan suggests a particular close reading sequence in which:

(1) The first reading allows the reader to determine what a text says,

(2) The second reading allows the reader to determine how a text works, and

(3) The third reading allows the reader to evaluate the quality and value of the text (and to connect the text to other texts).

**One Consideration in ELLs’ Close Reading of Texts: The Role of Background Knowledge**

Although there are multiple challenges for ELLs at all levels of English proficiency in effectively partaking in the close reading of complex texts (e.g., academic language needed, unlocking the meaning of complex texts), I will focus here on the role of background knowledge. There has been [some debate](http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/common-core-watch/2012/teach-like-a-champion-versus-the-Common-Core.html) about whether to pre-teach elements of a text before students read it using a close reading framework. For ELLs, however, the role of background knowledge cannot be ignored. As part of doing a close reading of text, teachers of ELLs need to find out how much background their students have about a text’s given topic and build background where necessary.

One of the many hats we wear as educators of ELLs is to set up our students so they can achieve academic success. While more attention is now being paid to the question of ELL rigor and finding the right balance between scaffolding and independent learning, the CCSS now call for us to be more cognizant of how we approach building ELLs’ background knowledge as part of close reading. So, while building ELLs’ background knowledge definitely has its place in the Common Core, it is only one piece of the close reading puzzle. After we build ELLs’ background knowledge as necessary, we must then focus the majority of our instruction on having students working with the text itself so that they can unlock its meaning.

**An Example**

To better illustrate how ELLs’ background knowledge comes into play during close reading, let’s take a look at a sample text. An Appendix to the CCSS provides [text exemplars](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf) with sample texts of different genres suggested – but not prescribed – for each grade level. For example, Erinn Banting’s *England the Land* (2004) is listed as a suggested informational text for close reading in grades 4-5. Take a look at two paragraphs of this text, and think about what kinds of background knowledge students would need to fully access this text:



<http://restoringmayberry.blogspot.com/2011/04/laying-hedgerows.html>

*Low fences, some of which are thousands of years old, divide much of England’s countryside. These fences, called hedgerows, were fist built by the Anglo-Saxons, a group of warriors from Germany and Scandinavia who arrived in England around 410 A.D. As they gained control of sections of land, they protected their property with walls made from wooden stakes and spiny plants. Dead hedgerows, as these fences were called, were eventually replaced by fences made from live bushes and trees.*

*Recently, people building large farms and homes in the countryside have destroyed many live hedgerows. Other people are working to save the hedgerows, which are home to a variety of wildlife, including birds, butterflies, hedgehogs, and hares.*

**My Think Aloud in Building ELLs’ Background to Access This Text**

If I were using Banting’s text to teach fourth grade ELLs at varying levels of English proficiency, I would want to first find out their knowledge of:

* The history of the Anglo-Saxons
* What was happening during the time period described in the text (410 A.D.)
* Low fences or hedgerows
* The importance of protecting one’s property in the time period described and today
* How large farms and homes in the English countryside look today
* The wildlife described in the text

As a teacher preparing to do a close read of this text with my ELLs, I would not spend the majority of my instruction on building my ELLs’ background knowledge, like I might have done before the CCSS.  However, I would recognize that my ELLs would likely have very little background knowledge on the many topics contained in this text, let alone be familiar with all the terms and language structures used in the text.

I would therefore want to carve out some – but not a majority of – my instructional time to provide my ELLs images, videos, and resources in both English and their first languages that would help position them to be better prepared to work with this text. I would also prioritize which topics from the list above would warrant my time and attention during instruction. Some students might only need the image I included here of a hedgerow (which also helped my comprehension of the text.) In essence, I would want to help provide them a comparable frame of reference that their native English speaking peers might already have developed in terms of background knowledge.

I can also use this brief text as an example to note how background knowledge might differ from a personal connection to a text. For example, a student may have some knowledge about what the English countryside looks like from a documentary he or she has seen about England. On the other hand, a student’s personal connection to this text might be in the form of an event in the student’s life that took place in the countryside. Where background knowledge will most likely support the student’s understanding of the text, the student’s personal connection might not accomplish the same goal.  For ideas on ways to determine what kinds of background knowledge students have or need, take a look at these [strategies from Colorín Colorado](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/20827/).

**Final Thoughts on Close Reading**

Using close reading of texts with ELLs presents more challenges beyond balancing building background knowledge with working with the actual text. Such challenges for educators of ELLs include choosing appropriate grade level texts, supplying supplementary texts at different reading levels, scaffolding instruction, and creating text depending questions that ELLs can access – topics I intend to write about in future posts. Successful close reading with ELLs requires a more defined skill set and targeted training for all educators of ELLs.

**AdditionalResources**

Here are some resources on close reading for all students to help you build your arsenal of materials:

* The American Federation of Teachers’ free resource [Sharemylesson.com](http://www.sharemylesson.com/) has several teacher-created lessons that incorporate the close reading of texts.
* Tim Shanahan has a presentation on planning for close reading [here](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/07/planning-for-close-reading.html).
* The Teaching Channel has a [video about using Thinking Notes](https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/student-annotated-reading-strategy) to encourage close reading and also houses many other videos such as these of real classrooms doing [close readings of text](https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/help-students-analyze-text) and targeted [pre-reading activities](https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/pre-reading-strategies).
* Literacy Professors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey also have housed multiple [resources](http://www.fisherandfrey.com/?page_id=20) on close reading on their website.
* Nancy Boyle has a [blog entry](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec12/vol70/num04/Closing-in-on-Close-Reading.aspx) about close reading that provides some suggestions for classroom instruction.
* This lesson titled [Saying More with Less](http://transformed.teachingquality.org/blogs/shoulders-giants/02-2013/ela-lesson-sequence-common-core-saying-more-less) utilizes a close reading framework to teach about the economy of language by having students read, write, and talk about very short texts.
* Four [myths about the ELA CCSS](http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2012/07/10/tln_strasserdobbertin.html?tkn=MQQDL95x8FcsUPV%2FsX3GyhXXdLi3Wd%2FRCVx3&intc=es) touches on aspects of the ELA CCSS (including close reading) that have been debated.