**[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**

**Teaching Informational Text to ELLs**

February 13, 2013 by [Diane Staehr Fenner](http://blog.colorincolorado.org/author/dstaehrfenner/)

As you transition to using the CCSS for your instruction of ELLs, you are probably hearing quite a bit about the importance of teaching “informational” or nonfiction text to your students. This shift to using more informational text is tricky enough for all students, but it becomes especially challenging for ELLs due to its distinct features such as assumption of background knowledge and use of complex academic language.

This two-part post will focus on some aspects of teaching informational text to ELLs. This week I will share background considerations and strategies regarding informational text, first providing a basic foundation about informational text for all students and then narrowing my focus to include a few specific strategies about teaching informational text to ELLs. Next week, I will highlight the “close reading” of informational text for ELLs.

**What the CCSS Tell Us About the Use of Informational Text**

The CCSS [guiding documents](http://www.corestandards.org/resources) lay out the balance of fiction to nonfiction text, and suggest the use of 50 percent informational text/50 percent fiction in the elementary school years. This percentage increases to 70 percent informational text/30 percent fiction for students by high school. The reason behind this shift to include more informational text at the K-12 level is because college students and individuals in careers are more likely to work with informational text such as research briefs and reports than fictional texts. Due in part to their emphasis on using complex, informational text, the CCSS are said to better prepare students to meet the demands of college and the modern workplace.

However, this mix of informational texts and fiction is meant to occur *across* English Language Arts (ELA), science, social studies, and the arts – not in ELA alone. That is, ELA teachers can still teach fiction but must collaborate with teachers of other subjects to ensure that all students are reading the recommended balance of informational and literary texts. CCSS guidance documents suggest that informational text can include such genres as essays, speeches, memoirs, and biographies.

If you’re interested in reading more about how some teachers are including informational text in their instruction, a recent [Education Week article](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/01/30/19nonfiction_ep.h32.html?tkn=XOMF7vHA66pEOt5daj2BR4sZzKtLtkzlGUFd&cmp=clp-edweek) explores a sampling of teachers’ and districts’ interpretations of how they are infusing informational text into their instruction. You can also find out about Reading Rockets blogger Emily Stewart’s experience implementing the CCSS ELA standards in her diverse third grade Washington, DC classroom [here](http://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/commoncoreclass/). She has been writing about her experiences working with informational text and includes some authentic strategies for doing so.

**Which Informational Texts to Use?**

The ELA Common Core standards include [Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf) which provide examples of the level of complexity that the CCSS require of all students at each grade band. The texts were selected by using three criteria: (1) text complexity, (2) quality, and (3) range. This guidance also provides a snapshot of the breadth of texts that students should engage with to meet the standards. The texts listed are not meant to be prescriptive but rather serve as a guide for helping teachers select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own students. In addition, brief performance tasks supplement the text exemplars by providing examples of sample applications of the CCSS to texts of suggested complexity, quality, and range.

**What Teaching Informational Text Means for Teachers of ELLs**

Knowing what informational text is and how to choose, adapt, and supplement appropriate texts for ELLs will require a certain knowledge base. Judging by the attendance of any CCSS-related presentation at last week’s National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE) conference (including standing room only at the American Federation of Teachers’ introductory [presentation](http://ccweta.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/presentation.pptx) on the CCSS), I am not the only educator trying to gather information on how the CCSS apply to our heterogeneous population of ELLs.

**NABE 2013 Keynote: Dr. Diane August**

[Dr. Diane August](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/common_core/classroom/video/interviews/august/), Managing Researcher at the American Institutes for Research, gave a keynote presentation at NABE that focused in part on infusing the use of informational text into instruction for ELLs. You can find her full presentation [here](http://ccweta.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/nabe-2013_diane-august.pdf). She shared that text is “at the heart of the new standards” and that, under the CCSS, texts will now be categorized at higher grade levels than before the implementation of the CCSS. For example, *A Secret Garden* is now said to be appropriate for the fourth grade while *Tom Sawyer* is suggested for the middle grades. In order for ELLs to meet the CCSS, including accessing informational text, Dr. August says these students will need additional instructional support.

Dr. August shared some reasons that make text challenging for all students, including ELLs. Citing Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012), she described how text can be especially challenging due to assumed content knowledge, limited use of text features and graphics, distortions in the text’s organization such as unexpected time sequences, and multiple levels of meaning. In addition, certain language features can provide a roadblock to students accessing complex text, such as sophisticated figurative language, use of variations of standard English (think *Tom Sawyer*), archaic language, and unfamiliar vocabulary.  Using only the first sentence from the Gettysburg Address as an example, Dr. August highlighted seven (!) ways in which that sentence alone is challenging for ELLs.

**Example of How to Scaffold Informational Text for ELLs**



Source: National Park Service
<http://www.nps.gov/features/waso/cw150th/reflections/defining-america/>

Going beyond pointing out challenges of informational text, Dr. August then offered some strategies for how teachers of ELLs at different levels of English language proficiency could work with the Gettysburg Address, an informational text. Naturally, teachers could also apply the strategies she exemplified to instruction using different informational texts. She first gave examples of how to build ELLs’ background knowledge about the Gettysburg Address prior to reading it, such as by having students watch a brief video clip of an actor delivering the Gettysburg Address, watching a video clip about Abraham Lincoln, doing an interactive reading about the Civil War, and doing an interactive reading about the Declaration of Independence.

Next, she demonstrated how teachers could provide a selected glossary of the text’s vocabulary, answer scaffolded text-dependent questions, and use sentence frames grounded in the text that are adapted for different levels of students’ language proficiency. She also provided examples of giving direct instruction in key as well as high frequency vocabulary found in the text (such as the word “conceive”) to help unlock the nuanced meaning of the complex text.

She then showed how teachers could have students engage in a functional analysis of the text to help them unpack complex sentences by having students outline the who, what, where, and when of the text, citing the text for evidence.

**Drawing Upon ELLs’ First Languages**

Finally, Dr. August focused on ways in which teachers could draw upon the richness of ELLs’ first languages to help them unpack the meaning of the text. For example, she showed how students could read the Gettysburg Address (either in English or in a Spanish translated version) with a partner, noting one thing they learned and one thing they would like to understand better. She also shared a Spanish resource that describes what the Gettysburg Address is and places it into the events of that period in history for ELLs unfamiliar with US history:

*El Discurso de Gettysburg es un discurso pronunciado por el Presidente Abraham Lincoln y es de los más conocidos en la historia de los Estados Unidos. Fue pronunciado durante la Guerra Civil Norteamericana, en la tarde del jueves 19 de noviembre de 1863. Lincoln pronunció su discurso en el conmemorativo Cementerio Nacional de los Soldados en Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, en honor a los hombres que murieron durante la Batalla de Gettysburg.*

Dr. August also shared how teachers can help ELLs use their knowledge of cognates to increase their comprehension of the Gettysburg Address, pointing out such cognates as “continent,” “nation,” and “liberty.” I encourage you to look through her full presentation to find out more strategies for making informational text accessible to ELLs.