

IDEAS *for Excellence*



A Publication for English Language Educators

What Are You Reading?

How K-12 Educators Are Using Nonfiction Reading Books to Enhance Student Learning and Meet NCLB Requirements

by Allison Mangrum

Educators across the country are grappling with the implications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Among the myriad of new requirements are mandates that children read by the third grade and that all students, including English language learners (ELLs), have access to the mainstream academic curriculum and meet state content standards.

How are teachers responding? Many classroom teachers, including the nine that Ballard & Tighe interviewed this fall, are turning to a once overlooked resource—nonfiction reading books—to help build students’ reading skills and also make academic content more accessible. With vast choices of nonfiction books on the market, these teachers provided tips on choosing appropriate books, as well as advice on how to effectively integrate nonfiction books into classroom lessons.

Why should I use nonfiction reading books with students?

Learning should be engaging!

Learning is most effective when students are active participants in the learning process. The format and presentation of reading material have never been more important in the struggle to win students’ attention. Using illustrated reading books that address content in a fun and exciting way can help capture students’ interest. Elementary teacher



▲ Elementary school teacher Caryn Sonberg reads to her students.

Nonfiction reading books are more stimulating than traditional textbooks.

Caryn Sonberg of Alexandria, VA agrees: “Students like to refer to pictures in books. Many times nonfiction reading books are more stimulating than traditional textbooks, and the reading level is sometimes more appropriate than traditional textbooks, so students can better access the content.”

Nonfiction reading books enhance students’ content knowledge. Teachers have a lot of material to present in a short period of time, so it is important that every classroom activity helps support and build upon the content that students are learning. ESL teacher

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Patricia Garland of Perkasie, PA uses nonfiction reading books with her ELLs to help them access the content they are learning in the mainstream classroom. She believes that by reading nonfiction books, students gain a richer understanding of what they are learning in the content areas. ESL teacher Nicole Andrews of Carlsbad, CA agrees: “I like to use nonfiction in history so that students can get as realistic an idea as possible about how people lived in the past and the events that occurred. I want them to feel as if they can experience the time and place that we are studying.” Bilingual education teacher Dr. Sergio Ramirez of San

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Antonio, TX adds that the character lessons that students learn through nonfiction literature are equally important: “[Nonfiction literature] is meaningful in connecting the students’ aspirations and their culture to real-life role models and the achievements of historical figures.”

Reading builds language skills.

Reading nonfiction literature helps ELLs gain confidence in their language skills. Mainstream and ESL teacher Maria Morales of Cherry Creek, CO says: “By providing instruction with nonfiction books, I am addressing the content needs of the grade level and subject area. At the same time, I am working on developing academic language proficiencies that will help students to be more confident and successful in the classrooms as they move into a higher language proficiency level.”

Nonfiction prepares students for

“real life.” As students interact with the “real world,” they are confronted daily with nonfiction reading. Newspapers, bus schedules, food labels, and driver’s license exams are everyday examples of the nonfiction material that students will need to decode. And, of course, state and national exams test students’ abilities to interpret meaning in nonfiction passages. Jaana Terhune, an ESL teacher in Saline, MI explains: “Because many standardized tests use nonfiction to test different subject areas, I believe it is essential to introduce nonfiction reading materials to ESL students very early in their learning journey.”

How do I choose appropriate nonfiction reading books for students?

If you have a class of ELLs, ask the mainstream teacher for

recommendations. It is important to find out what ELLs are learning in their mainstream classes and connect their reading materials to that content. Patricia Garland uses nonfiction reading books chosen by the students’ mainstream classroom teacher in order to be certain that the books are aligned

to the grade-level core curriculum. Chances are, your students’ mainstream or content teachers have already researched age-appropriate reading books that address the state standards.

Be familiar with your school, district, and state standards. Many schools, districts, and states provide teachers with standards for meeting literacy and content objectives. Some states even provide recommended reading lists. These are very helpful when choosing nonfiction reading books. ESL teacher Shelly DeSimone of Whittier, CA says: “We create assignments that meet the state standards using reading material that may or may not be on recommended reading lists. Teachers love ... [nonfiction reading books] that directly address the standards. ... Those texts help make our jobs easier.”

Look at recommended reading

lists. Dr. Sergio Ramirez and other teachers interviewed recommended specific reading lists. These lists are wonderful resources because they provide teachers with objective, critical reviews of books and spotlight award-winning titles. Here are some popular recommended reading lists that many teachers find helpful when choosing nonfiction reading books:

- Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards
<http://www.hbook.com/bghb.shtml>
- Children’s Book Council
<http://www.cbcbooks.org/>
- Children’s Literature Choice List
http://www.childrenslit.com/f_clc.htm
- Giverny Best Children’s Science Picture Book Award
<http://www.15degreeelab.com/award.html>
- National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Notable Social Studies Books
<http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable/>
- The National Council of Teachers of English Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children
<http://www.ncte.org/elem/awards/orbispictus/>
- National Science Teachers Association Outstanding Science Trade Books for Children
<http://www.nsta.org/ostbc>

Conference Calendar

<p>Colorado ABE October 3-4, 2003 Steamboat Springs, CO</p> <p>RGV/TABE October 3-4, 2003 South Padre Island, TX</p> <p>Oklahoma TESOL October 10-11, 2003 Norman, OK</p> <p>Texas Council for the Social Studies October 16-19, 2003 Ft. Worth, TX</p> <p>Texas ABE Oct. 28-Nov. 1, 2003 Ft. Worth, TX</p> <p>TexTESOL November 7-8, 2003 El Paso, TX</p> <p>New York State TESOL November 7-8, 2003 Rye, NY</p>	<p>La Cosecha November 12-15, 2003 Albuquerque, NM</p> <p>California Library Association November 12-17, 2003 Ontario, CA</p> <p>Carolina TESOL November 13-15, 2003 Greenville, SC</p> <p>NCSS November 14-15, 2003 Chicago, IL</p> <p>Northern New England TESOL November 15, 2003 Manchester, NH</p> <p>NABE 2004 February 5-7, 2004 Albuquerque, NM</p> <p>Illinois TESOL February 27-28, 2004 Chicago, IL</p>
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Determine age and language level appropriateness of books. “Students” are not a homogenous group with the same abilities and interests. Keeping your unique and diverse audience in mind is critical. One book may be perfect for a fluent English speaker, but too difficult for a beginning ELL. The teachers interviewed suggested ways to determine age and level appropriateness by glancing through the book’s features:

- **Cover**—Is the cover design appealing? Will it grab students’ attention? With children’s books, the cover generally reflects the type of illustrations you will find inside.
- **Table of contents**—Make sure the topics covered in the book are relevant to the content students need to learn.
- **Index**—Check the index for more detailed information about the book’s contents.
- **Glossary**—Is there one? Which words are defined? Are they too easy/difficult for your students? Are the defined vocabulary words in line with the vocabulary students will be held accountable for on standardized tests? Is there a phonetic spelling or pronunciation key available?
- **Length of book**—Does the length of the book fit your needs? How well does it work with the way students will read the book (e.g., teacher reads aloud, students read in pairs)? How much time can you allot for reading the book?
- **Visuals**—Are there attractive illustrations and photographs? Do they relate directly to the text? Are there enough images for your age group? If you teach older students, are the images “too young”?
- **Text font**—Is the text large enough/too large for your specific age group? Is the text font easy to read?
- **Organization**—How is the text organized? Will it make sense to students? Does it flow or does it jump around?
- **Support features**—Are vocabulary words defined in context on the page on which they are used? Do picture captions help students better understand the content? Are there



▲ Teacher Shelly DeSimone has her students skim the book before reading it.

maps, time lines, graphs, diagrams, and other reading supports to help students connect with the content?

- **Skills**—Does the book provide a skills index or a list of standards met?
- **Assessment**—Are there comprehension or critical thinking questions throughout the book or at the end of the book?

Read! Read! Read! Spend a day at the library reading nonfiction children’s books. The more nonfiction books you read, the more you will be familiar with what features you like and what style of book your students will most benefit from.

How should I introduce nonfiction reading material to my students?

Tap into students’ prior knowledge.

Before introducing a new book to students, get them thinking about what they already know about the topic. Nicole Andrews likes to introduce nonfiction reading books after her students have already begun studying the subject matter so they have some

background knowledge of the topic. Dr. Sergio Ramirez likes to connect the reading book to his students’ personal experiences, interests, or aspirations. Caryn Sonberg concurs: “We review what we have already learned about the content; we look at the front cover of the book and discuss it; we predict what the book will be about. If we’re reading a biography, for example a biography of Abraham Lincoln, we might compare him to George Washington and other presidents we’ve learned about.”

Plan pre-reading activities.

Students are often more excited about reading a book if they have an idea of what the book is about. Patricia Garland and her students take part in pre-reading activities before they begin reading a nonfiction book. She has students glance through the book and make predictions about what will happen. They read the headings and subheadings in the book and review the table of contents so they know what to expect from the book. Ms. Garland also has students look up difficult vocabulary words they will encounter when they

read the book. Skimming the book beforehand helps students feel more comfortable with the book. Shelly DeSimone explains: “I have the students look over the material from cover to cover. We read the table of contents, check the index, look for a glossary, find

It is essential to introduce nonfiction reading materials to ESL students very early in their learning journey.

tables and charts, and skim chapter headings. Once the students have a feel for what they’re about to read, we dive in.” This approach helps students get an idea of what they are about to read, which helps them to feel less overwhelmed. Ms. Garland suggests that teachers relate the topic of the book to students’ prior knowledge and experiences. For example, if students are reading a book about the Pilgrims, she has her ELLs think and talk about their own immigration experiences. Before reading a nonfiction book, Jaana Terhune’s students brainstorm what they already know about the topic and map it out on a graphic organizer.

Read the book aloud. If you have young students and/or beginning ELLs, you may choose to read the book aloud to the class. Instructional coordinator Lauren Nguyen of Houston, TX recommends reading books aloud as a good way to introduce the book to the class. This strategy will familiarize students with the content so that when they read it again on their own, they can more easily concentrate on the language. Teachers who have older students or more advanced ELLs have other options: shared reading, reading in pairs or groups, or independent reading.

How can I address the diverse needs of the students in my classroom?

Round-robin reading. With beginning ELLs or a multi-level ESL class, round-

robin reading can be a fun and practical way to make sure all students are being exposed to the content. Lauren Nguyen explains how she uses this format: “We usually do a teacher read-aloud and random round-robin (I call on students in random order to read the next word or paragraph, depending on their language level). If a student doesn’t know where we are, I keep reading and their partner shows them where we are. I read between each student so no one loses his or her place.”

pause, students say the next word in unison. We also do choral reading.” You can tailor this activity depending on your students’ abilities. Beginners can read one word at a time, while more advanced students can read a sentence at a time.

How do I know if my students understand what they are reading?

Involve the arts. ESOL teacher Sandra Fowler of Jacksonville, FL likes to have

Our Panel of Educators

- Nicole Andrews, ESL; 7th and 8th grade social studies, San Dieguito Union High School District, CA
- Shelly DeSimone, ESL, La Serna High School, Whittier Union High School District, CA
- Sandra Fowler, ESOL, Southside Middle School, Duval County District, FL
- Patricia Garland, ESL, Pennridge School District, PA
- Maria Alejandra Morales, mainstream and ESL, Antelope Ridge Elementary, Cherry Creek School District, CO
- Lauren Nguyen, instructional coordinator, Houston ISD West Central, TX
- Dr. Sergio Ramirez, 5th grade bilingual, Morrill Elementary, Harlandale Independent School District, TX
- Caryn Sonberg, 2nd and 3rd grade mainstream, Cora Kelly School, Alexandria City Public Schools, VA
- Jaana Terhune, ESL, Saline Area Schools, MI



Log onto www.ballard-tighe.com for a listing of our panel’s recommended nonfiction reading books.



Also check out Ballard & Tighe’s new *Explore the Ages* nonfiction reading books at www.ballard-tighe.com. These historical books are sure to be a classroom favorite!

Pair or group reading. Having students read in pairs or groups is great for multi-level ESL classes as well as mainstream classes with ELLs. Caryn Sonberg likes this format: “I sometimes pair an ESL student with a fluent English speaker. This strategy is helpful to both students. The ESL student benefits from the language skills of the fluent English speaker, and the fluent English student develops leadership and tutoring skills. Meanwhile, both students are accessing the content.”

Cloze reading. Just as cloze writing activities can be helpful for students as they learn to write, cloze reading can be helpful for students learning to read. Lauren Nguyen utilizes this strategy: “I read and pause for a moment. When I

her students draw a picture of their favorite part of the book. Caryn Sonberg asks small teams of students to present what they have learned via a poster, skit, or other artistic device. Allowing students to show their comprehension of the content makes the learning process interactive and also helps students remember what they’ve learned.

Ask comprehension and critical thinking questions. Shelly DeSimone makes a game out of quizzing her students: “I use thumbs up/thumbs down for yes/no comprehension questions. I also have students ‘vote’ by giving them three answer choices—one correct and

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the other two incorrect. With that method, I can see if I am losing large segments of the class or if only a few students do not understand the material.” Lauren Nguyen quizzes her students through a think-pair-share activity. She asks a question and then walks around the room listening to the student pairs discuss their answers.

Play! Playing games is a good way to test students without them feeling the pressure of being tested. Dr. Sergio Ramirez checks his students’ comprehension of a book’s content through verbal interaction activities such as games, chants, and play-acting. When reading a biographical book, Sandra Fowler has her students conduct an “interview” with one of the characters in the book.

Write. After they read a historical book, Nicole Andrews’ students complete a historical book report. She also includes a place on the report form for students to draw. Maria Morales tailors book reports: “Students at different levels are expected to do some type of report. Some reports can be pictorials ... and other reports are in writing, depending on student ability.” Sandra Fowler has her students keep a journal, or daily notes, of what they have read in the book, including their opinions on the book.

Test. Traditional paper and pencil tests are a time-honored way to assess students’ comprehension. Plus, they give a teacher tangible results for student files. Caryn Sonberg recommends asking both comprehension and critical thinking questions when testing students. Comprehension questions assure you that the students understand the content, while critical thinking questions help assess students’ language skills. Traditional tests often contain short answer, essay, true/false, multiple choice, and matching questions. However, pencil and paper tests don’t have to be traditional at all. Jaana Terhune provides students with a short list of questions and allows them to look up the answers to these questions in their books. Lauren Nguyen likes to use a cloze story to test her students. She writes a summary of the book and leaves out key information. Students read the cloze and fill in the missing details.

Ask! At the end of a lesson, ask students to explain what they learned and how the book helped them to learn more about the subject. One way to do this is through a graphic organizer (such as a KWLH chart). Or ask students to critique the book. Here are sample questions to ask:

- Did you like this book? Why or why not?
- What was this book about?

- What did you learn from this book that you didn’t already know?
- How did this book help you to learn these things?
- Are you glad that we read this book? Why or why not?
- Would you recommend this book to a friend?
- On a scale from 1-10, with one being the lowest and 10 being the highest, rate this book.

Conclusion

Integrating nonfiction reading books into your lessons can enrich and reinforce students’ learning of academic content while simultaneously building their literacy skills. Whether it’s a riveting biography of Abraham Lincoln, the inspiring story of Helen Keller, or the tragic chronicle of Pearl Harbor, nonfiction reading books have a place in every classroom. They make learning exciting and engaging. And for many educators, there’s nothing more gratifying than hearing one student ask another, “What are you reading?”

Allison Mangrum graduated from Hope International University, Fullerton, CA. She is the author of a new nonfiction children’s reading book, *African American Writers Who Inspired Change*, which will be available fall 2004 as part of Ballard & Tighe’s Explore the Ages series.

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by e-mail, please contact us at info@ballard-tighe.com. On the subject line, write *IDEAS for Excellence* listserv, and in the message portion please write your name, school, state, and e-mail address.

Congratulations

Patrick Bathras of Baltimore, Maryland was recognized as an Outstanding Young Educator of the Year. Well done!

Congratulations to **Carrie Conley** of Rockville, Maryland on her new position as assessment specialist for Montgomery County Public Schools.

Kudos to **Ivonne Durant** of Dallas, Texas who has been appointed executive director, multi-language enrichment for the Dallas ISD.

Best wishes to **Gloria Gutierrez** of Dallas, Texas on her retirement.

Congratulations to **Marlene Kehler** of Richardson, Texas on her retirement.

A round of applause for **Karen Kraft** of Richardson, Texas on being named assessment specialist for the Richardson ISD.

Hats off to **Marcela O. Parra** of Manhattan, Kansas, a recipient of the Service to Education Award.



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