

IDEAS for Excellence

*Featured Inside—A Student's Guide
to Pre-reading a Textbook Chapter*

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PUBLISHERS

SPRING 2000

Pre-reading Strategies and Other Tools Help Adolescent Students "Learn How To Learn"

by Kate Kinsella, Ed.D.

In the fall 1999 issue, Kinsella addressed the necessity of teaching all students—not just high achievers in gifted and honors classes—strategies that will help them "learn how to learn." She also discussed the academic challenges English language learners in her college preparatory class will face when they pursue education beyond high school. In part two of her article, Kinsella outlines strategies teachers can use to help adolescent English language learners succeed academically in both secondary school and college.

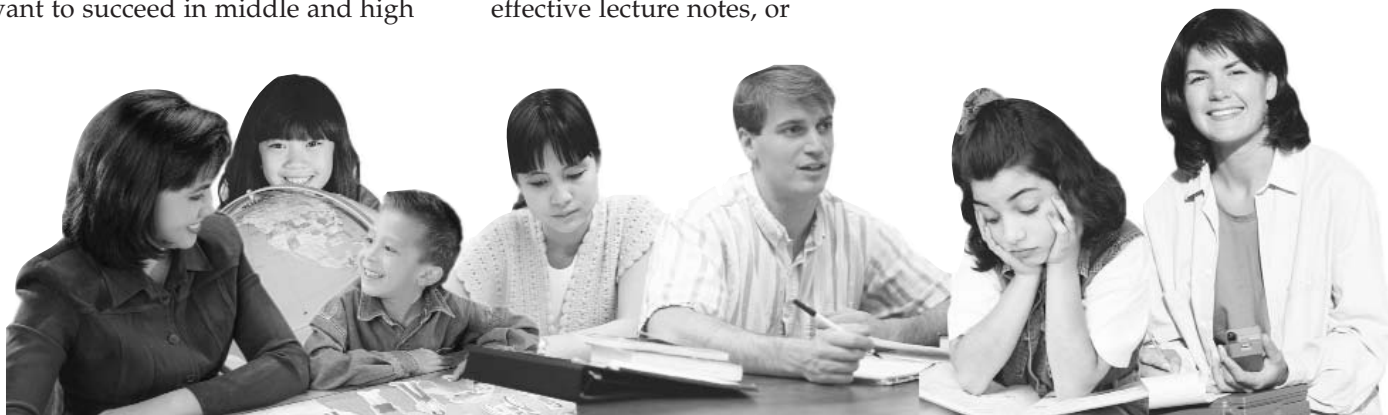
Adolescent English language learners struggling to access core curricula in a second language are surely among students most in need of strategies and tools to help them "learn how to learn." Assailed by new concepts, vocabulary, and learning formats throughout most of the school day, these students need systematic instruction in learning strategies that can help them access content in core subject areas. Unfortunately, however, this special learner population often is not privy to the secrets of successful students, those who demonstrate genuine promise for higher education and "Information Age" professions.

English language learners who want to succeed in middle and high

school, and eventually earn a college degree, must have a repertoire of skills to help them learn within traditional formats (such as lectures), as well as within contemporary formats (such as cooperative groups). Without explicit guidance in "learning how to learn" in different classroom formats, these students often are unable to reach their academic potential. Consequently, for example, a motivated learner may emerge from a week's biology unit with a deeper understanding of human anatomy and an appreciation for learning with peers. However, that same student may be no better equipped to tackle the next textbook chapter, take effective lecture notes, or

competently answer an essay question.

Students who spend the greater part of the school day in core content classrooms, lacking full English language proficiency and subject matter foundations, need *all* subject area teachers to demystify the learning and study skills of successful students. Otherwise, novice English language learners are relegated to a passive dependency, focusing entirely on listening and observing in order to follow the lesson presentation, while failing to prepare responsibly for class by reading the assigned material or taking accurate notes for future review.



Content Area Learning Tools

In order to thrive within the academic mainstream, English language learners need powerful learning tools to help them navigate through the content. Some study skills, such as dictionary use, have general applicability to all content areas, while others, such as lecture note taking, must be modified to accommodate the demands of different disciplines. As an example, the lecture note-taking system most useful in recording content in a concept-driven field like history is not necessarily the most practical approach for a data- and process-driven field like mathematics. And a literary response journal eliciting personal reactions and relevant experiences, commonplace in language arts instruction, does not lend itself to analysis of tectonics or logarithms.

Arguably, it is more appropriate for content area learning strategies to be introduced, modeled, and practiced in the history, science, or mathematics class rather than in a language arts class. Subject matter instructors are more familiar with the content and with the requisite study skills for their respective fields. In addition, students learn a powerful lesson when a subject matter instructor demonstrates the applicability and usefulness of a particular study approach in the context of that subject matter. Students seem to be far more motivated when a conscientious social studies instructor introduces a process for reading and summarizing a newspaper article during a current events lesson rather than doing “dry runs” of the same exercise in a reading and study skills class. What happens when

developing readers confront a physical science chapter that does not seem to fit the general reading skills they have practiced in an academic support class? Too often the result is that they become easily overwhelmed. They fall back upon ineffective approaches like merely perusing visual aids or scanning for answers by identifying bold face terms.

Focus on Content Literacy

While all students can benefit from systematic instruction in learning strategies, educators faced with the challenge of simultaneously teaching language, content, and learning strategies within a heterogeneous classroom are predictably at a loss as to how to proceed. With the current emphasis on standardized testing, exit proficiency exams, and rigorous subject matter standards, *content literacy*—the ability to read and learn from distinct content area texts—would seem to warrant utmost attention.

... reading and understanding texts in academic subject areas perplexes most English language learners...

The process of reading and understanding texts in academic subject areas perplexes most English language learners and seriously impedes their access to and achievement in these content classes. Teachers must address this critical need in order to help their English language learners, and all students, attain the goals set for them.

The Right Approach

Reading in various curricular areas presents students with different challenges. Too often, English language learners have only a naive awareness of the demands

placed on them by the various forms of academic material. For example, when reading history or science texts, English learners often are not able to identify more significant information because they are unfamiliar with the distinguishing organization and text features. In fact, many students view all assigned reading as a form of a “story.” As a consequence, they approach diverse content literacy tasks in essentially the same manner: starting from the beginning and progressing slowly and painstakingly in a linear fashion with no immediate or long-term goals. With a bilingual dictionary at their side, they focus on trying to achieve even minimal comprehension by plodding through the text.

These students are unaware that more *text-wise* readers don’t just begin to plow through challenging informational material. Instead, when their goal is “reading to learn,” text-wise readers know the value of starting with an overview reading. These text-wise readers begin by briefly reviewing the assignment, content, and organizational framework, and then noting the degree of reading difficulty. Only after these preliminary steps do they turn to a more thorough and analytical reading.

Becoming Text-Wise

Helping motivated yet underprepared students become more “text-wise” is a priority in San Francisco State University’s college preparatory class. Part of being text-wise is knowing how to identify more significant information. Unless students are acquainted with the layout and organizational features of a particular text, it is extremely difficult for them to distinguish a

main idea from subordinate points. This, in turn, makes it difficult for them to focus their reading and acquire maximum knowledge from the material that they encounter.

One way to help students become more text-wise is to introduce a process for *pre-reading* academic material. Pre-reading occurs before students actually read the textbook. It refers to a focused and abbreviated preliminary reading that familiarizes students with the overall content and organization of an expository selection.

All students need pre-reading strategies to learn from informational texts. In fact, students need to begin mastering these vital pre-reading strategies as soon as they start toting textbooks home. It is particularly important to equip students with productive strategies for approaching and managing reading assignments in social studies and science. Why? Because students consistently are flummoxed by reading within these content areas.

A Pre-reading Technique

At a fundamental level, pre-reading will involve students in formulating a general mental outline of an assigned text. They should focus on **organizational aids**—including the title, introduction, subheadings, topic sentences, and summary—as well as **visual and typographical guideposts**, such as illustrations and terminology highlighted with boldface or italics. This will familiarize students with the scope and sequence of ideas within an expository reading selection. It also will help them analyze the specific task demands and guide them toward more realistic reading and study plans.

One way to introduce a pre-reading activity is to demonstrate how it works. For example, the teacher might make transparencies of a brief chapter and then guide students through the pre-reading process. The teacher would move carefully from one step to the next, first highlighting and labeling each feature (e.g., subheading, illustration) using the overhead projector, and then clarifying its specific function on the board (e.g., subheading—to point out the topic of the following chapter section). The steps to follow when comprehensively pre-reading a textbook chapter are detailed below in Table 1.

The teacher should allow adequate time for students to highlight and label each text feature in their textbook before modeling the specific pre-reading step. The teacher can read this information aloud and encourage students to

read along silently. The goal is for students to grasp the process rather than for them to decode and pronounce words.

After modeling each stage of the pre-reading process, the teacher should stop to reflect aloud upon what was just read. The teacher might state what he or she anticipates will follow, and then elicit student understandings and questions. At the close of this process, the class should determine the level of difficulty of the assignment and collaborate in establishing a manageable reading and study schedule to complete the task.

Benefits of Pre-reading

There are at least two other compelling reasons for students to learn how to pre-read content area assignments. First, pre-reading gives them a general familiarity

Table 1

How to Pre-read a Textbook Chapter

- **Read the chapter title.** The title provides the overall topic of the chapter.
- **Read the chapter subtitle (if included).** The subtitle suggests the specific focus or approach to the topic of the chapter.
- **Read any focus questions at the beginning of the chapter.** These questions indicate what is very important in the chapter. They are meant to guide your reading and help you be on the lookout for their answers.
- **Read the chapter introduction or first paragraph.** The introduction, or first paragraph if there is no introduction, serves as a lead-in to the chapter. It gives you an idea of where the material is starting and where it is heading.
- **Read each boldface subheading.** The boldface subheadings will give you an idea of the major topic of the following chapter sections.
- **Read the first (topic) sentence of each paragraph.** The first sentence often tells you what the paragraph is about or states the central thought. However, be aware that in some material the first sentence may instead function as an attention-getter or transition statement. In this case, go on to the second sentence to try to determine the main idea of the paragraph.
- **Look over any typographical aids.** Notice important chapter terms that are emphasized by slanted *italic* type or dark **boldface** type; often a definition or an example of a new key term follows.
- **Look over any other visual aids.** Notice any material that is numbered (1, 2, 3...), lettered (a, b, c...), or presented in list form. Graphs, charts, pictures, diagrams, and maps are other means of emphasis and are usually included to point out what is important in the chapter.
- **Read the last paragraph or summary.** The last paragraph or summary gives a condensed view of the chapter and helps you identify important ideas. Often the summary outlines the chapter's main points.
- **Read quickly any end-of-chapter material.** If there are study questions, read through them quickly since they will indicate what is important in the chapter. If a vocabulary list is included, skim through the list rapidly to identify terms you will need to learn as you read.

Boldface headings give students an idea about the major chapter topics.

Typographical aids help students identify key vocabulary.

Graphics and other visual aids point out what is important in the chapter.

The Beginning of Representative Government

One way the English government paid for the Hundred Years' War was by raising people's taxes. As King John found out many years earlier, this was not a popular thing for a king to do. So before raising taxes during the Hundred Years' War, the king of England called together groups of people to talk about his plans. One group included nobles and bishops. The other group included knights and the leaders of towns. The king explained to these two groups the need for higher taxes.

As the war went on, these groups often were called together. Sometimes, they even met on their own to discuss important issues. In return for agreeing to higher taxes, they asked the king to agree to do some things they wanted. These meetings were the beginning of **representative** government in England. This was an **unintended** result of the Hundred Years' War. The group of nobles became known as the Lords. The group of knights and town leaders became known as the Commons. Together, the two groups were called the Parliament. By 1341, the king of England signed a law saying taxes could not be raised without the agreement of Parliament.

representative: a person or group acting on behalf of the interests of a larger group
unintended: not planned

? THINK ABOUT IT
Why was formal representative government in England an "unintended result" of the Hundred Years' War?

▼ For many years, the king of England had most of the power. By the mid-1300s, the king and Parliament shared the powers of government.

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Pre-reading strategies help students “learn how to learn” and demystify the process of reading and understanding academic texts.

with the content. As all teachers know, many students put off or avoid difficult reading assignments altogether because of the cognitive and linguistic demands they present. Having spent a half-hour pre-reading, however, a frustrated student or an exceptionally busy one can at least come to class with some degree of familiarity with the material. Such students will be better prepared conceptually for subsequent class activities. In addition, pre-reading will aid students who have weak listening comprehension in English. Such students will be better able to follow a related lecture and class discussion if they arrive with an agenda—developed through pre-reading—of what to expect.

When introducing a new learning strategy such as pre-reading, it is important for students to have guided opportunities to practice the strategy and see its academic rewards. The college preparatory class generally revisits the pre-reading process in numerous class sessions in order to help students see how much they can assess about the chapter content and organization simply by pre-reading. It is unreasonable to expect young learners to adopt—through trial and error, incidental instruction, or recreational reading—an informed and systematic approach to learning from core curricula in distinct fields of study. This is something middle and high school teachers can and should

teach all students, but particularly English language learners.

Pre-reading is by no means a magic pill that will result in immediate academic reading proficiency. However, it is a critical strategy that can help English language learners access the core curriculum and offer them the possibility of educational success and mobility. A primary objective of any “learn how to learn” strategy is to enable students to become more competent and self-directed learners. Adolescent English language learners who know how to pre-read assigned texts in different subject areas have a more strategic position from which to take charge of and direct their own learning.

Dr. Kate Kinsella is a teacher educator in the Department of Secondary Education at San Francisco State University, specializing in academic language and literacy development in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. She remains actively involved with secondary students by teaching a year-long college preparatory course for first-generation college students through SFSU's “Step to College Program.” She also is an active consultant to K-12 schools and colleges nationally and internationally.

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Congratulations

Hats off to **Dr. Joyce Appleby**, general historical editor for *Explore the United States*, on her new publication, *Inheriting the Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2000). A recent review in *Publisher's Weekly* reported: "An esteemed historian of early America, Appleby has written a social history of 'the first generation of Americans'—not those who fought the American Revolution but, as her title indicates, those who inherited it, who had to figure out just what their parents' bold declarations of liberty looked like on the ground... [This is] a wonderful book, which freshly conveys the energy and creativity unleashed in a generation forging a new national identity."

Kudos to **Dr. James Asher**, founder of the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach, on the release of *Learning Another Language Through Actions*, 6th edition (Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., 2000). For more information on TPR, visit www.tpr-world.com or write to Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., at P.O. Box 1102w, Los Gatos, CA 95031.

Tim Beard was appointed director of Instructional Services at Gonzales Unified School District in Gonzales, California. Well done!

Bravo to **Dr. Frances Berdan**, historical editor for *Explore World History*, who was awarded a \$122,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to create "EthnoQuest," a CD-ROM that includes a virtual field-work game for anthropology majors. (Expected publication date: 2001)

Congratulations to **Dr. Silvia Carrizales** on her appointment as bilingual director for Dallas Independent School District in Dallas, Texas.

We applaud **Stephen Cary** on his recent publication, *Working with Second Language Learners: Answers to Teachers' Top Ten Questions* (Heinemann, 2000).

After 38 years of service, **Helen Mata** of Alief Independent School District in Houston, Texas had a school named after her. Way to go!

Gonzalo Ramirez has been appointed director of bilingual education at Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District in Carrollton, Texas. Well done!

Congratulations to **Dr. Cheryl Riggs**, general historical editor of *Explore World History*, on her appointment as principal investigator and resident scholar for the Inland Area History Social Science Project, a project aimed at enhancing the teaching and learning of history-social studies.

Cheers to **Dr. Waldemar Rojas**, named general superintendent of the Dallas Public Schools.

Juan Sánchez of Gadsden Independent School District in Anthony, New Mexico, was named "Administrator of the Year." Well done!

Congratulations to **Jaime Sandoval**, appointed director of the Dallas Public Schools Multi-language Enrichment Program.

We applaud **Matilde "Nellie" Vela** of Maplewood Elementary School in Austin, Texas, named Texas Association of Bilingual Education's (TABE) 1999 Teacher of the Year.

We salute the following teachers named **California Teachers of the Year**: **John "Jack" Hawkins** of Fullerton Joint Union High School District, **Marilyn Whirry** of the Manhattan Beach Unified School District, **Patrick Mongoven** of San Marcos Unified School District, **Karen O'Connor** of Poway Unified School District, and **Kami J. Winding** of New Haven Unified School District.



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published semiannually by*

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