When teaching exceptional learners, specifically English Language Learners (ELL), teachers are more effective if they focus on deploying activities that address a wide range of learning styles and language comprehension abilities. This is especially true in today’s classroom where school communities are becoming increasingly diverse. For example, many teachers have students who just moved to Washington and some of these students have limited ability to communicate in spoken and written English. Nevertheless, these students will be sitting next to native English speakers, which is an advantage since students new to English often learn more effectively if they are integrated into general education classes.

While there are numerous principles to follow for working effectively with ELL students, the real challenge for many educators is putting principles into practice. Obstacles associated with implementation are compounded when there are wide gaps between students who comprehend English more readily in comparison to those who need more time for processing. Nevertheless, I have found that creating and deploying activities to engage ELL students can be accomplished in many ways, even in the context of highly diverse settings. For example, I teach in an ELL class in Seattle, consisting of 20 students, representing six ethnicities. These students are designated ELL and receive services for different reasons. Two are foreign exchange students, while a few others receive services to support their individualized education plans. Some students are enrolled based on parent or guardian choice and still others are in class after completing a placement test and self-assessments. Some students have family roots in Washington, but others are new transplants from other countries, such as those from immigrant or refugee families. Just as their backgrounds vary, so do their particular needs in English instruction. Some students take general education classes, while others are in the process of being mainstreamed. Others are extremely proficient in their native language, both in terms of communication and academic performance, but communicating in English is a real challenge.

Not unlike teachers in other disciplines, one of my goals is to prepare students for life outside of the schoolhouse. Achieving this goal requires an intermediate step, specifically, equipping students with basic survival English for full participation in general education classrooms. One activity for preparing students is the **Literature Circle**. I deploy literature circles later in the year, as students progress from fundamentals to application. Regardless of the stage, all of our efforts focus on mastery of English based on Washington’s English Language Proficiencies.

### Literature Circle

The goal of literature circles is to promote student comprehension of fiction and nonfiction texts by cultivating 1) a supportive classroom environment, 2) collaborative conversation, 3) alternative communication methods, 4) vocabulary, 5) writing, and 6) reading activities. These principles show a positive effect on the learning of ELL students (Anthony, 2014) and a strong case can be made that the principles are readily activated in literature circles. While achievement of Washington’s English Language Proficiencies is key, literature circles also enables students to work cooperatively with peers for practicing social competency and exercise of their preferred learning style.

A key step to implementing an effective literature circle is selecting the text. An example reading passage suitable for secondary students is Eleven by Sandra Cisneros. The first sentence reads, “What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one.” It is easy to see from this brief sample that Cisneros engages students with content, along with inclusion of nuanced syntax and grammar. The overall effect is that the passage is accessible and entirely useful for teaching English.

However, even rich and engaging passages of text need pedagogical support to maximize learning. This is where literature circles provides structure. After selecting a passage, students are organized into groups of five and each student is assigned a role:

1. The **Discussion Director** leads discussion and ensures the group is spending time communicating about the passage at hand. The most effective discussion directors are those who learn through verbal-linguistic or interpersonal approaches.
2. The Illustrator chooses a passage from the reading and makes an illustration of it. The illustration can be a drawing or a diagram, such as a graphic organizer or a Venn. This role is perfectly suited for visual-spatial learners.

3. The Word Expert chooses new, difficult, or interesting words, and then guesses at the definition using context clues. The word expert also defines words according to the dictionary. Analytical-type students are suited to the work of the word expert.

4. The Passage Picker chooses a passage of text that has some special meaning and shares insights with the group. Passage pickers often have a learning style that is intrapersonal or naturalist.

5. The Summarizer of course summarizes the main points of the story and consults with other group members to ensure the summary is thorough and concise. Those with logical-mathematical skill are often excellent summarizers.

Although the literature circle is intended to appeal to a broad range of students, and meet various needs in terms of unique learning styles, it may require flexible application and adjustment. Of course, this is the case for every instructional practice since each classroom situation is different. However, if there is one requirement for the activity, it is that the Discussion Director must demonstrate proficiency in comprehending the selected passage, along with effective interpersonal skills. At the same time, skills required for effective Discussion Directors can be taught, and are probably best thought of as part of the intended learning outcomes. The other roles in the group are readily assigned to a variety of learners and can be rotated to different students for interest sake. Figure 1 shows a set of directions for students as they implement their literature circle. Each role includes a specific set of questions or prompts to follow.

There are many ways students can read the passage, either before assembling in a circle or afterward. Passages can also be assigned as homework or integrated into whole-class instruction, depending on time and whether students will need in-class support. Once the circle is formed, the

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**Literature Circle Directions**

Follow these steps for effective discussion:

**1. Discussion Director (That’s you!)**
   a. Read your first prompt or question, and ensure everyone responds
   b. Read and discuss the rest of your questions
   c. This should take at least 5-10 minutes

**2. Illustrator (____________________)***
   a. Ask the illustrator to show the picture, Venn diagram, or story map
   b. Ask the group if they have questions for the illustrator
   c. Ask “what would each of you have chosen to illustrate?”

**3. Word Expert (____________________)***
   a. Have the Word Expert read the first word only
   b. Have the group find the word in the story - Word Expert tells page
   c. Each person in the group should guess what the word means
   d. The Word Expert reads the dictionary definition
   e. Ensure each word has been discussed for understanding
   f. Do each word this way
   g. This should take 10 minutes

**4. Passage Picker (________________________)**
   a. The Passage Picker shares the passage and reasons for choosing it
   b. All group members should find this passage in the story
   c. Ask the group if they had a favorite passage they would have picked

**5. Summarizer (_________________________)**
   a. The summarizer should share important points
   b. Ask group members if they agree or disagree with the summary
   c. If major points were missed, the summarizer should add them
   d. Have the group decide on small details; put an x beside the details

**Making Connections Discussion Prompts**

Ask the group if they have any connections to the reading and real life.

Share your connection, and ask other members more questions about it.

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*Figure 1.*
discussion may commence according to the order of assigned roles, as shown above, with the discussion director ensuring member participation. As circle members complete work for their role, the teacher may assign one student to ask a special set of questions which elicit connections between the passage and student real-world experience. At the conclusion of the “connection” phase, the teacher may again prompt students, but this time to complete a group assessment form as a method of peer evaluation. Results from these forms are used for reflection by the student, and as a future planning aid for the teacher. A sample group assessment form shows in Figure 2.

Literature circles promote growth in numerous academic competencies. However, there are other social outcomes that students practice along the way, not the least of which are cooperative learning, positive interdependence, group accountability, and group processing. To be sure, there are circumstances when clearly defined roles, engaging content, and clear directions are insufficient for overcoming challenges associated with dynamic group work. For example, it has been my experience that some groups talk over each other all at once. One solution to this problem is giving a “talking stick,” which students pass around to ensure everyone is heard. This reduces the flow of the discussion, but with practice the stick can be removed and regular literature circle rules reinstated. Another challenge emerges for those students who lack interpersonal communication skills. Again, one solution is to have these students write a brief reflection about their performance on the Group Assessment Form. Taking this approach enables the teacher to discern between shy students, and those who are reluctant to participate because of gaps in their understanding.

Finally, one way to extend literature circles is by engaging students in the process independently. For example, teachers can have students select a passage and then assume each of the five roles. Instead of a discussion, students record results in writing. Another extension, which sounds exotic but is becoming more achievable these days, is to have students convene a literature circle outside of regular school hours using Internet technologies such as Skype or Google Hangouts. Google Hangouts has the added benefit of permitting attendees to record their conversation, which can be viewed as a YouTube video by the teacher or peers sometime later.

Reference

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