



by Heather Kern, January 2017

As the twenty-first century continues to unfold, so too do the needs of our learners. Diversity is present in our classrooms in ways never seen before. As of 2013-14, the latest year for which we have data, the percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) in our public education system averaged 9.3%, up significantly from a decade earlier (2016). These increases are driving the need for additional classroom support, particularly during literacy instruction. According to Karen Ford, "English language learners need opportunities to build background knowledge." Furthermore, she goes on to explain that English Language Learners "benefit from explicit instruction in vocabulary. Organizing vocabulary around a theme facilitates learning."

As a classroom teacher with anywhere from twenty-five to near forty percent ELL students each of the past two years, the question of how to support all of my students and especially my English Language Learners – some of whom may have been in the country only a handful of months – as they encounter new vocabulary is a sobering challenge. Furthermore, the responsibility every educator now faces to design lessons that allow for inquiry-based learning can make the process of planning instruction for high-needs students even more daunting. Using collaborative library lessons to support and guide English Language Learners through the process of inquiry-based learning and research can offer both students and teachers maximum support and a plethora of resources to lay the groundwork for building students' comfort with the vocabulary and allows for the repeated exposure that Ford states is necessary for ELL students to feel comfortable with this new lexicon.

One strategy I successfully used to accomplish this multitude of tasks was to design an inquiry project to introduce students to the concept of inquiry-based learning. The second semester for third-graders in Virginia requires teachers to deliver instruction on a long-range science unit covering animal classifications and adaptations as well as food chains and ecosystems. Building an understanding of the vocabulary associated with these lessons can be an arduous task for even the most advanced learners. However, armed with a research guide to assist them in focusing on the vocabulary as it related to their chosen topic, students successfully investigated a series of questions and presented their findings in a manner that best fit their learning stage and style.

First, students were asked to brainstorm a list of animals they were interested in learning more about. With the support of the classroom teacher and the well-versed librarian, students were then required to find two resources – one print and one electronic – at their respective reading levels that they could use to gather information. This requirement guided students toward choosing a creature that was not too remote or abstract as to prevent them from finding substantial resources. The educators were able to guide the students toward exploring electronic resources on child-safe sites such as Scholastic Go, World Book Kids, and Britannica, many of which had the option for students to have the article read aloud to them, which supports ELLs who may remain unsure about the pronunciation of the vocabulary.

Next, students were given a teacher-created research guide designed to emphasize vocabulary specific to the science units. The guide contained a list of questions, asking students to use their sources to answer questions about their animal's natural habitat, learned behavior, and physical adaptations. Students were asked to record these answers, and ELL students worked in small groups with the teacher or the librarian to locate and highlight the information and practice phrasing it in their own words following earlier lessons on plagiarism.

Following the conclusion of their research, students conferenced with one of the instructors to confirm they had correctly located and transcribed their information. This midway point in the inquiry provides a unique opportunity for the teacher and the librarian to confer with all students and provide additional support as needed for ELL students. Finally, students chose how they wanted to exhibit the information they gathered. Although students were offered the freedom to choose any mode of presentation, from poster or report to iMovie or speech, many students chose to create a PowerPoint presentation. Electronic presentations, such as those that can be created in

PowerPoint or Google slides, allow students to pair written information with visual components, which is critical to the success of ELL students. Benchmark Education suggests that images such as photographs can support ELLs as they strive to transition in their understanding from the concrete to the abstract (2016). The pairing of a visual medium with the associated vocabulary reinforces both the scientific lexicon and the conceptual affiliation for these students.

Why use collaborative library as a mechanism for this type of inquiry-learning? Small-group and one-on-one conferencing afforded to the students by working with a collaborative librarian allows each set of unique and diverse learning needs to be met and addressed. Furthermore, a knowledgeable collaborative librarian is better suited than most classroom teachers to guide students toward finding a wide array of resources designed to meet their individual levels. ELL students still struggling with reading may be encouraged to explore articles at a lower lexile level than peers who may be reading above grade level. Additionally, collaborative librarians are often flexible in their scheduling, allowing for consistency in back-to-back research and writing sessions that will aid the students in remaining focused on their work and feel accomplished by arriving at a finished product in a few days' time rather than over the course of several weeks.

As classroom teachers, we are tasked every day of every school year with striving to meet the needs of students with a multitude of backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. For teachers assigned to escort ELL students through this learning process, the landscape may look quite different. Using the collaborative library to support and boost inquiry-based learning is one way to aid our learners with acquiring and then mastering difficult new vocabulary. As diversity in education continues to expand, it is imperative that we find ways to teach units that allow students to explore at their own levels and absorb the material in their own time.

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