

Tiered Texts: Supporting Knowledge and Language Learning for English Learners and Struggling Readers

This article, through an engaging analysis of classroom dialogue, describes how and why a tiered-text approach to reading can help all students meet high standards for comprehension and content.

One of the most persistent challenges facing teachers is the need to provide effective literacy instruction for adolescent English language learners (ELLs). The literacy crisis for these students is a compelling one; only 4% of eighth-grade ELLs scored at the proficient or advanced level on the reading portion of the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress (Perie, Grigg, and Donahue). A lack of at-grade-level literacy development is exacerbated for ELLs who enter the educational system in the later grades, often with below-grade-level literacy skills in their native language (Short and Fitzsimmons). They must master complex course content while simultaneously gaining English language proficiency in high schools where rigorous, standards-based curricula and high-stakes assessments are the norm (Short and Boyson).

We propose that to address the lack of literacy among ELLs and other struggling readers, instruction must support the development of academic language and background knowledge essential for learning in high school content-area classrooms and the workplace. If English language learners in English classrooms are to succeed in critically engaging with academic texts, they need intentionally designed interventions that facilitate mastery of subject-specific academic vocabulary and background knowledge, as well as the forms and functions of academic language. To support teachers as they make these accommodations, we share in this article an intervention that scaffolds both background knowledge and language development through tiered texts. First we discuss factors involved in acquiring a school or academic dis-

course. Then we define and describe tiered texts as a way to differentiate literacy learning for English language learners and other struggling readers. Finally we identify ways that teachers can implement tiered texts, using a classroom-based example of how tiered texts can be used with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Acquiring School Discourse: What We Know

While English language learners often acquire social communicative language skills within two or three years, development of academic language skills requisite for success in content-area classrooms takes from five to ten years (Thomas and Collier). English learners are usually given only one or two years of ESL instruction, during which time they achieve communicative competence. Then they are transitioned into regular English classes where they must "sink or swim" because instruction has not been designed to meet their needs.

Many students experience a mismatch between their home language and the academic English they encounter at school (Hart and Risley; Heath, "Sense," *Ways*). Academic English refers to the language of school, a unique language that students typically encounter only in the academic environment. According to Jeffrey Zwiers, it may be the most complicated "tool set" in the world to learn to use.

Academic English is only one register of many formal and informal registers of English that students encounter in and out of school. When texting a friend, for example, students use an informal language register that depends on brevity and

abbreviations. When presenting a speech in class, conversely, students use a highly formal register to convey their thoughts about a topic. They are expected to organize their speech in a certain way and use sophisticated language to convey their ideas. Every register is important; none should be considered superior to another since each speaker needs to use multiple registers to communicate in varied discourse communities.

Many students, however, need explicit instruction in using more formal language registers. Additive communication, an approach we advocate, invites instruction that blends home and school languages (Brock et al.; Turner). Learning academic content, in large part, involves understanding the key concepts and language of each discipline. Providing ELLs with multiple opportunities to read, write, and talk about academic vocabulary coupled with explicit instruction results in depth of word knowledge (August et al.) and improved reading comprehension (Langenberg et al.). Learning vocabulary must not only involve direct instruction in word meanings but also allow students to apply strategies for independent vocabulary learning (Carlo, August, and Snow). All too often, however, vocabulary instruction for secondary English language learners involves skill-and-drill instruction focused on a narrow range of skills (Short and Fitzsimmons).

Academic vocabulary, a critical component of the background knowledge ELLs need to respond critically to a range of texts, involves understanding the words and phrases that are the “talk of a text.” Examples include complex and difficult phrases such as *evaluate the premise*, *contrast the characters*, *identify the chronology*, *provide a citation*, *examine the event*, and *determine the appropriate consequence*. Phrases like these often pose problems for students who lack knowledge of academic vocabulary.

Academic and topical vocabularies are part of the background knowledge needed for success in learning a content area. In addition to these crucial language areas, text comprehension is also based on world knowledge and student ability to access and relate appropriate background world knowledge to the text topic being read (Carroll). While reading, one must note familiarity with the topic, the context in which the topic is appearing, and the language carrying the message. To accommodate this, the effective teacher explicitly scaffolds instruction

in ways that develop students' schema, thus laying the foundation for successful critical literacy experiences. After engagement in these scaffolded activities, students are more prepared to gain, analyze, evaluate, and act on new, yet related, information from increasingly difficult sources.

To study the efficacy of this type of scaffolded instruction for English language learners and struggling readers, we designed a series of assignments that develops background knowledge, provides contextualized instruction in academic vocabulary, and encourages critical literacy. This approach requires that teachers help students move beyond literal understanding of a text, engage with a variety of text types, note text structures and features, explore a text's purposes and meanings, and reconstruct texts (Luke and Freebody). According to Ernest Morrell, engaging adolescents in such critical literacy experiences can move them from marginalization to the mainstream.

Tiered Texts: What Are They?

Tiered texts provide students with rich opportunities to deepen their understanding of a range of topics and a variety of aspects of academic language. Students begin with an easy-to-read text aligned with their entry-level background, academic, and topical knowledge. As their bases of knowledge and language expand, they are able to read, discuss, and write about more difficult texts on the same topic, using their newly acquired topical and academic vocabulary. Built on the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Fisher and Frey; Pearson and Gallagher)—which involves explicit teacher modeling, guided instruction, and independent practice—tiered texts scaffold student understanding and provide background knowledge and the multiple exposures to academic vocabulary required for comprehension (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson).

Instructional Implementation: How Can Tiered Texts Be Created or Selected?

To create or select tiered texts, teachers must first identify standards-based topics of study in which ELLs need additional support, and select two or more supportive texts that can help students access the target text. These texts should become

progressively more challenging and contain similar concepts, topical vocabulary, and academic language. The first text should be short, introduce students to key concepts, and be written at a level that matches students' entry-level instructional abilities. The second can be a longer, more challenging text that reinforces the information and language of the first and transitions students to the target text. The target text is a grade-level text the teacher wants students to master independently. It may be from the literature anthology, a classroom novel

such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Scarlet Letter*, or a challenging text from any genre. This does not have to be a single final text read by the whole class since in many classrooms students read thematically related texts at varying degrees of difficulty. The important feature is that students' language and concepts are being

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scaffolded so that they will be able to read and comprehend a related text independently. Figure 1 provides examples of tiered texts that can be used with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Great Expectations*.

Once texts are selected, the teacher implements scaffolded instruction through an instructional frame that gradually transfers the instructional lead from teacher to students, with the goal being student independence. Below we show how this is instructionally supported through the use of tiered texts on the same topic but with ascending levels of vocabulary and concept sophistication.

Tier 1: Building Background

To connect the reader and the topic, teachers need to build the knowledge base and topical and academic language students will need to read all the tiered texts. This happens as the teacher completes a read-aloud, poses a problem, shows a video, or shares real-world artifacts.

For example, teacher Mary O'Shea at Kearny High School in San Diego uses tiered texts to help students access Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as they study the theme of "love" as a cause of violence. To support her students, many of whom are

English language learners, she develops background knowledge about the play, carefully introducing key academic vocabulary and scaffolding student comprehension in ways that help them develop language and conceptual skills they need to read at grade level and beyond.

During Tier 1 of the lesson, Mary uses three different texts to build student background knowledge for reading *Romeo and Juliet*. First she employs a picture book, *William Shakespeare and the Globe* (Aliki). Second, she shares a brief plot summary of the play with her students through *The Romeo and Juliet Rap* (Jacobs). Finally, she shows the Franco Zeffirelli film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, which uses the original language found in the play.

This description of Tier 1 demonstrates how Mary develops student background knowledge about the life and times of Shakespeare through a shared reading of Aliki's *William Shakespeare and the Globe*. Before moving to this text she places her target text *Romeo and Juliet* on the document camera and explains, "When I want to read a new text like *Romeo and Juliet* that has language that I might not know, I first read a less difficult text that uses more familiar language." Then removing *Romeo and Juliet* from the document camera and in its place showing *William Shakespeare and the Globe*, she continues, "I like to read an introductory text like this before I begin to read *Romeo and Juliet* because it gives me a basic knowledge about the history and society, introduces me to the language, and helps me to compare life today with life back then. I think you'll enjoy reading this with me." As she reads aloud, Mary invites students to compare and contrast life now with life during that era and models the uses of Shakespearean words and phrases to introduce the vocabulary. Pausing after having interactively shared several pages, Mary says, "As I'm reading this book I'm realizing that it is giving me some good information about Shakespeare's life and plays. I'm also learning interesting background information about what life was like when he lived, such as living conditions, laws, entertainment, or customs. I hope this is happening for you too. Take a few minutes to share with a partner some things you're noticing about how your life would have been different back then. Try to use the language. Then we will record these on a class chart."

FIGURE 1. Sample Tiered Texts for Selected Classroom Novels

	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
Tiered Text(s) 1	<p><i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>. Dir. Robert Mulligan. MCA. 2005. DVD.</p> <p><i>The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow</i>. Dir. Sam Pollard. PBS, 2004. DVD.</p> <p>Shields, Charles. <i>I Am Scout: The Biography of Harper Lee</i>. New York: Holt, 2008. Print.</p>	<p>Cooper, Michael L. <i>Dust to Eat: Drought and Depression in the 1930's</i>. New York: Clarion, 2004. Print.</p> <p>Library of Congress. "America from the Great Depression to World War II." Washington DC, n.d. Web. 15 Jan. 2010. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>.</p> <p>Hesse, Karen. <i>Out of the Dust</i>. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.</p>	<p>Ackroyd, Peter, et al. <i>Uncovering the Real Dickens</i>. BBC: Opus Arte, [Heathfield, East Sussex], 2003.</p> <p>Damon, Duane. <i>Life in Victorian England (the Way People Live)</i>. Detroit: Lucent, 2006. Print.</p>
Tiered Text(s) 2	Sergel, Christopher, and Harper Lee. <i>The Play of "To Kill a Mockingbird."</i> Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995. Print.	Rice, Earle. <i>The Grapes of Wrath (Globe Fearon Edition)</i> . New York: Globe Fearon, 1996. Print.	<p>Dickens, Charles. <i>Great Expectations: The Graphic Novel</i>. Detroit: Lucent, 2010. Print.</p> <p><i>Great Expectations</i>. Videocassette. Criterion Collection, 1998.</p>
Target Text	Lee, Harper. <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> . 1960. New York: Warner, 1982. Print.	Steinbeck, John. <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> . New York: Viking, 1939. Print.	Dickens, Charles. <i>Great Expectations</i> . 1860. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.

After listening in as the partners chat, Mary invites them to share their thoughts:

Javier: I guess that I'd be more likely to get sick back then 'cause rats brought diseases.

Maria: Yea, they think the rats caused the plague and lots of people died when that happened.

Mary: Yes, when we read *Romeo and Juliet* you'll hear one character say, "A plague on both your houses." Thousands of people died from the plague and they were terrified because they didn't know what caused it. What do you think "A plague on both your houses" means?

Michael: Maybe like a curse on two houses?

Mary: Yes, the two houses refer to the two warring families in the play, the Montagues and the Capulets. Romeo was a Montague and Juliet was a Capulet. The character is putting a curse on both houses by wishing the plague on both.

Latisha: They did some horrible stuff back then, like they chopped off people's heads who were criminals and people went to watch.

Andy: Yeah, beheadings were common in that time.

Alan: They weren't just mean to people, they were also real cruel to animals. Like in some of the pictures, they had bear baiting and cockfights and things like that.

Devon: I like the picture showing how they went to plays, kind of like how we go to movies, but they threw stuff if they didn't like the play.

As the discussion continued, Mary pointed out to students that they were identifying customs related to living conditions, the law, and entertainment. She categorized each statement on the chart and noted that later as they read *Romeo and Juliet*, they would learn even more about these customs that could be added to this information chart.

Tier 2: Practicing and Preparing to Read a Difficult Text

During Tier 2, students gain practice in reading an easy text that prepares them for reading the more difficult original play. Graphic novels (see, for example, *Picture This! Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet* [Page and Petit]) and raps are ideal for this purpose because they often mimic the language and features of the original text but are more accessible to students.

After completing work with the Tier 1 texts, Mary moves students into the Tier 2 text, *The Romeo and Juliet Rap* (Jacobs). Because rap represents a familiar and engaging form of language for today's students, it bridges students' out-of-school and in-school language. Furthermore, this particular rap mimics the format of the play and provides the setting, introduces key characters, and outlines key events in the original text.

Mary helps students draw on prior knowledge by reviewing the elements of plot they had previously studied during a short-story unit. She notes that they will encounter these in the play, but that the format of a play is different from a story. She shows students how to identify each act and scene, the setting, and the speaker and their lines. She then writes four terms—*prologue*, *dialogue*, *monologue*, and *soliloquy*—on the board and explains that the plot in a play occurs through the actor's speeches. She helps students analyze these terms in this way: "Let's begin by looking at the first three words. Each contains the root word *logue*, which means speech. Let's look first at the word *prologue*. Here are some words with the prefix *pro*: *produce*, *proceed*, and *promotion*. Let's look at the word *promotion*. What does it mean?"

Maria: To move up a grade.

Mary: Yes. When I look at this word I know that the root is motion, which means to move. The prefix *pro* means ahead of or in front of. So putting these together I know that promotion means to move ahead. So what do you think the word *prologue* means?

Julio: Speech ahead of or before??? That doesn't make sense.

Mary: Terrific, analyzing the parts of the word got you on the right track. The prologue is a speech that happens before the story begins. It gives the setting and some background about the story. Let's look at the

prologue in the rap. It comes right at the beginning. As I read it, listen to find out the setting, the characters, and any additional background information. Raise your hands as soon as you know these three things.

Following this brief introduction, Mary and the students used the same sequence of instruction to analyze the terms *dialogue*, *monologue*, and *soliloquy*.

Next Mary explains to the students, "In the next scene from the rap, we meet two other characters in the play, Tybalt and Mercutio. In this scene, Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, kills Mercutio, Romeo's best friend. To get you thinking about this scene, I'd like you to discuss with your partner what you would do if someone killed your best friend." She asks if they would seek immediate revenge or allow the law to deal with those responsible. Listening to their thinking, Mary notices that many feel troubled by this question.

Julio: I'm not certain if the jury would convict a guy for killing my friends, especially cause my friends are mostly Black and Mexican. I would take care of it myself.

Michael: I know you'd feel like this but, I'd hate to end up in prison.

As they discuss this dilemma, Mary offers additional insight by saying, "I know most people would want to seek revenge, they think they wouldn't care, but there are grave consequences in today's society when we take the law into our own hands. If you ended up in jail you would feel you had avenged the loss of your friend and you would have many years there to think about your loss of income and education and how this was not only affecting you but your family and other friends."

Michael: Yeah that's exactly what happened to my cousin three years ago, and his mom is still suffering from it.

Julio: I know but I'd sure feel like that.

Mary: Of course you would, but you must give our court system a chance.

At this point Mary reads the rap aloud to the students, up to the point after Tybalt and Mercutio fight. Then she asks students to predict what will happen next. Mary cautions them that they will later find out what the terrible consequences of Ro-

meo's actions are and how this event influences the rest of the story.

To further engage students with the rap, Mary wants to familiarize students with more of the important characters. She explains: "Have you ever read a book that had a lot of characters that you couldn't keep track of?" Several students nod their heads. "Sometimes when I'm reading a book with lots of characters I write notes about each character in the front of the book. When we watched the movie, we got to know some of the key characters in the story. Today we will use a literary sociogram to help us keep track of the characters and the relationships among them [see fig. 2]. Whenever you forget who a character is, you can look back at the chart. Let's start with Romeo and Juliet. Romeo was from the Montague family, and Juliet was a Capulet. We can show their relationship on the sociogram by drawing lines with arrows, with one pointing from Romeo to Juliet and vice versa. We will write the word *loved* on the line to show their relationship." Mary continues:

Mary: What other characters have we met so far?

Latisha: The two guys that were fighting: Mercutio and Tybalt.

Kevin: Yeah, Mercutio was Romeo's best friend, and Tybalt was Juliet's cousin.

Michael: They hated each other.

Mary: Great. Let's record that on the chart. We will draw arrows to each of these characters, and write the word *hated* on the line.

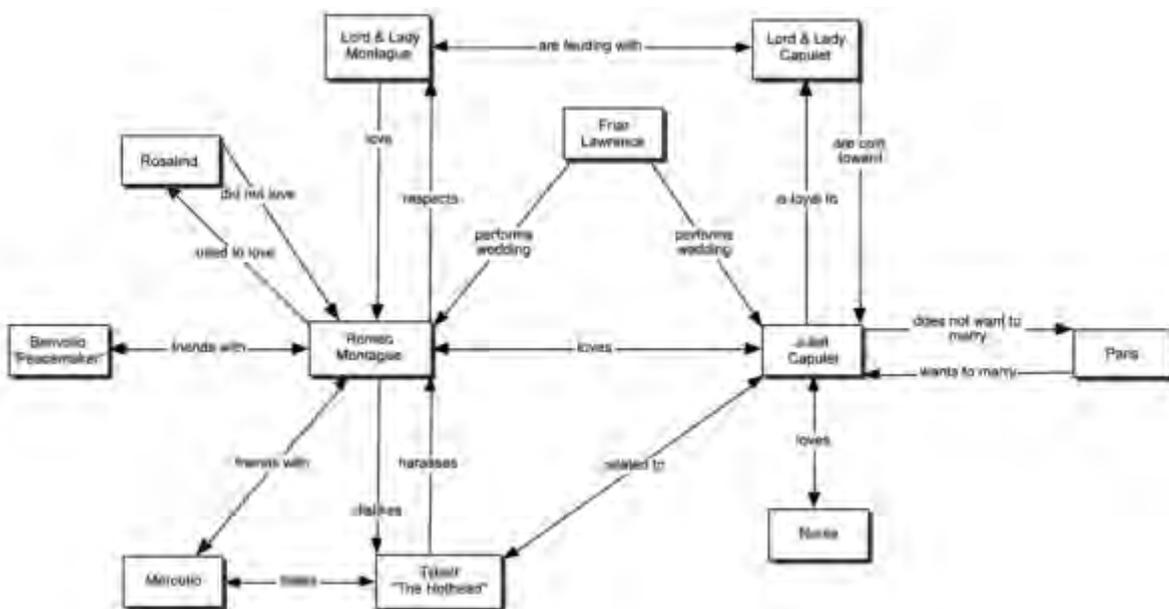
We can add to this chart as we meet more of the characters and explore their relationships.

At this point, Mary provides students with collaborative practice in reading the rap aloud. She assigns specific scenes to teams of students and has them practice reading their scenes. She also asks them to identify examples of dialogue, monologue, and soliloquy, and to discuss the action in their scene. Following this, students read their scenes aloud to the entire class and discuss their earlier predictions about the outcome of the play.

Tier 3: Independently Reading a Text

Once students developed background knowledge, new vocabulary, and an understanding of characters, they were ready to tackle new scenes from the original version of the play and create a response to the text with minimal teacher assistance. They possessed the prior knowledge necessary to understand the play's structure, format, and characters. As students read scenes from the original text, they paused periodically to collect evidence

FIGURE 2. Literary Sociogram of Romeo and Juliet



about the characters by analyzing direct quotations that they would use later when writing about a character. Finally, students demonstrated their critical understanding of the text by creating a PowerPoint presentation that retold the story from the point of view of a particular character or created an iMovie featuring their character set in a present-day conflict. Their creation of these projects illustrated that they comprehended and could extend topical knowledge and language.

The Promise of Tiered Texts

While the tiered text model is largely untested, it holds promise for meeting the academic literacy needs of secondary English language learners. Tiered texts are necessary to assist students as they deepen their knowledge of the plot details, and for many students, they offer more than one chance to capture it. It is an opportune way to differentiate learning and still keep all students engaged. 

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