



a decontextualized discourse style. Reading decontextualized texts has been shown to be difficult even for native speakers of

level is an arduous process as well as a long-term undertaking. Reading teachers who do not know about acquisition rates

English readers due to the nature of the discourse style. Decontextualized texts are characterized with a lack of contextual cues and an expository manner of writing (Cummins, 1984, 2000). It is extremely challenging for ELLs to comprehend decontextualized subject matter texts, and the demands for reading comprehension increase as students proceed to upper grades (Brown, 2006; Chamot, 1995).

How can teachers help ELLs become proficient in reading decontextualized content area books? How can they help ELLs understand these demanding texts? Before presenting suggestions, I present a brief description of the nature of academic language and how it differs from conversation language in order to give teachers an idea of the task ELLs face.

#### *Conversational English vs. Academic English*

According to Cummins (1981; 1984;1996), there are two different kinds of language proficiencies for ELLs to acquire: conversational or social English and aca-

for different English proficiencies can be easily misled, thinking that ELLs have reading disabilities because they can carry on conversations as if they were native speakers of English, but have problems reading academic texts. In reality, they have simply not yet acquired academic English.

Conversational language can be described as unedited speech, full of “choppy” and often incomplete sentences. Frequently, conversational language users do not specify references being made. People who are assumed to share the same context do not necessarily explicitly or fully express their thoughts to their interlocutors. When this assumption is not warranted however, a great deal of “filling-in” happens. It is common for interlocutors to reiterate, repeat, or provide new information to each other to reach the “same page” in the conversation. This kind of back-and-forth makes comprehension easier.

In addition, instantaneous clarification or feedback is possible in conversation. If one of the interlocutors perceives that other

cause you didn't have breakfast for me this morning" would be much more appropriate. Finally, conversational English includes extra-linguistic features, such as facial expressions, intonation, or gestures that could provide ELLs with cues that can help in comprehending the conversation.

Academic English is fundamentally different from conversational language. First, the academic register is characterized by expository and formal language. The social studies textbook would not say, "The government really screwed up in New Orleans when Katrina hit," which would be easier for ELLs with conversational language competence to understand. Instead, it is more likely to read "The federal government's failure to provide the timely rescue to the citizens of New Orleans, who were struck by hurricane Katrina, resulted in a high death toll that could have been prevented." In addition, the academic discourse used in reading is even more difficult to understand because of the absence of features normally presented in conversational discourse (e.g. facial features, intonation, and gestures).

#### *Challenges in Content Reading*

Adequately addressing ELLs' needs in content reading requires teachers to recognize the degree and scope of struggle that ELLs encounter. Some of the complexities and difficulties of content reading are illustrated here through examples from social studies. Numerous roadblocks exist when ELLs read text, presented below, related to Western Expansion in 5th grade social studies. The excerpts used as examples were taken from <http://www.americanwest.com/pages/wexpansi.htm>.

#### *Background Knowledge*

"Runaway horses, stampeded cattle, prairie fire, blizzards, heat, sunstroke, Indians, lice, snakes and the pure loneliness of the open plains - all of these and more faced the western pioneers of the 1800s. Certainly there were those who gave up, moving back to the security of the East, but many more stayed and helped build and shape the West one sod shack at a time, one small farm at a time and eventually one town at a time. They traveled forth on horseback, in Conestoga wagons...some even walked. For them it wasn't a question of how long it would take, only that it had to be done. And they did it."

Study after study has confirmed the fact that background knowledge facilitates reading comprehension (Dochy, Segers, & Buehl, 1999; Krashen, 2004; Peregoy & Boyle, 2004). Textbooks, as the example shows, assume that all readers share similar cultural experiences and have the necessary background knowledge to comprehend the text. It is likely that most mainstream students grow up hearing or reading about cowboys and Indians, but the same expectation cannot be applied to all ELLs. Thus, ELLs who do not know much about the Western Expansion prior to reading the text presented above will have a difficult time making sense out of what they are reading. This means that they have to figure out what they are reading alone based on their limited knowledge of the language and the conventions of writing alone.



1849. While that profitable discovery did boost California's population by 80,000 eager prospectors, there remained a awful lot of land

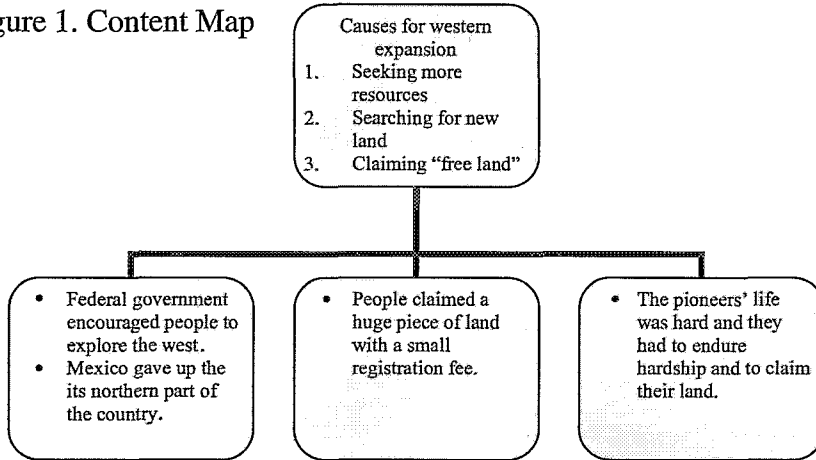
*Recommendation One: Content-Maps*

After the teacher introduces the content that students are about to read, a helpful step in making text more compre-

St. Louis, Missouri. "Why mention St. Louis?" you might be asking. Because in actuality the young United States started exploring the vast land mass to the west from that very point and almost fifty years before those gold nuggets started hitting the pan in California."

material covered in the text. Content maps help make content transparent by showing how parts of the text are related. This can be done in various ways depending on the cognitive maturity of ELLs, but graphic organizers that illustrate the hierarchical relationship of the facts can be very effective. Since the discourse structure is complex, teachers can point out the loca-

Figure 1. Content Map



*Recommendation Two: Guiding Questions*

To make content reading more manageable, it is advised that teachers present

cantly different in terms of content from the descriptions written for the 8th grade. If ELLs can handle the language of the lower

not only help ELLs gain more knowledge in the content area, but also help ELLs acquire more language in general, academic language in particular. Language is best acquired when ELLs comprehend the content being taught. When dealing with content-specific subjects, teachers need not remain passive until ELLs gain full proficiency in English. There are concrete steps to take, as discussed in this article. While teachers provide ELLs with comprehensible reading materials that stimulate their intellectual interests and help them develop competence in academic reading, they can also assist ELLs in meeting the challenges they face right now. The most important thing is that teachers make reading instruction an integral part of content area delivery. With better comprehension of the textbooks, ELLs understand more content area knowledge. An added dividend is that activities designed to accommodate ELLs often benefit fully English proficient students whose reading is below grade level. Thus, it is critical for the teachers of content area subject matter

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