Culturally Relevant Books in the ELL Classroom

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In this excerpt from *English Language Learners: The Essential Guide*, ELL researchers David and Yvonne Freeman offer a comprehensive set of tips for choosing culturally relevant books in the ELL classroom.

They also offer a number of book recommendations and a rubric that teachers and students can use to determine whether a book is culturally relevant.

Culturally Relevant Books

Stephen Krashen (2004) points out that the more people read, the more their reading comprehension will improve and the more capable they will be of reading from a variety of genres, including academic content texts. For bilingual children, the best approach is to develop their first language literacy and ensure they have many opportunities to read in both their first and second languages. When ELLs are being instructed in English, they need the additional support that comes through engagement with texts that connect to their cultural backgrounds.

Online resource

Learn more from the authors in Connecting Students to Culturally Relevant Texts

Research shows that students read better and read more when they read culturally relevant books (Y. Freeman et al., 2003; Goodman, 1982; R. Jiménez, 1997b). Developing a collection of culturally relevant texts takes a concerted effort. Not all books about Spanish speakers, for example, are relevant to all Hispanic students. Some books merely perpetuate stereotypes. Others, especially those published in Spain, contain settings and events that are unfamiliar to
Just what makes a book culturally relevant? Teachers and students can use the Cultural Relevance Rubric to determine whether or not a book is culturally relevant.

Teachers we have worked with have used the rubric in various ways. Some have read a book that they thought might be culturally relevant to a single ELL and then asked the questions on the rubric. They have been excited about how the children connect to the events and can extend the reading by comparing characters and events to their own families and experiences. Other teachers have had older students read a book they believed fit the questions on the rubric and then had students individually fill out the rubric. Still others have used the rubric as a basis for class discussion of a text they read aloud to the class or that the class read for a literature study. In the following section, we give examples of books that fit each question from the rubric.

Questions from the Cultural Relevance Rubric

**Question #1: Are the characters in the story like you and your family?**

*I Love Saturdays and domingos*

Francisco is a third-grade bilingual teacher working with Hispanic children in a small city on the California coast. He recently received Ada’s *I Love Saturdays and domingos* (Ada, 2002) as a gift because he and his Anglo wife have a four-year-old daughter.

The characters in this book mirror his own family. The book is about a girl who spends Saturdays with her English-speaking Anglo grandparents and Sundays (*domingos*) with her Spanish-speaking Hispanic grandparents.

Francisco read the story to his class and then explained that his daughter, Maya Esmeralda, has English-speaking and Spanish-speaking grandparents like the characters in the story. This led to a discussion of what the children in the class did with their grandparents, whether they spoke English or Spanish with them, and lots of questions for the teacher about his new daughter, what languages he and his wife spoke with her, and how it important it was to be bilingual.

*Rice All Day*

Jennifer, a kindergarten teacher in the inner city, has ELLs from all over the world in her classroom. She recently found a multicultural limited-text big book that is relevant to her students, *Rice All Day* (Tsang, 2003). Her students were fascinated as they read about breakfast with Lin from China, who has rice for breakfast; Luis from Mexico, who has horchata, a Mexican rice drink at lunch; and dinner with Waleed, who has a Middle Eastern rice-and-lentils dish for dinner.

**Question #2: Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?**

*The Tortilla Factory*

When Sandra read *La Tortillería* and the English version, *The Tortilla Factory* (Paulsen, 1995a, 1995b) to her newcomers from rural Mexico who had had limited formal schooling, she discovered that culturally relevant texts can lead to content learning, reading, and writing. This book describes the how corn seeds are planted, grown, harvested, and made into tortillas that nourish the workers, who then plant more corn. As Sandra read the book, her indigenous students from Oaxaca, Mexico, kept interrupting her to tell her they had planted corn, harvested it, and ground it into flour and made tortillas by hand, as shown in the pictures in the book.

The class decided that the students from Oaxaca should demonstrate all the steps involved in
turning corn into tortillas. After the class had discussed the process and the materials needed for the activity, Sandra bought the ingredients, and the students brought the necessary utensils from home. Her indigenous Mexican Triqui and Mixteco students, who usually acted ashamed of their culture and language, became the experts. These students demonstrated the steps while the other students took notes on the whole process.

Sandra used this culturally relevant book as part of her unit on plants and seeds. The reading and demonstration helped her students understand the steps involved in the cycle of planting seeds, harvesting them, and then turning them into food that gives workers strength to plant more seeds. All her students were engaged, and they developed both literacy skills and content knowledge through the activities Sandra developed around this book.

*Friends from the Other Side: Amigos del otro lado*

Another book that relates to many ELLs' experiences is *Friends from the Other Side: Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993). This book is especially appropriate for third through fifth graders who live along the border of the United States and Mexico. When teachers in South Texas read this book about a young girl who helps a young boy and his mother from "the other side," discussion often turns to illegals, an often ignored reality along the border.

Students who were born in the United States study alongside others who either cross the border daily or who live in fear of deportation until they can arrange legal papers. Discussion of the events in this story helps students think about the dynamics in their own classroom community. The book brings to the surface the human elements of suffering and alienation and encourages students to talk about their prejudices and fears.

*Marianthe’s Story: Painted Words and Spoken Memories*

Nancy has many refugee children in her urban third-grade classroom. These children suffer from different kinds of trauma and often need to share their experiences in a positive way. She reads *Marianthe’s Story: Painted Words and Spoken Memories* (Aliki, 1998) to them. This is a two-part book about a refugee girl from Greece.

In the first part of the book, the girl is a kindergartener who does not yet speak English but is able to draw pictures to represent some of her traumatic experiences. The second part of the picture book, which is read by turning the book over and starting at the back, is about this same girl in elementary school who can now write in her journal and share her story in English. Nancy’s students are not from Greece, but many of them have had experiences like those of the main character in this story.

**Question #3: Have you lived in or visited places like those in the story?**

*The Circuit and Breaking Through*

Oscar, a high school developmental reading teacher in a rural community, works with long-term English learners. Many of his students' parents are migrant workers. Two books that are culturally relevant for these students are *The Circuit* (F. Jiménez, 1997a) and *Breaking Through* (Jimenez, 2001). The first book described the elementary school years of a migrant child, and the second book follows this students’ progress through high school. The author writes about the area Oscar’s students live in, talks about places his students know, and describes experiences like those that the students or their relatives have had. The students are interested in these books, and they eagerly discuss the events in the stories.

*One City, One School, Many Foods*

Another book that is appropriate for urban middle and junior high school ELLs from different cultures is *One City, One School, Many Foods* (Palacios, 1997). The book describes students from different countries who now live in New York City. It shows them eating at home with their families and describes meals from the Dominican Republic, Korea, Africa, Uzbekistan, and China. This book provides many opportunities for discussion of cultural differences. Students can compare and contrast foods from different countries.

**Question #4: Could this story take place this year?**
When Yvonne read *Going Home* (Bunting, 1998) to her graduate class, she realized quickly that this book was especially relevant for teachers.

In this story, two children raised in the United States reluctantly travel back to rural Mexico with their parents to spend Christmas with relatives there. On the trip, they begin to understand the sacrifices their parents have made for them. After reading the story, one teary-eyed teacher raised her hand and said, "That story taught me how important it is that my students go back to Mexico for the holidays. I've always complained and wondered why parents take their children out of school. I understand a bit better now."

The following week, a high school teacher reported that she had read the book to her students and that the reading had led to a discussion that caused several of her students to talk about how their views of living in the United States were different from their parents' views and how hard it was for them and their parents to understand and appreciate each other. The book is especially valuable because it connects with the current reality of many Mexican-American students.

*The Name Jar*

*The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) is another book that deals with current realities. In this story, a Korean girl goes to school in the United States for the first time. On the bus to school, someone asks her what her name is, and all the children laugh at how it sounds. Once she gets to her classroom, she refuses to tell anyone her name.

After several days, the teacher devises a way to give her a name by putting out a jar and asking the children write a name for her and put it in the jar. At the end, the children discover her real name and its beautiful meaning, and everyone puts her real name in the jar.

**Question #5: How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?**

*La mariposa*

Barbara teaches in a rural school where many of the students are from migrant families. She finds that her native Spanish-speaking first graders love to hear her read stories that relate to their experiences and are also about children their own age. One story her students enjoy is *La mariposa* (F. Jiménez, 1998). This book was originally a chapter of Jimenez' *The Circuit* (F. Jiménez, 1997a) and is now a children's book beautifully illustrated by Simon Silva.

Barbara reads the Spanish version of the book first, and the students discuss it. Her students tell her, "*Es triste porque Francisco no tiene amigos*" (It's sad because he doesn't have friends), and they connect to his brother Roberto helping him. "*Mi hermano me lleva a la escuela también, maestra.*" (My brother brings me to school too, teacher).

Later in the year, while the students are engaged in an insect unit, she reminds them of the story she had read earlier in Spanish. That reading serves as a preview as she now reads them the English version. In the story, the young boy sits in the back of the class and observes a caterpillar that turns into a butterfly. The metamorphosis parallels the change the young boy is going through. Barbara's students relate this part of the story to the cocoon they have been watching in their own classroom as part of their insect unit.

**Question #6: Are there main characters in the story who are boys (for boys) or girls (for girls)?**

*América Is Her Name*

Linda teaches ESL in an urban high school. One book she reads to her students is *América Is Her Name* (L. Rodríguez, 1997). This book is about a girl from Oaxaca, Mexico, whose family moves to a large city in the United States. Linda's female students find this book especially relevant because the character, América, is a high school girl in a city who struggles with...
teachers and family members who don’t understand her. América develops pride in her cultural roots. Although her ESL teacher speaks only English, a visiting poet who speaks Spanish comes to América's class. He encourages the students to recite poetry. América stands and recites a poem she learned in Mexico. Later, she writes a poem that wins a citywide contest. The girls in Linda's class enjoy reading about América, an immigrant girl who overcomes obstacles to succeed in the new country.

Linda has also found books that the boys in her class connect to. One book almost all the boys enjoy is Gary Soto's *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997), a story about a boy who is trying to escape the violence in the big city where he lives. Many of the boys in Linda's class can see themselves in the main character of this powerful story.

**Question #7: Do the characters talk like you and your family do?**

*Sitti's Secrets*

Frank was concerned because he could rarely find culturally relevant books that connected to his Arabic-speaking students. *Sitti's Secrets* (Nye, 1994) is a story about a girl living in the United States who goes to visit her grandmother in Palestine. The girls speaks only Arabic. However, both communicate through gestures and a few key Arabic words sprinkled throughout the text including *Sitti* (Grandmother), *habibi* (darling), and *mish-mish* (apricots). This touching story of the love between grandmothers and grandchildren especially connected to the Arabic-speaking students in the class, several of whom had grandparents living as far away as the grandmother in the story.

*The Three Pigs: Los tres credos, Nacho, Tito, and Miguel*

*The Three Pigs: Los tres credos, Nacho, Tito, and Miguel* (Salinas, 1998) served as an exciting shared reading for Manuel as he worked with a small group of struggling middle school Hispanic students. These boys immediately connected to the language of the characters and the detailed art in the book as well as the humorous characters and events. They noticed the details in the book, and one boy commented that Nacho's house looked like his abuela's in Mexico. Another commented that the souped-up car looked like a primo's (cousin's) car, and all noticed that the pigs liked to eat homemade tortillas.

However, the students were most intrigued by the author's clever use of language to help readers connect to the book. In the first place, they appreciated the name of the three pigs — Nacho, Tito, and Miguel. One boy's nickname was actually Nacho and another had an Uncle Tito. They laughed that the wolf's name was José and the pigs said, "No way, José." when they wouldn't let him into their houses. Later in the story, the wolf drools hungrily imagining the carnitas and chicharrones (bits of braised pork and crisp pork rinds) he would eat once he caught the pigs. Familiar Spanish words such as these were sprinkled throughout the text. The boys even noticed that one pig, Miguel, had a bilingual T-shirt reading "Leer es poder: Reading is power." This familiar story connected to these readers because this version includes language, places, and things in their own lives.

**Question #8: How often do you read stories like these?**

Recently, as an assignment for Yvonne’s graduate class, students were asked to read a culturally relevant book to a student or group of students and administer the rubric. Yvette, a bilingual teacher, was appalled when the student she interviewed answered, "Nunca" (Never) to the question, "How often do you read stories like these?" "¿Nunca?" Yvette asked again. "Nunca," her student insisted.

Our concern is that many ELLs do not have access to culturally relevant books. Classroom libraries do not have enough books and certainly not enough in students' primary languages. Even when there are books in English or in students’ native languages, few of those books have the characteristics that the culturally relevant rubric calls for: Few books are about the present experiences of the students, few books have characters that look like and talk like the students, few books have settings familiar to the students, and few books include the kinds of everyday experiences the students have had.

*In My Family: En mi familia*
story related by another of Yvonne's graduate students. Suzanne is a monolingual teacher
who had been concerned that her students, almost all of whom were Latinos, were not
succeeding in reading and writing in English.

At a state bilingual education conference, she bought many books, and nearly all had a
Latino theme because she knew her classroom library had few books related her students'
backgrounds. Though she expected her students to connect with the books, she had no idea
how exciting culturally relevant books would be for them.

She wrote about her experience of introducing one of these books to her students:

This afternoon I picked up *In My Family: En mi familia* by Carmen Lomas
Garza(1996). Time being limited, my purpose was simply to show the new books I
had bought to my fourth graders and to encourage them to investigate and enjoy
the Spanish and English texts. The fever began as a slow burn as we discussed
the wonderful cover illustration depicting an outdoor dance floor, people of all
ages dancing, a musical ensemble, and simple light bulbs strung from posts. I
asked my students what they thought of the cover and where they thought the
dance was taking place. A roar went up. "MEXICO!"

I decided to read a bit to see what sort of connections my students would make
with the first short vignette described in the book, "The Horned Toads: Los
chameleones." The room erupted in wild conversations during the reading.
Students were unable to contain their excitement; they had stories to tell and, all
decorum aside, they were going to tell them! They shared with their neighbors,
friends, and, of course, me. They knew about horned toads, desert environments
and fire ants that "really sting." By the next vignette, "Cleaning Nopalitos: Limpiando nopalitos," there was no way to calm the wonderfully noisy groundswell
of story-telling and sharing. I was entering their culture, a culture and tradition
they were passionate to share (D. Freeman & Y. Freeman, 2001, p. 109).

Suzanne's story illustrates the importance of using at least some culturally relevant texts. A
few years ago one might have argued that there were not many culturally relevant books
available. However, now, at least for Hispanic students and especially those with Mexican
origins, there are books that connect to students' present lives and realities. Bilingual and
ESL conferences at state and national levels display many such books from different cultures.
Teachers can also find many culturally relevant books by searching online. Below is a
bibliography of the culturally relevant books for reference.

Freire (1987) summarized the importance of connecting what students read to their lives,
and we as educators should not forget his words. Freire wrote: "Reading the world always
precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world"
p.35). The teachers we describe here have used culturally relevant books to ensure that their
students always connect reading the word with reading their world.

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Greenwillow Books.


por la justicia.* Houston: Piñata Books.


N.M.: University of New Mexico Press.


David and Yvonne Freeman are professors at the University of Texas at Brownsville. David is a professor of reading and ESL, and Yvonne is a professor of bilingual education. The Freemans have coauthored a number of books, including *Teaching Reading and Writing in Spanish and English, Dual Language Essentials, Closing the Achievement Gap, Essential Linguistics*, and *Between Worlds*.


**References**


**Reprints**

For any reprint requests, please contact the author or publisher listed.

**More by this author**

- [Choosing Children's Books: Cultural Relevance Rubric](#)
I am an ESL teacher in Boston, Massachusetts. My Spanish-speaking students are Dominican and Puerto Rican. I have long used the beautiful dual-language books, such as Radio Man and En Mi Familia, with my students, and they have delighted in them. Recently, a former student told me how much she enjoyed the Mexican books I brought her! It was a concrete message to me that, although the books were cherished, and although the language was home, the books represented another multi-cultural experience to my students, and not exactly the experience of “going home.”
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This book is a practical, research-based, classroom-ready resource for English language arts teachers interested in learning how to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into all aspects of their instruction, including writing, reading, and vocabulary...

Introduction: What is Culturally Relevant Teaching and Why is it Important? Section One: Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction 1