

# The ELL Reading Corner

## The Impact of Trade Books on Reading Achievement for English Language Learners



### What Research Tells Us

**“The importance of reading as an avenue to improved reading has been stressed by theorists, researchers, and practitioners alike, no matter what their perspectives. There are few ideas more widely accepted than that reading is learned through reading.”**

—*National Reading Panel, 2000*

Trade books directly address the essential components of reading instruction as outlined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act IESEA 2001, *No Child Left Behind*.

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Vocabulary development
- Reading fluency, including oral reading skills
- Reading comprehension strategies

A print-rich classroom filled with trade books offers unique and specific access to these essential components of reading instruction. Students who read daily, both in and out of school, have higher reading scores than students who read less often.

The more students read, the better their vocabulary, their ability to read, and their knowledge of the world. Giving students the opportunity to choose from a wide selection of reading materials in their favorite genres and topics develops the “wonder and joy of reading that can only be derived from reading” (Fletcher & Lyon, 1998).

Recent studies on literacy confirm what educators have known for years—the more contact children have with books, the better readers they become. Teachers can promote better reading performance by reading to children daily and by having them interact with books through the extensive use of classroom libraries.

This paper outlines some of the most recent research on trade books and classroom libraries and demonstrates the importance of making these resources readily available to students. It highlights:

- the importance of access to a variety of trade books
- the effect of reading trade books on reading motivation and achievement
- the benefits of reading trade books in helping struggling readers and second language learners
- the characteristics of an effective classroom library

**“...it is generally agreed that practice in reading develops better readers.”**

—*National Reading Panel, 2000*

# Connecting English Language Acquisition with Content-Area Learning

**“Access to books is one thing. That the books be accessible to the reader is even more important.”**  
—*Krashen, 1982*

Research indicates that English Language Learners (ELLs) can meet and/or exceed the same academic standards as children who speak English as a first language, and that these students benefit from the same language-rich environments as their native English-speaking peers. But, finding accessible content-area reading materials appropriate for new learners of English is a challenge for even the most experienced teacher.

The **ELL Reading Corner** was developed to meet this need. The books in the library have been carefully selected for new learners of English, especially those in the earliest stages of language acquisition. Each 45-book library features a diverse selection of titles appropriate for varying levels of early English language proficiency. Each title is designed to extend students’ oral language, academic vocabulary, and content-area knowledge.

## Why an ELL Reading Corner?

**“If English language learners are to catch up academically with their native English-speaking peers, their cognitive growth and mastery of academic content must continue while English is being learned. Thus, the teaching of English as a second language should be integrated with the teaching of other academic content that is appropriate to the students’ cognitive level.”**

—*Cummins, 1994*

Current research and government initiatives emphasize the importance of integrating English language acquisition with content-area learning. Specifically designed to meet this goal, the **ELL Reading Corner** will provide English language learners with authentic English-language books that are:

- **Content-Rich:** The books have been especially selected to promote the acquisition of academic English. A wide range of nonfiction and fiction titles will help students develop essential content-area knowledge by exposing them to the concepts, vocabulary, and text structures found in each of the major curriculum areas.
- **Accessible:** The books in each collection have been carefully leveled for students in the three initial stages of English language acquisition: Preproduction, Early Production, and Speech Emergence.

Why use classroom libraries with English language learners?

Research shows that effective classroom libraries:

- Provide essential opportunities for new learners of English to engage with accessible, content-rich English-language texts
- Promote the acquisition of academic English and content-area knowledge
- Build on students’ background knowledge by providing culturally appropriate reading materials
- Offer varying degrees of challenge for students at different stages of language acquisition and literacy development
- Motivate students by allowing them to choose personally relevant and interesting books

- **Motivational:** The books reflect a variety of genres, topics, and cultures that draw on readers’ background knowledge and ensure that all students can find books that interest them.

Given the importance of content-area learning for new learners of English, approximately 60 percent of the books in the ELL Reading Corner are nonfiction titles. Within each level, there are books that address math, science, and social studies standards—as well as engaging fiction titles intended to spark students’ imaginations while addressing the essential components of reading as defined by Reading First.

## Access to Trade Books Is Key

**“Not only does having access to trade books motivate students to read, it also increases their reading achievement.”**

—Guthrie, Schafer & Von Secker, 2000



The first step to increasing reading achievement is providing students with quality books that will encourage them to read. Studies in the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated convincingly the impact of access to books on reading growth and achievement (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985; Allington, 1983; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Taylor, Frye & Maruyama, 1990). Stanovich and West (1989) found “orthographic processing skills appear to be linked to print exposure, and thus be environmentally mediated, rather than being simply an indirect product of differences in phonological ability.” In a later study in 1997, Cunningham and Stanovich assert that early exposure to a variety of reading materials improves students’ ability to comprehend texts in later grades. They conclude, “individual differences in exposure to print can predict differences in growth in reading comprehension ability throughout the elementary grades and thereafter.”

Access to books is at the forefront of a number of recent research studies on students’ reading growth and progress. Neuman (1999) examined the effects of “flooding” local child-care centers in inner city Philadelphia with books. The study found that having books in close proximity to students and teachers improved young children’s acquisition of several important pre-reading abilities, including:

- concepts of story
- concepts about print
- letter name knowledge
- writing

Neuman’s study showed “it was both the physical proximity of books and the psychological proximity of the people around them that enhanced the placement, opportunity, and access to books for children.” Duke (2000), in an article entitled, “For the Rich It’s

Richer: Print Experiences and Environments Offered to Children in Very Low- and Very High-Socioeconomic Status First-Grade Classrooms,” studied differences in the print environment offered to children in 20 first-grade classrooms of very low or very high socioeconomic status. Site visits showed substantial differences between the socioeconomic levels—the lower socio-economic status classrooms had less print, fewer types of print, and used print in fewer situations. The differing environments resulted in different access to books and other print materials and affected access to high quality literacy instruction.

In another study focusing on the availability and use of information texts in first grades, Duke (2000) described experiences offered to children in 20 first-grade classrooms selected from very low and very high socioeconomic status school districts. She found a scarcity of informational texts in these classrooms overall, but particularly in the low-socioeconomic status schools. The classrooms contained relatively few informational texts in their libraries, on their walls, or on other surfaces. The most startling finding was that children in low-socioeconomic classrooms had access to and read in information trade books for an average of only about 3.6 minutes per day, giving them scant opportunity to explore topics of interest to them.

McQuillan and Au (2001) examined the effect of eleventh graders’ access to books and other reading materials on how much and how often they would choose to read voluntarily. They found that access to reading materials, especially student preference books, led to more frequent reading regardless of students’ reading abilities. This study demonstrates that proximity to a variety of books motivates students to read.

## More Reading Equals Better Readers

**“For virtually all children, the amount of time spent reading in classrooms consistently accelerates their growth in reading skills.”**

—Anderson, 1995; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988

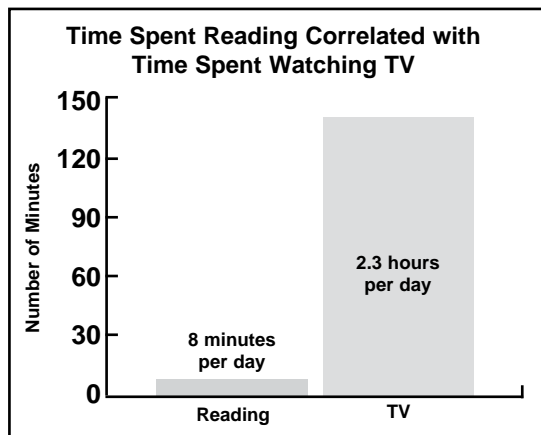
When we give students access to books and time to read, they become better readers. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) showed that time spent reading books resulted in consistent reading achievement gains. The highest achievers in fifth grade read up to 200 times as many minutes per day than did the lowest achievers.

In their extensive review of how “reading good books improves students’ reading performance,” Caldwell and Gaine (2000) found that the best predictor of reading achievement is the amount of time children spend reading books on their own. This assertion was bolstered by a similar review in Cullinan’s study showing a clear connection between independent reading and school achievement.

The report of the National Reading Panel of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) reviewed a large body of research indicating a clear association or relationship of reading time to reading achievement. Although this same panel was unable to demonstrate a “causal” effect of independent reading on reading achievement, the preponderance of correlation data indicates the more that children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

The most recent report of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP, 2000), *The Nation’s Report Card—Fourth Grade Reading Highlights*, showed a consistent, positive relationship between the number of pages read daily and reading performance. Students who reported reading 11 or more pages per day scored higher than students who reported reading fewer pages daily. The good news here is that the number of students who report they are reading more than 11 pages daily has been increasing steadily since 1992.

A study by Smith, Tracey, and Weber (1998) that found elementary students read only 8 minutes a day—although they watch television for 2.3 hours a day.



One way to bridge this gap and increase reading time is to provide students with engaging reading materials, including quality trade books. The importance of doing so is well documented. Templeton and Pikulski (1999) found when students read widely in books and other print materials, they come into contact with vocabulary that rarely occurs in spoken language.

In addition, research shows reading trade books produces reading achievement across a wide spectrum of measurements: knowledge base, language development, comprehension skills, story sequencing, vocabulary, reading fluency, linguistic competence, confidence to move on to more sophisticated and difficult reading, improved spelling and writing quality, and improved use of language mechanics (Caldwell & Gaine, 2000; Cantrell, 1999; Fredericks, 1992; Farris & Hancock, 1991; Taylor, Frye & Maruyama, 1990; Krashen, 1989).

The 2000 NAEP report documents a widening achievement gap between the most advanced and the most at-risk readers. Neuman (2001) indicates that today in the U.S., economic differences between the haves and have-nots are greater than at any other time in history since 1929. One reason for this widening of the gap in student reading achievement may rest in youngsters not receiving enough instruction in using and reading information trade books. Without a variety of high quality materials to spark interest and encourage reading, children do not get the experience they need to become proficient readers.

These recent research findings consistently point out the positive effect that spending ample time reading books has on children’s later reading performance, achievement, and general knowledge.



## Trade Books Motivate Students to Read

**“If teachers view themselves first as purveyors of pleasure rather than instructors in skill, they may find the skill will flourish where pleasure has been cultivated.”**

—Fader, 1976

Given the high relationship consistently documented between time spent reading and reading achievement, increased effort needs to be made to motivate students to do more reading. Almost 40 years ago, Daniel Fader, author of *Hooked on Books: Program & Proof* (1968), found that the way to help his students improve their reading ability was to have them read trade books. He determined his students read more when they had access to trade books because trade books were both interesting and meaningful to them. More recently, Gambrell (2001) has used the phrase “blessing a book” to encourage teachers and parents to understand their role as “purveyors of pleasure.”

In the 40 years since Fader’s initial study, research has continued to show students are motivated to read trade books (Asher, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; McQuillan & Conde, 1996; VanSledright, 1995; Wigfield, 1996, 1997; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). Asher (1980) found high interest in reading materials resulted in greater desires to read and increased reading comprehension.

VanSledright (1995) studied classrooms where teachers used both trade books and textbooks to teach fifth grade students U.S. history. Observations and interviews of students revealed fifth graders found trade books interesting and informative, and enjoyed reading them. Findings of this study showed students were highly motivated to read trade books and gravitated toward using trade books for research projects while studying history.



**“From the interest perspective, students’ preferences must be addressed in order to capture their attention and engagement and, thus, to foster conditions for learning.”**

—Worthy, Moorman & Turner (1999)

A recent student demonstrated that the materials students want to read are not available to them in schools. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) reported a study entitled, “What Johnny Likes to Read Is Hard to Find in School” that examined the reading preferences and access to reading materials of sixth-grade students in three large middle schools in the southwestern U.S.

Results indicated that sixth-grade students enjoyed reading scary books and stories, comics and cartoons, magazines about popular culture, and books and magazines about sports. Student preferences were examined by gender, income, reading attitude, and achievement, and the study found more similarities than differences among these groups. Researchers surveyed students and interviewed teachers and librarians to determine the availability of and access to students’ preferred reading materials.

The results showed that the majority of students obtained their preferred reading materials from home and stores rather than from schools and libraries. Classrooms ranked a distant last for availability of interesting books or magazines, even among low-income students. As the research indicates, children know what they like to read and are more likely to choose to read when materials relate to their personal interests. Providing easy access to trade books capitalizes on students’ interests and motivates them to read.

### Students Need Access to a Variety of Genres

- Fantasy
- Sports
- Mystery
- Biography
- Autobiography
- Poetry
- Historical Fiction
- Folktales
- Realistic Fiction
- Fables
- Science Fiction
- Humor
- Adventure

## Trade Books Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners

**“Because trade books offer a wide variety of reading levels, interest, content areas, and cultures, they are one of the most powerful tools for meeting the needs of a variety of students with special learning.”**

—*Vandergrift, 2001; Hart-Hewins, 1999; Flippo, 1999*

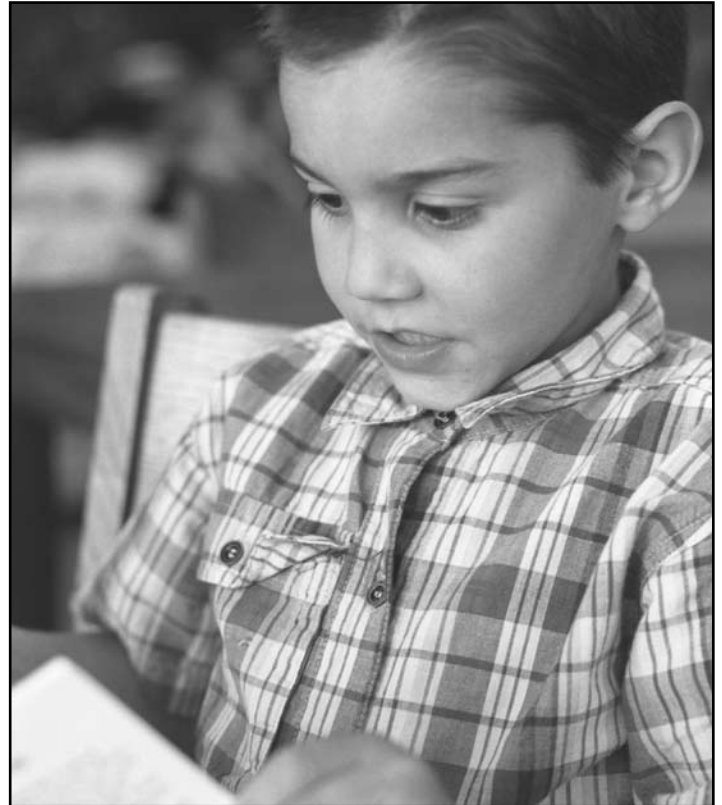
Even though highly motivated, some students need additional support to help them succeed in school. Students learn at different rates, using many learning styles, and with varying degrees of ability, confidence, and self-efficacy.

Thames and Reeves-Kazelskis (1992) found using trade books increased poor readers’ interests and reading attitudes significantly. Trade books were also extremely beneficial in promoting reading achievement among students who are sometimes labeled reluctant or slow readers (Krashen, 1989; Morrow, 1992; Ortiz, 1986).

Trade books play a major role in helping second language learners become skilled and fluent readers and speakers of English (Laumbach, 1995; Elley, 1991). Trade books not only teach children English but also reinforce newly learned English words, which occur frequently in print and oral language. Trade books are also embedded with cultural information and exhibit a natural flow of language, which is less common in most basal readers. Elley (1991) states, “...those children who are exposed to an extensive range of high-interest illustrated story books and encouraged to read and share them are consistently found to learn the target language more quickly.” Mangubhai and Elley (1982) asserted, “The provision of a rich supply of high-interest storybooks is a much more feasible policy for improving English learning than any pious pronouncements about the urgent need to raise teacher quality.”

In a study of using trade books in a literature-based reading program, Morrow (1992) found minority children from a variety of backgrounds experienced increases in achievement, voluntary reading, and attitudes. Trade book reading coupled with traditional basal reading programs produced much more robust reading achievement and reading attitudes among minority children than did traditional basal instruction alone.

The research is clear. As Krashen (1989) points out, books are an essential element and most powerful incentive for reading. For non-English speaking students and others, Krashen concludes by saying, “We must build critically needed reading environments for all our learners—book by book.”



## Characteristics of an Effective Classroom Library

Recent research emphasizes the importance of the classroom library, particular in children’s literacy development. In one large-scale study (Neuman, 1999), classroom libraries with high-quality books were placed in over 350 schools to enhance the language and literacy environment of 18,000 economically disadvantaged children. Findings revealed that with books in close proximity to classroom activity:

- time spent reading increased by 60% compared to a control group
- literacy-related activities more than doubled, from an average of 4 interactions per hour to 8.5 interactions per hour
- letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, concepts of print and writing, and narrative competence rose 20% more than the control group after a year, followed by continued gains 6 months and 12 months later.

### Characteristics of a Literacy-Building Classroom Library

**Quality classroom libraries are not simply collections of children’s trade books located in the back corner of the room. There are certain characteristics and design features that strongly influence whether or not classroom libraries may be used to their full potential to improve children’s reading performance.**

- 300 to 600 books
- Wide range of reading difficulty
- Variety of genres
- New books with appealing covers
- Attractive, inviting setting
- Permanent “core” collection and regularly replenished “revolving” collection

# Characteristics of an Effective Classroom Library (continued)

## A Large Supply of Books

### Optimal Number of Books in a Classroom Library

- 300 to 600, depending on grade level and number of copies of each title

### Number of Books Teachers Should Expect Children to Read During the School Year

- 1st Grade/Picture Books: 100 to 125
- 2nd Grade and up/Chapter Books: 50 to 75

In order to attract and hold children's interests, classroom libraries must be stocked with many good books. According to the American Library Association (Hack, Hepler & Hickman, 2001), classroom libraries should include about 300 titles, single and multiple copies, as part of a permanent collection, with supplements from a well-stocked school library. The International Reading Association recommends that classroom libraries start with at least seven books per child and purchase two additional new books per child each year. The Maryland Reading Task Force of the Maryland State Department of Education (1998) recommends each elementary school provide a library media center containing a minimum of 20 titles per student. Each classroom collection should contain a minimum of 500 titles, which could be partially drawn from the library media center.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) recommend a collection of about 300 to 600 books, depending on the grade level and number of copies of each title. Their calculations estimate that teachers should expect first graders to read about 100 to 125 books during the school year, and older children, who are likely to read longer books, 50 to 75 books for the year.

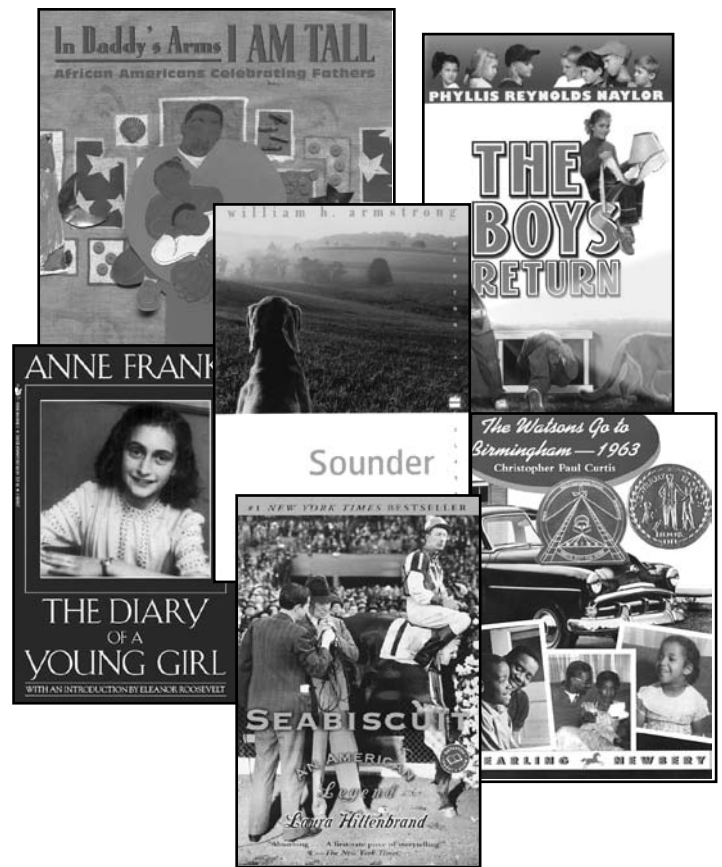
## A Wide Variety of Books Replenished Regularly

Children also need to be exposed to a range of language, topics, genres, and perspectives (McGee & Richgels, 1996). They need books that reflect the diverse, multicultural nature of our society, books where they can learn about themselves and others. The literature selection should include:

- **Traditional stories:** Familiar stories that are found in every culture, including fables, folk tales, myths, and legends
- **Fantasy:** Stories that contain characters who may have superhuman powers that spark children's imaginations
- **Realistic fiction:** Stories with characters, settings, and events that could plausibly happen in true life
- **Historical fiction:** Stories set in the past, accurately reflecting the time period in which they occur
- **Biographies and autobiographies:** Books about the lives of everyday or famous people
- **Information:** Books that provide realistic, accurate, and authentic information

## High Quality Books

To spark children's interest and enthusiasm about reading, books must catch children's attention, captivate their imaginations, and make them want to return to their pages again and again. Only high-quality books will achieve these goals (Neuman, 1999). Rather than some old tattered books from garage sales, books need to look physically attractive, with fresh covers and interesting, bright illustrations. Brand-new books should be added to replenish the classroom library on a regular basis.



## An Attractive Setting

Children are more likely to visit classroom libraries and actively participate in them when they are physically attractive. A number of design features have been identified (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986; Neuman & Roskos, 1992):

- **Partitions:** Bookshelves or other barriers on at least two sides help to set the library apart, giving children a sense of privacy and providing a quiet, cozy setting for reading.
- **Ample space:** There should be room to accommodate about four or five children at a time.
- **Comfortable furnishings:** Pillows, carpeting, bean bag chairs, plants, and flowers all help to create a comfortable atmosphere for reading.
- **Open-faced and traditional bookshelves:** Open-faced bookshelves display the covers of the books, and naturally attract children to the library; traditional bookshelves, carts, and baskets hold multiple copies of books for children to read to each other.
- **Literacy displays and props:** Book posters from the public library, an author's display, message center (for reviews of favorite books), listening corner, puppets, and flannelboards encourage children to use the library in many different ways—for quiet reflection and reading, reenactments of stories, and conveying messages to one another.

## Conclusion

When students have access to trade books, they read more. The more students read, the greater their reading achievement. They acquire a host of specific knowledge about reading processes, such as comprehension, concepts of print, letter knowledge, concept of story, and writing. In addition, reading widely supports students' overall growth and progress in academic learning and world knowledge. And this benefit holds for all learners. By simply

making high-interest materials available, struggling readers, economically disadvantaged students, and second-language learners can boost their reading ability and narrow the achievement and economic gap documented in the 2000 NAEP report. Access to books is the key ingredient to increasing students' reading achievement, motivation, and engagement.

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