English Learners and Reading Comprehension:
Text Organization in History

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Introduction

History is primarily a text-based discipline. To comprehend history texts and access content, English learners (ELs) and low-literacy students need English language support. History textual sources, both primary and secondary, are often dense, have multiple forms of text organization, and use complex noun phrases (or nominalizations). They are often challenging for all students to comprehend but especially for English learners. This, however, should not deter teachers from incorporating history texts as part of instruction. Teachers can increase students' reading comprehension and content knowledge by equipping themselves with a variety of reading strategies and analysis tools that support language development. Teacher modeling, guided practice of literacy strategies, pre-reading, annotations, asking questions of texts, explicit and in-context vocabulary activities, and carefully structured sentence and paragraph writing scaffolds are some examples of effective practices.

The California History-Social Science Project (CHSSP) has developed a number of reading strategies that help students examine history texts closely. In this article, we demonstrate one such reading comprehension strategy for text organization, or the structure of texts. In history, types of text organization include *cause and effect, chronology (series of events), compare and contrast*, and *argument/thesis*. Descriptions and definitions can also be found embedded in history texts. Text organization reading strategies also illustrate the distinct ways in which verbs, conjunctions, adjectives, and adverbs are employed in history texts, which help students learn the functions of language to construct meaning (Schleppegrell, 2004). This disciplinary skill is important to learning both history and the English language.

The Importance of Content Literacy

Providing English learners the means to learn history content with English language development strategies is supported by current research. There is a growing consensus among policymakers and education specialists that content literacy is criti-

cal to English language development (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010; August & Shanahan eds., 2006; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Shanahan et al., 2008). Rather than segregating English learners for specialized training in English language proficiency that is divorced from the content areas, education researchers encourage teachers to modify classroom instruction to meet the needs of all learners (Goldenberg, 2008). To succeed academically, English learners must have access to mainstream instruction that integrates "language as a vehicle for learning academic content and learning about the world" (Olsen, 2010, p.19). The U.S. Department of Education's 2010 ESEA reauthorization proposal urged states to revise their English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards to align them with their content standards, thus ensuring "that the standards address the English skills students need to learn academic content" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010,

p.3). Moreover, the new Common Core State Standards (http://corestandards.org/) prioritizes an increased concentration on academic literacy in all the content areas.

Text Organization Instruction

Students trained in understanding how texts are organized have deeper reading comprehension. When students learn patterns of text organization, they learn language structures to analyze and connect information and a discipline's methodology for constructing arguments. As a result, students become better readers of history texts. They will be efficient and effective in identifying the main constructs of history texts – thesis, supporting evidence, and conclusions.

Students can be taught how to recognize organizational patterns by identifying the signal words

Organizational Pattern:	Signal Words:
Chronology, chain of events	*Action verbs*: *Signal words*: first, second, next, finally, subsequently, afterwards, until, previously, before, until, during

Cause and effect
    When _____, then
    _____
    If_____, then
    _____
	Mixed verbs: (led to), enabled, caused, made
	Signal words: thus, so that, since, therefore, then, consequently, as a result, due to, because of

Compare/contrast	*Mixed verbs*: (compared to) *Signal words*: on the other hand, however, although, similarly, as opposed to, not only, yet, besides
Debate/perspectives/message	*Saying, thinking, feeling verbs*: argued, believed, responded *Signal words*: however, also, furthermore, that, according to
Argument development: Thesis/evidence/analysis	*Mixed verbs*: due to, led to *Signal words:* although, for example, consequently, because
Descriptive/definitional	*Relating verbs*: to be, to have *Signal words*: contains, includes, consists of, also, for instance, furthermore, moreover

Figure 1. Expository Text Organizational Patterns Chart

that connect and build relationships between ideas and evidence. Low-literacy students and English learners will particularly benefit from recognizing how facts and evidence in historical narratives are organized. An ability to determine the organizational structure of history texts develops and extends historical thinking. For example, learning to recognize *cause and effect* patterns in texts helps students identify relationships between events, rather than seeing history as a string of disassociated events. Figure 1 is a useful tool for understanding the mechanics of the organizational patterns encountered in history texts. While not an exhaustive list, it provides examples of key signal words and verbs commonly used; teachers and students can add to it.

Selecting Text for Instruction

The CHSSP's approach to lesson design is inquiry-based and we strongly encourage teachers to use a historical investigation question to frame their lessons. We encourage the use of both primary and secondary sources as instructional materials in history lessons. Lessons are more engaging when they are organized around an historical investigation question. It is particularly effective for motivating students to seek and process information with a purpose in mind (VanSledright, 2002). Although analyzing primary sources is an active form of learning (sourcing, interpreting, corroborating), it is only successful if instruction is strategically planned (Barton, 2005). A text organization activity will provide students practice with disciplinary and language skills. It is an instructional approach that has students learning how to read, comprehend, and evaluate various types of texts that is deliberate, and, in the context of a historical investigation, has purpose.

Teachers should carefully select a text passage that is appropriate for the context of the lesson and for students' reading skills. Choosing a text passage for instruction can be challenging. Teachers should consider two important factors:

1) the language demands of the text; and 2) the content they want students to learn. First, history texts often employ more than one organizational pattern on a single page or passage. Even history textbooks, the instructional material commonly used in history-social science classrooms, are more complicated than they appear. Cynthia Shanahan of University of Illinois states, "The typical argument structure of expository texts is not explicitly represented in history textbooks either – the overarching structure is narrative and descriptive; the cause-effect arguments are embedded within this structure" (Shanahan, 2008). Given this, decoding the structure of a text is a critical first step towards understanding the main ideas of a text. Secondly, teachers should select sources that support their lesson's content goals. Since close examination of text is time consuming, each source's content should significantly add to students' understanding. What students learn from the source should explicitly aid them in answering the historical investigation question.

A Classroom Example

Teachers must have an instructional plan for how students will interact with the text passage once it is selected. Having students annotate text is a good practice to develop active readers. Students who highlight, underline, and take notes are processing information as they read. We provide an example in Figure 2. The text organization activity featured is from a teacher-created 8th grade lesson. The teachers utilized the reading strategy with a speech by Black Hawk as part of a multi-day lesson about the effects of Jacksonian Democracy on Native Americans (Gregory et al., 2011). The student objective was to identify and explain cause and effect relationships in *Black Hawk's Surrender Speech, 1832* (Figure 2). As presented in Figure 1, there are sentence structures and signal words consistent with cause and effect patterns of text organization. However, this is an example of an historical narrative that includes some cause-effect connections without

Black Hawk's Surrender Speech, 1832

Background: In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act and Native Americans were resettled in the West. In 1832 a band of Sauk and Fox Indians tried to reoccupy the lands they had once held in the Illinois and Wisconsin territories. The attempt failed and Chief Black Hawk was forced to surrender. The following is an excerpt of his surrender speech.

You have taken me prisoner with all my warriors. I am much grieved, for I expected, if I did not defeat you, to hold out much longer, and give you more trouble before I surrendered. ... When I saw that I could not beat you by Indian fighting, I determined to rush on you, and fight you face to face. I fought hard. But your guns were well aimed. The bullets flew like birds in the air, and whizzed by our ears like the wind through the trees in the winter. My warriors fell around me; it began to look dismal. I saw my evil day at hand. The sun rose dim on us in the morning, and at night it sunk in a dark cloud, and looked like a ball of fire. That was the last sun that shone on Black Hawk. His heart is dead, and no longer beats quick in his bosom.... He has been taken prisoner, and his plans are stopped. He can do no more. He is near his end. His sun is setting, and he will rise no more. Farewell to Black Hawk.

-Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Chapter Resource File, *The Age of Jackson*, 12-13

Figure 2. Black Hawk's Surrender Speech (Teacher Key)

these markers. Primary sources often lack these signal words. *Black Hawk's Surrender Speech, 1832* also contains a large amount of metaphorical language and switches between first and third person pronouns. This makes it especially difficult for English learners to follow.

This activity focuses on cause and effect relationships in Black Hawk's speech to help students deconstruct Black Hawk's metaphorical language and derive meaning from it. First, the class reads the passage aloud to find and clarify any confusing or unknown words. The students then reread the passage to look for cause and effect patterns based upon the text structure and language cues. To make their critical thinking transparent, the teacher asks the students to annotate and mark the text. Students are to underline and label with a C, phrases they identify as *causes*. Students mark the *effect* phrases with an E and should highlight

any signal words. The arrows identify the cause and effect relationships (see Figure 2). Through a close examination of Black Hawk's use of cause and effect statements, students learn his perspective on the direct and indirect consequences of European military dominance.

Creating a Graphic Organizer

A graphic organizer that summarizes the student's text annotation is a powerful tool to help them make more connections and deepen their understanding of the content. Figure 3 is a teacher key of a note-taking tool that has students explicitly organize their annotations into cause and effect categories. We recommend that teachers create an answer key for all activities and writing assignments. Keys are useful conceptual roadmaps for the activity (and the lesson) and by completing the student work in advance, teachers can pre-

view whether the activity has sufficient language support, builds content knowledge, and answers the historical investigation question. In creating a key for a graphic organizer for text organization, the teacher can decide, based upon student readiness, on how much information to model and which parts of the graphic organizer the students will do independently. For example, teachers may complete part of a graphic organizer for the students and leave key ideas for students to determine independently. In Figure 3, the teacher left the italicized sections blank for students to complete. The annotations from the text excerpt (underlining, labeling, and arrows) will help students complete the cause and effect chart. Finally, graphic organizers should include a content and language question to ensure that students understand essential concepts and language patterns. Teachers may design sentence starters to assist English learners in answering the content question.

Cause	Effect
You have taken me prisoner with all my warriors	I am much grieved
for I expected, if I did not defeat you, to hold out much longer, and give you more trouble before I surrendered	I am much grieved
When I saw that I could not beat you by Indian fighting	*I determined to rush on you, and fight you face to face. I fought hard.*
But your guns were well aimed. The bullets flew like birds in the air, and whizzed by our ears like the wind through the trees in the winter.	My warriors fell around me; it began to look dismal.
I saw my evil day at hand. The sun rose dim on us in the morning, and at night it sunk in a dark cloud, and looked like a ball of fire.	That was the last sun that shone on Black Hawk. His heart is dead, and no longer beats quick in his bosom.
He has been taken prisoner,	*and his plans are stopped.*
He can do no more. He is near his end.	*His sun is setting, and he will rise no more. Farewell to Black Hawk.*
Content Question: How does Black Hawk feel about his defeat by the militia? *He feels as though he has died because they have lost their land, the right to live on it, and their culture.*	

Figure 3. Black Hawk Surrender Speech Graphic Organizer (Teacher Key)

Student Response Paragraph

In our example lesson, teachers concluded the cause-effect text organization strategy by asking students to write a response paragraph to check for understanding. Students responded to the content question: *How does Black Hawk feel about his defeat by the militia?* The following example of a student's response paragraph (Figure 4) shows how the teachers used sentence starters to aid students in evaluating cause and effect relationships. The scaffolded paragraph provides narrative structure: for the thesis, supporting evidence, and conclusion. The sentence starters are practical language supports that assist students in the cognitive task selecting the appropriate evidence within the proper context. Sentence starters can be removed depending on student readiness.

Figure 4. Student Work Sample

The student was able to mine this challenging piece of text for meaning, including the metaphors and pronoun use, and express the meaning in his/her own words. This explicit strategy serves as a model for students on how to deconstruct textual passages for meaning, make conclusions by answering the content question, and use evidence to support their argument in a written response paragraph or essay.

Conclusion

Cynthia Shanahan argues that when students are explicitly taught to recognize organizational patterns in texts, their comprehension of the text and their ability to write accurate summaries improve, even when their prior knowledge of the subject is low or the text is particularly difficult (Shanahan, 2008). The CHSSP advocates using text organization reading strategies with all students, with varying scaffolds based on the students' needs, especially for English learners. This strategy is highly effective with most written texts, including history textbooks. As students learn to recognize the patterns of expository discourse, they become better able to comprehend text on their own. When students learn how signal words and verbs organize evidence, they develop strategies to understand ways historians connect evidence in an historical narrative. Reading strategies allow teachers to address barriers to students' comprehension such as challenging text with unfamiliar and discipline-specific vocabulary, metaphors, complex ideas, and arguments.

Coupled with writing a response paragraph to the content question, this strategy enables all students, especially English learners, to have access to rigorous historical texts and to develop their ability to write in these same expository text patterns.

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