

Text Analysis and Critique

The written language of content instruction can be challenging for English Language Learners (ELLs), as they have limited background knowledge of the United States, cultural differences, difficulty learning from textbooks, as well as difficulty learning from lectures (Reiss, 2005). As an educator, it is essential to understand that when teaching ELLs, content instruction simultaneously becomes English language instruction.

The book, *Samuel Morse, That's Who!: The Story of the Telegraph and Morse Code* by Tracy Nelson Maurer, is a content-area text used in classrooms to meet the cognitive, academic, and linguistic demands of students. In the 1800s, information travelled slowly around the world. Who could possibly visualize a world with instant messaging? Samuel Morse, that's who! Samuel attempted to create other inventions at first, such as water pumps and marble-cutting machines. However, none of his inventions succeeded. His aspiration was to become a historical scene painter, however, his paintings received minimal attention. During Samuel's trip to Europe in 1829, he was captivated by the optical telegraph system. His captivation sparked a new idea, which was to create a system utilizing elective pulses to instantly transfer coded messages from one machine to another, regardless of the location, weather, date, or time. Samuel shared his brilliant idea with two friends, Leonard Gale and Alfred Vail, both of whom were eager to contribute. After much failure, the men encountered success through the creation of telegraph lines connecting Baltimore and Washington D.C. In due time, telegraph lines were constructed from coast to coast due to Samuel's brilliant idea. *Samuel Morse, That's Who!* provides students, K-2, the opportunity to engage in social studies content, while engaging in the English language. The purpose of this literature is to conduct a linguistic analysis of *Samuel Morse, That's Who!* to

determine the challenges ELLs may encounter. The components of linguistic analysis include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

Phonological awareness is the catalyst for phonemic awareness. Phonology is the way in which language is organized, while phonetics refers to hearing, identifying, and manipulating sounds (Herrera, 2015). Educating students on phonology consist of promoting sight words, identifying names and sounds of letters, utilizing structural analysis skills, and repetition of sight words (Herrera, 2015). The word choice selected by the author provided the reader with a vivid sensual appeal. This can be discovered at several points in the book. For example, “He experimented with wild paint mixes, too—milk for a pearly effect, glazes for glossy finishes...” Vocabulary, such as *folks*, *dabbled*, *tromping*, and *boorish*, are challenging for all students. In order to facilitate learning, academic language must be slightly advanced (Rogers, 2018). However, the listed vocabulary is outside the knowledge base of ELLs. Such complex vocabulary for students must be taught prior to the content-based lesson to increase student comprehension. Additionally, many individuals have the misconception that it is beneficial to simplify academic vocabulary for ELLs. However, this is false. Rather, it is imperative to amplify academic vocabulary. For example, one word located in the text is “cry.” During small group activities, educators should work closely with ELLs. For example, on a Home Depot painter’s card, the cards that contain four shades of the same primary color, write the word *cry* on the lightest shade. Then, directly below the word *cry*, write *weep*. Below *weep*, write *sob*. Lastly, in the darkest shade of the paint card, write the word *bawl*. Amplifying academic vocabulary in texts allows students to learn four new words, as well as the relationship between words.

Furthermore, a learner's comprehension is enhanced once they acquire, to some degree, familiarity of the content. Many students, including ELLs, may encounter confusion while reading the following line from the book, "Painting grand scenes—Hercules dying, Bible stories, historic battles." Cultural differences may preclude ELLs from understanding the context of the sentence. Students come from diverse cultures with different beliefs and traditions. Keeping this in mind, ELLs may not be knowledgeable on such topics, such as Greek mythology or religion, which may impede their comprehension.

Semantics is the study of word meaning, while pragmatics is the study of meaning according to context. Throughout the book, semantics governed the author's writing. No part of the text included a pragmatic phrase. The same phrase, "Samuel Morse, that's who," was repeated many times to emphasize the importance of the inventor's name. Repetition of academic vocabulary and phrases is beneficial, as it enhances student's memory retention (Echevarria, 2017). Alliteration can be located at several points throughout the text, for example, "... tromping from town to town..." and "Success always seemed one step ahead for Samuel." The academic language is quite challenging, as it is content specific. Content specific terms include *Morse Code*, *inventions*, *telegraph*, and *French Optical Telegraph System*. ELLs are at a disadvantage due to their limited background knowledge of the history of the United States. Prior to reading, the educators must focus on building background knowledge and pre-teaching vocabulary, in order for students to properly comprehend the literature.

The illustrations were carefully drawn to correspond to the events in the story. For example, when Samuel saw the "...famous French optical telegraph system," the page had a detailed illustration of the French telegraph system. Illustrations are beneficial for all students, especially ELLs, as visuals can be understood universally (Richards, 2018). Additionally, the

maps in the book effectively enhanced the student's comprehension. For example, toward the end of the book, a map displayed the seven continents. The illustrator labeled New York in North America, as well as Paris and Berlin in Europe. Labeling these locations attracts the reader's attention toward the geographic area where Samuel's invention was inspired and created. The events of the book were organized chronologically, which is the easiest format for students to follow. The book began when Samuel was a young child, which was when "news wasn't usually new by the time folks heard it." The book followed Samuel's journey, from traveling to Europe, to become a painter, to traveling back home, and planning a way to create instant messages. At the end of the book, the illustrator included a timeline to provide a visual for the reader of the chronological events. Such a visual promotes the student's comprehension of the text.

Morphology is the study of the smallest, meaningful unit of language and how it is used to build new words (Kieffer, 2008). The author included a variety of simple morphemes, specifically bound morphemes. The author incorporated words mainly with suffixes, such as *travelled*, *painted*, *usually*, *greatest*, etc. Teaching students prefixes and suffixes is essential in ENL instruction. An awareness of morphology, prefixes and suffixes, contributes to a student's vocabulary knowledge. Basic knowledge of prefixes and suffixes leads to an increase in the student's ability to use context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words (Richards, 2018). In order to build metalinguistic awareness, the educator can create an anchor chart labelled with the following columns: prefix, root word, suffix, new word, and meaning. During the read aloud, students can write newly encountered words on the chart.

Upon careful analysis, *Samuel Morse, That's Who!* is a challenging literature for ELLs. The vocabulary selected by the author provided the reader with a vivid sensual appeal. However, the vocabulary is quite challenging for ELLs. The literature included cultural phrases, in which

not all students may be familiar with. Cultural differences may preclude students, including ELLs, from comprehending the context. Content specific vocabulary were included in the literature, which is challenging for ELLs due to their limited background knowledge of the United States. The illustrations throughout the book corresponded to the events in the story. Visuals are beneficial for all students, especially ELLs, as visuals can be interpreted without language. The events were written in chronological order, which is ideal for all young learners, as well as ELLs. The author included simple morphemes, which enhance the learner's vocabulary and comprehension. *Samuel Morse, That's Who!* is an informative content-specific book, however, educators must diligently plan instruction to enhance the understanding of ELLs.

References

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