

# Lingua Anglia: Bridging Language and Learners

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## What's the Point? Using Relevance Instructions to Support Comprehension

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If we asked you to share your prior experiences of the ancient Greek world, what would you say? If we asked you to share your prior experiences of friendship and trust, what would you say? Both of these questions might have merit for teachers preparing learners to encounter the ancient Greek legend of *Damon and Pythias*. However, the relevance of the questions designed to activate prior knowledge depends upon our learning goals (McCrudden and Schraw). This column explores the importance of *relevance instructions* when preparing students to read text. Teachers' instructions set goals for readers, and these goals help readers "allocate resources" that "focus on relevant text elements" (McCrudden and Schraw 114). Preparing English learners, indeed all students, to encounter a text in meaningful ways through relevance instructions can support

comprehension and invite their prior knowledge into the classroom in significant ways.

When working with teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in an urban school, Kathleen noticed that the selection of *Damon and Pythias* was frequently skipped by teachers who explained that many students, especially English learners, encountered difficulty connecting with the story. Specifically, many students did not understand the setting (4th-century BCE). Kathleen saw that despite her efforts and the efforts of her colleagues to prepare students by teaching them about the power structure during this period in the ancient Greek world, students were still unable to relate to the text.

Kathleen considered *Damon and Pythias*, which tells the story of two friends. When Pythias is accused of a crime by the ruling tyrant and sentenced to death, he begs for a chance to return home and say good-bye to his family. To allow Pythias this final visit, Damon offers to take his place, knowing he will be executed if Pythias fails to return by a certain date. On the day Damon is to die in place of his friend, Pythias returns. Out of respect and awe for their deep friendship, the ruler decides to let them both live.

Given the strong theme of friendship in the text, Kathleen decided to change her instructional approach. Instead of focusing her students' attention on prior knowledge they had not yet developed, she shifted her prereading discussion to access knowledge they all had: prior knowledge of the most important aspect of this story—human relationships. Kathleen initiated the lesson with a discussion of sacrifice.

She asked, "What are you willing to sacrifice for your best friend or someone in your family?" After a brief discussion, she prompted students to focus attention on the heart of the story: "As you read this story, find out what one man is willing to sacrifice for his dear friend." The rich and lively discussion that transpired after students read the story shifted Kathleen's views about tackling complicated content. By making friendship the most relevant aspect of the legend in preparing students to read, Kathleen designed instruction that played to students' strengths and served as a scaffold in their interaction with the challenging content of a complex text. Furthermore, their comprehension of the bond between Damon and Pythias then served as a foundation upon which they could build

knowledge about and engage with the other instructional opportunities offered by the text, including the ancient Greek setting.

## Relevance Instructions in Supporting Comprehension

As students advance in grade levels, the complexity of text intensifies. Planning instruction around challenging reading material is multifaceted, particularly when addressing the learning needs of diverse students who bring a range of backgrounds and experiences to the classroom. Although teachers may not recognize this, English learners bring rich funds of knowledge to the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez). It is our job as teachers to connect new learning to that knowledge. One way of doing this is through relevance instructions. Research on why students experience difficulties with comprehension points to two main reasons: (1) students' prior knowledge does not explicitly match the content being addressed and (2) students are not aware of the connection between their prior knowledge and the content being taught, and therefore have not been supported in explicitly activating available prior knowledge (Bransford).

## Supporting All Readers: Relevance Instructions

Teachers often provide instructions that guide readers to identify segments of text that connect to the reading goals (McCrudden and Schraw). These instructions establish relevance and have powerful ramifications on readers' comprehension, influencing

and guiding readers' attention and understanding. In an early study (Pichert and Anderson), researchers manipulated relevance by asking college students to read the same short, simple text. After reading text from the perspective of either a burglar or a home buyer, the students rated segments of text for importance and then recalled information a week after reading the text. For instance, students who read the text from a burglar's perspective rated the famous paintings in the house as more important than the leaky roof; those reading from the home buyer's perspective found the leaky roof an important idea. Moreover, they recalled the ideas deemed important one week later. The researchers concluded that readers determine information that connects to their goals (burglar or home buyer) as most important, and they have greater retention of this goal-directed information. Overall, readers search for relevant information and then construct meaning of aspects of text that meet their reading goals.

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There are different types of relevance instructions that produce different outcomes. *Specific instructions* guide readers to attend to specific information or terms. For instance, teachers might ask students to elaborate on why the ruler allowed both Damon and Pythias to live. This question focuses attention on a specific aspect of the story. *General instruc-*

*tions* guide readers to use a certain perspective or adopt a purpose for reading (e.g., entertainment or study). When reading literary text, general instructions that guide readers to view stories from the perspective of the protagonist inevitably support all readers (McCrudden and Schraw). Hence, Kathleen's prereading discussion and instructions focused students' attention on what one man was willing to sacrifice for his friend.

Teachers control the "relevance effect" (McCrudden and Schraw 115); that is, teachers influence learning by establishing reading goals and directing the attention of their students. Since effective readers establish meaningful goals to understand the text (McCrudden and Schraw), it is *critical* for teachers to recognize when these prereading activities divert readers' attention from the story's meaning. When Kathleen focused on the unfamiliar ancient setting in preparing her students for *Damon and Pythias*, her well-intentioned activity inadvertently guided her students to focus on elements at odds with her instructional goals. Both her insufficient support of students' prior knowledge about ancient Greece and her failure to prompt students toward the relevant elements of the story led to difficulties in text comprehension.

## Instructional Practices: Relevance and Beyond

Given what we know about the importance of relevance in supporting the comprehension skills of all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse students, what can we do as teach-

ers to use it effectively in our classrooms?


**Generate interest.** When teachers focus students' attention on human relationships and activate an affective reaction, the teacher creates situational interest in the story (Hidi and Renninger). For instance, teachers can select an enticing character trait, an interesting motive, or a hostile relationship and then generate discussion about this meaningful aspect, without giving away the entire story plot. It is critical that teachers provide just enough to stimulate discussion and interest. In time, students will learn to follow the character anytime the plot thickens or the content becomes challenging.

**Develop vocabulary.** The students' relationship with the protagonist provides an opportunity to enhance students' vocabulary. The protagonist's character traits, emotions, and motives allow for lasting language development that is cohesive and interrelated. For example, when discussing the willingness to *sacrifice* for a friend, as with the legend of *Damon and*

*Pythias*, new words such as *devotion*, *dedication*, *trust*, *faithfulness*, and others can be included in discussions or other language development activities.

**Develop knowledge of the setting.** The relationship that readers develop with the protagonist is an ideal opportunity to learn more about the setting of the story. The teacher can maximize this opportunity to utilize students' interest in Damon and Pythias to learn a bit more about the ancient Greek world. In other words, *students' understanding of the friendship in the story can now serve as an anchor for learning about new content*.

In conclusion, complex text offers a gateway to rich and meaningful learning opportunities. Identifying what is relevant to students' lives and goals as readers in the text in turn serves as a gateway to understanding and acquiring new knowledge. As teachers, we have incredible opportunities to foster relationships between all of our students and the texts and protagonists they encounter in our classrooms. By explicitly

facilitating English learners, and all students, in identifying what is relevant to them as readers, we are creating a space for them to grow in their ability to comprehend text and to engage with increasingly complex texts. 

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