

Making Nonfiction Informational Text Comprehensible for ELLs

by Jo Ann Miles, edited by Debra Calluzzo

This article explores the challenges that ESL teachers face when designing and implementing nonfiction informational text lessons for English language learners (ELLs). The Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) require that all educators be teachers of all four of the English language subsystems (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and instruct across the content-area curriculum. This paper provides a model for adapting and creating materials targeted to meet the various language levels and academic needs of the ELLs.

The creation of a nonfiction informational unit of study requires specific components that include a series of interrelated lessons in language arts, the content areas, and the arts. In a unit of study on the *Arctic Snow Fox* (which I wrote two years ago for my students), lessons are tiered to meet the new language performance levels: Entering, Emerging, Transitioning (Figure 1), Expanding, and Commanding. Although the following unit was designed for students in Grade 2 who are currently designated as Intermediate- and Advanced-level language learners, it could readily be adapted for primary levels (K and 1) or elementary levels (3 through 5). As the *Arctic Snow Fox* is a nonfiction informational text, academic language will be made comprehensible for ELLs through a series of interrelated lessons that feature repetitive language through words, phrases, and sentences.

Each day's lesson features a different New York State literacy standard: a grammar structure, phonics, academic language (Tiers One and Two), comprehension citing text evidence, writing both constructive and extended responses, and study skills.

The initial lesson is a teacher-led picture walk in a narrative style that uses visuals and realia that represent the story characters, e.g., "Once there was an arctic snow fox that was hungry and went for a walk on a cold winter day . . ." The purposes of this narrative walk are to: (a) provide schema for English language learners, (b) to develop listening skills for note taking and oral retelling; and (c) make a connection between fiction text and nonfiction informational text. This transitions into a nonfiction retelling that uses facts and details. A question is posed, such as, "Did you know that the arctic snow fox lives in a frigid, frozen environment?" The use of an interrogative is deliberate because it engages the students and prompts them to think in an expository style. Realia is introduced to generate an oral language discussion that focuses on grammatical features. For example, the teacher holds up the replica of an arctic fox and asks "What does an arctic fox *have*?" A student might respond with "A arctic fox have feets." This response prompts the ESL teacher to have a mini lesson about articles, singular and plural noun verb agreement, and irregular plural nouns.

The second lesson requires the students to discern the important ideas in the story. For example, the teacher retells the story, stopping between each paragraph to elicit from the students what the central ideas were. As the students generate the ideas, the teacher writes them on the board and the students, in turn, write them on lined paper (Figure 2). This writing exercise segues into an oral language activity as the students are asked to take the phrases and shape them into complete sentences.

In the third lesson, the students mark up the story by paragraphs, circling punctuation as they read from left to right. This exercise allows for repeated contacts with language, a silent and quick reread to develop fluency, and preparation for middle-grade “skimming and scanning.” The students then read the story aloud, as it has been targeted for their language level.

The fourth lesson calls for a close reading requiring the students to answer literal and inferential questions using paragraph reference, and also to define vocabulary. In order to develop academic language and use of adjectives, the students do scientific diagramming and labeling of the arctic fox’s body parts. This exercise is a precursor to writing and functions in the same way as a graphic organizer.

Grammar is the purpose of the fifth lesson. Using nouns directly from the text, the students are required to change irregular nouns from singular to plural and cite the grammar rule (Figures 3 and 4). They are also required to write a complete sentence using that noun and varying its format: statement, interrogative, and exclamatory.

The sixth lesson concerns phonics. Using words directly from the text, the students are required to identify digraphs, blends, and suffix *s* endings.

In the final phase, expository writing skills are developed. To guide the students in writing their essays, an initial activity calls for them to write three facts (Honigsfeld, 2013) in the following categories: Habitat, Physical Characteristics, and Food Source. The next prewriting activity requires the students to organize their ideas by paragraph. Finally, the students compose a full-length essay, accompanied by an illustration (Figures 5 and 6).

The arts are included throughout the entire unit of study. Every activity allows the students to draw a visual representation of a particular aspect of the story—for example, “Draw a snow fox with furry feet walking on the ice and hunting a snow hare.”

This model can be used in any curriculum area to meet the needs of English language learners in accordance with the CCLS for reading informational texts.

References

Honigsfeld, A. (2013). Sheltered Instruction for K-5 Teachers. Workshop presented at Port Washington, NY. Port Washington Union Free School District, November 26, 2013.

Jo Ann Miles is an ESL teacher at John Philip Sousa Elementary School, Port Washington. She has also taught graduate level courses for ESL educators at Stony Brook University, Long Island University, and the Port Washington Teacher Center. She holds M.A. degrees in both TESOL and English. <jmiles@portnet.org>


Debra Calluzzo is a reading teacher at John Philip Sousa Elementary School, Port Washington, She holds an M.A. in remedial reading and certification in Reading Recovery®.

Figure 1

Figure 1. Standard RI.2.10

Transitioning - Intermediate

The Arctic Snow Fox



What is it like in the Arctic? It is very frigid (frigid = cold) cold. There is lots of wind. The land is flat with snow and ice. There are big hills too. The trees do not have leaves. They are called bare (bare = without) trees. There are bushes with berries.

The Arctic Snow Fox lives in this frigid habitat. (habitat = home) It sits on top of the snow. It is hard to see the snow fox because its fur is the same color as the snow. When an animal is the same color as its background, it is called camouflage. Camouflage helps to protect an animal from its enemies. (enemies = not friends) The Snow Fox is white and the snow is too.

The snow fox does not mind the cold. It has fur to keep it warm. It has an oval shape body to keep it warm. It has fur on its feet.

The Snow Fox goes for a winter walk. It can trot (trot = run) fast on the ice and snow. It makes tracks (tracks = footprints) as it trots on the snow. It is hungry and looks around for food or prey (prey = animal hunted by another animal) to eat.

The Snow Fox sits on its back legs and sniffs (sniffs = smells) the cold air with its snout (snout = nose). It is looking for food. The Snow Fox likes to eat both plants and animals. An animal that eats both plants and animals is called an omnivore. It uses its fangs (fangs = teeth) to eat prey.

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Figure 2. Standards SL.2.2 and W.2.8









Name Britney Date _____

My Listening Notes


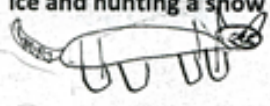
1. Arctic Windy Cold + frigid
2. Snowy, Ice, mountains
3. Camouflage = Snow fox + Snow
4. are both white
5. oval body keeps snow fox warm
6. thick fur keeps it warm
7. fur on feet helps it walk on
8. on ice + on snow
9. Omnivore = eats plants + animals
10. Snow fox hunts snow hares
11. mice, berries, snow geese,
12. reindeer Keen eyesight,
13. Smelling + hearing

Figure 3. Standard L.2.1b

Name Lee Date 3/24/18
Directions: Change these words from the singular to the plural. Write the grammar rule.

| | | |
|---------------|------------------------|---|
| 1. snow fox | <u>snow foxes</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>Adds</u> | |
| 2. bush | <u>bushes</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>adds</u> | |
| 3. berry | <u>berries</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>change y to ies</u> | |
| 4. foot | <u>feet</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>changes</u> | |
| 5. mouse | <u>mice</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>changes</u> | |
| 6. reindeer | <u>reindeer</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>stays the same</u> | |
| 7. snow goose | <u>snow geese</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>changes</u> | |
| 8. scarf | <u>scarves</u> |  |
| Rule: | <u>changes</u> | |

Draw a snow fox with furry feet walking on the ice and hunting a snow hare.



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Figure 4-Standard W.2.8

Directions: Read each word. Write 1 or 2+ next to the word. Then write these kinds of sentences: . ? !

1. snow foxes snow foxes live in the Arctic. ✓

? 2. berries Where do snow Foxes find berries? ✓


! 3. reindeer Reindeer are too strong to catch a snow foxes for a snow fox to catch. ✓

4. snow goose Snow Foxes ^{like to} hunt snow geese. ✓

? 5. feet ^{Why do} Snow Foxes have furry feet with pads? ✓

! 6. scarf A snow Fox can use his busy tail as a scarf. ✓


Draw a flock of snow geese flying over the arctic.



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Figure 5-Standard-W.2.2

Name Britney Date 4/13/15

X Snow Fox 

X I want to tell you about
the snow fox.

X The snow fox lives in the
Arctic. It is frigid and snowy.
There are big gusts of wind.
There is ice.

X The snow fox has white fur.
They have keen eyesight.
They have a bushy tail and
it has fur on its feet.

X The snow fox digs and
punches the snow and gets the
ermite. The snow fox hunts for
snow bunnies, snow geese and snow
reindeer. When it wants a snow
goose it jumps up in the air.
When it goes to sleep it wraps
its tail like a scarf.

X Thank you for reading about
the snow fox.

Standard W.2.2

Figure 6 –Standard W.2.7

