

# TENSIONS IN TEXT SELECTION:

## How English Teachers Balance Text Selection When Working With Emergent Bilinguals

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**Abstract:** The authors examined secondary English teachers' values and beliefs about text selection (canonical versus modern and young adults) when working with emergent bilinguals. Findings showed that the tensions teachers identified were focused on whose literacy actions the teachers wanted to prioritize in the classroom: those of the students or those of the authors. Teachers who wanted to prioritize students' literacy actions were concerned with what they lost by not having shared novels. Teachers who prioritized the authors' literacy actions were also conflicted about text selections but primarily wanted to support students' engagement with canonical texts. While the dichotomy has been set up to be between canonical and noncanonical texts, perhaps teachers can

focus on the difference between student and author/text-directed literacy acts and how those acts are being enacted in the classroom (individually or collectively).

*Keywords:* emergent bilinguals, canonical texts, young adult texts, teacher decision making, culturally sustaining pedagogy

In order to better serve the increasingly emergent bilinguals (EBs), many teachers, administrators, and districts have chosen to move away from the canon (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). In this research, we define the literary canon as texts in the western tradition that have been selected as representative samples of quality literature. Traditional English classroom text selections have been harmful to students who are not represented in the canonical texts. They have left classes thinking that their lives and their stories do not matter enough to be represented and cared about in the context of the classroom. Additionally, it has been harmful to the students who do not engage with the texts of the canon. Those students are missing the opportunity to learn and develop their literacy skills.

As this move has become more common, the reasoning behind those choices needs to be considered again and again to ensure that each individual professional understands the affordances and constraints associated with what texts are taught in the classroom. This article seeks to investigate the tensions and reasoning behind the choices teachers make with regards to incorporating canonical and noncanonical texts in their classrooms through the following research questions: 1) What are the tensions in selecting reading material for the high school English classroom? and 2) How do teachers balance/address the tensions involved in selecting reading material for the high school English classroom?

## Literature Review

Determining the texts students will read has become “an ongoing debate, complex and radical, in the sense that it gets to the roots of the question of what cultural discourse will be privileged in our schools, who will benefit from access to that discourse, and who will be excluded” (Fairbrother, 2000, pp. 2-3). Teachers who want to teach the canon want students to be culturally literate, but the idea is to become culturally literate in the dominant culture, which the students may or may not want to engage in (Fairbrother, 2000; Hirsch, 1983; Yosso, 2005).

While the canon is traditional, it has also been found to narrow the reading experiences if that is all one reads (Aston, 2018). The canon has been stable for several decades, and “canonicity” is likely to elude nonwhite authors and women; they will continue to be at the margins of a culture that is legitimized by its place in the school” (Applebee, 1992, p. 32).

Research has found that teachers are not frequently discouraged from using young adult literature by colleagues or administrators, but that they believe there is less time for novels due to state testing concerns and preparation (Smith et al., 2018). Additionally, Advanced Placement teachers reported that they needed to use texts that are more complex and have higher Lexile levels due to the requirements of those courses (Smith et al., 2018). Through speaking with students and parents, Wolk (2010) surmised that “when looking at what students are required to read in school in 2010, it might as well be 1960” (p. 9).

## Theoretical Framework

It is important to ensure that we take an asset-based stance with research concerning EBs. Such approaches focus on the strengths of our diverse students, rather than focusing on the perceived shortcomings in a system not created for them. In an effort to extend on asset pedagogies such as culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Paris (2012) has advanced culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP). CSP “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). This includes the text choices and the language practices that teachers support in the ELA classroom. CSP requires that we understand that the acts of measuring ourselves and the young people in our communities against White middle-class norms of knowing and being, continue to dominate the notions of educational achievement (Alim & Paris, 2017). Understanding the structure of society and dominant cultures shifts the normal deficit view of EBs to an analysis of teacher choices within this structure.

Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) is the understanding that knowledge is built through one’s interactions with others in the present moment and that prior knowledge is built through the previous interactions. This means that an individual’s understanding of a concept is based on both their prior experiences and the interactions they have with others about that concept. For the present study, this is important to consider because the data was collected from ELA teachers while they were engaged in coursework that was reshaping their thinking about their classrooms. Additionally, much of the data this study examined came from discussion board posts in which the participants were reading comments from their peers and responding to those comments.

Learning often happens through the interactions between students and

teachers, and those interactions are based in specific cultural situations that both confine and define the interactions in multiple ways. Additionally, other interactions also influence the interaction between teachers and students, which are also culturally situated. According to Vygotsky (1978), social and cultural values, beliefs, and understandings are all developed and shown through interactions between individuals, directly influencing an individual’s current and future understandings. The society and culture in which one is immersed influences how we think and what we see as worth thinking about.

## Methodology

The current study was based on previously collected data from a federally funded grant that focused on all educators taking a vested interest in elevating the academic success of high school emergent bilinguals through a whole-school reform model. Since we were interested in teachers’ reasoning for text selections for their English courses, we selected the five English teachers involved in the grant and bound the case at the district level. Participants were from two of four high schools in a suburban school district in north Texas.

School Acacia had 2,015 students of which 49.4% were economically disadvantaged, 13.5% were English learners, 12.6% were African American, 38.6% were Hispanic, and 43% were White. Three of the participants were from school Acacia. Jack worked as a teacher of sheltered instruction for English and social studies, Chrissy taught pre-AP English I, and Janet taught sheltered English I and II.

The other two participants worked at school Bergenia. School Bergenia had 2,319 students of which 37.3% were economically disadvantaged, 3.4% were English learners, 30.3% were African American, 21.8% were Hispanic, and 42.4% were White. Sarah taught pre-AP English II, and Monica taught on-level English III.

As a part of the grant that the teachers were involved in, they took three graduate level courses focused on emergent bilinguals. With many of their other teaching colleagues, they also participated in a summer institute focused on teaching emergent bilinguals. Data came from their graduate-level coursework and included participants’ responses to class discussion boards and participants’ assignments from courses, including minilesson, research poster, theory into practice paper, second language acquisition paper, and cultural literacy autobiography paper.

Open coding was used to identify ideas found within the data (Saldaña, 2021). Axial coding was used to combine similar codes. The final codes were as follows: tension, canon/text, theory, actions, change, culture, student learning, and teacher values. From these codes, we formulated responses to the research questions that became the themes presented in the findings.

## Findings

Findings suggested that teachers felt numerous tensions in selecting reading materials for their classrooms, even as they felt strongly about their reasonings for those choices. Initial codes included: canon, text, teacher change, action, student learning, and teacher values. These codes were condensed and reframed as two themes. These themes are prioritizing students’ literacy actions and identities, and prioritizing authors’ literacy actions and identities.

### Prioritizing Students’ Literacy Actions and Identities

Some of the teachers maintained a clear focus on prioritizing the students’ literacy actions as they commented on the assignments



they had their students complete. Chrissy required students to read the same class text, but she differentiated their vocabulary work. In a discussion board response, she explained how she had students select their own vocabulary words:

I now have my Pre-AP students create their own personal dictionaries when reading novels. They also have to use the word correctly in a sentence and come up with two synonyms and antonyms for each word. It seems to be effective, and my students appreciate having the autonomy to create their own word list.

Chrissy's choice to have students self-select their words and creation of dictionaries highlighted her choice to prioritize student-directed literacy actions as compared to the teacher selecting the words for the whole class. By having students select their own words, she prioritized having students maintain an awareness of their vocabularies and to notice words that they did not know at a deep level. Students were then to add those words to their lists so that they could improve their personal vocabularies.

In their group minilesson plan, Janet, Jack, and Chrissy had students read articles and track their own thinking; the students were then asked to "express whether or not any of their opinions changed after going through the pros and cons of their chosen topic." The framing of this assignment showed the teachers' choice to focus on noncanonical texts because the teachers wanted students to read current events. While they also incorporated comprehension checks, the focus of the lesson was for students to track their thinking and how it changed while reading texts and talking with classmates. When reflecting on a lesson he created, Jack explained that the next time he did that lesson, "I would also include more opportunities for students to write

and organize their thoughts using charts or graphic organizers." This instructional change would help students visually track their thinking and increase their awareness of their metacognition. Whether or not they used canonical texts, each of these examples prioritized the students' literacy actions: creating their own dictionaries and using the words; evaluating evidence and explaining their opinion; and tracking their thinking with graphic organizers.

Several of the teachers prioritized students' literacy actions in their selection of texts. When she explained why she did not often use canonical texts in the classroom, Janet wrote, "I know the canon is important, but what does it matter if they're fake reading it anyways?" Janet spoke to her preference for student-directed literacy actions and said, "By telling students WHAT they must analyze or infer, we are just banking knowledge and not allowing true learning to happen." She believed that students must have much more rein to select their reading and to focus their own analysis than traditional canon-based classrooms typically allow students to do. Janet also wrote,

Using the readers/writers workshop...will help foster a curriculum that supports learners as individuals. Students are encouraged to apply skills learned in the classroom to the narration of their own stories, creating an atmosphere that encourages authenticity and individuality.

She emphasized the importance of students' individuality in their selection of the texts they read and engage with. Janet's instructional choices prioritized students' literacy actions because she believed that students would engage more in literacy activities and thinking than if she assigned canonical texts that she did not believe students would read.

Finally, the purpose of the students' literacy tasks was significant to the teachers. Jack and Janet both consistently pushed back against exclusively using canonical texts. Jack wrote, "I absolutely agree that authentic work is one of the most important things we can provide students. They need to see a purpose for it, and there needs to be an audience outside of just the teacher." Janet added on to this thread: "Our kids won't be kids forever, and if they can see hypothetical situations in literature and then relate it to the real world, it has a long-lasting impact on them." Both statements focus on the importance of students reading texts that they can apply to their lives and with which they can and will engage in literacy work. That was the priority of the teachers here: to make sure students engaged in literacy tasks with the texts they read. The teachers' unspoken avoidance of canonical texts was perhaps because they did not believe that their students would engage in enough of the literacy actions to reap academic and cognitive benefits from their work.

Some of the teachers showed that they greatly valued independent literacy acts while working with student-selected texts or canonical texts. Jack said he focused on the larger takeaways that he believed his students gained by reading modern texts, and those takeaways tended to be intensely personal. He said, "For many of our students, the literature they read in school is alien to them, representing neither their culture nor the inequalities that society imposes upon oppressed groups," and that, by reading modern texts, "They can see that their lives and their stories are worth telling and worth listening to." Jack did not see ways for students to connect in those same ways to the texts from the canon. Instead, he valued students' independent, personal responses and reflections on their lives.

Janet also emphasized the importance of independent literacy acts for the development of the individual students' literacy skills and identity. Janet said,

Using the readers/writers workshop...will help foster a curriculum that supports learners as individuals. Students are encouraged to apply skills learned in the classroom to the narration of their own stories, creating an atmosphere that encourages authenticity and individuality.

While this statement focused on the individual's literacy actions, she also explained that she wanted some balance between the individual and group literacy acts. She said, "I didn't use whole-class novels effectively this past year, trying to implement too much independent choice, but I believe an effective way to create conversations with students is a mixture of independent choice, book clubs, and whole-class novels." Her focus on student choice novels seemed to be something she believed was not mergeable with canonical texts. She did not speak to the idea of using canonical texts when attempting to balance independent and group literacy acts.

### **Prioritizing Authors' Literary Actions**

While some of the participants focused on students' literacy actions in relation to the text, other teachers tended to prioritize authors' literary actions and students' responses to that already completed work. Monica wrote about English class as "a study of literature," indicating the privileging of canonical texts. Chrissy and Sarah had begun to incorporate some student choice texts into their classrooms, primarily for independent reading time, and not necessarily for the work they were assigned. They spoke about the works they had students read and the analysis that they have students do in relation to those works.



Sarah wrote, "I want to make sure all my students are receiving a rigorous and challenging class with hopes of preparing them for the AP test, SAT, etc." She also wrote, "I teach English and still find that I can't [find] the time or a way to cover some of the fun activities we did at the [grant-funded summer training] simply because we have to find a way to align them with a Standard or a TEK and then, of course, the Learning Target must be posted too." The implication in both statements is that she believed that her Pre-AP English II course may not be compatible with culturally sustaining language practices like translanguaging. She may have conflicting beliefs about culturally sustaining pedagogies and standardized testing. She also wrote, "I have been trained to be a content area teacher. . . . [Students] come to me with hopefully years of great schooling under the belt and long-term memory of rules about grammar and literature terms and having read and remembered great works they've read over the years." In this explanation of her job and her students, there is no mention of students' active literacy work or engagement. She instead spoke about her students' literacy skills as based in memorization and engagement with canonical texts.

Chrissy also taught honors students. She wrote, "My principal trusts me to teach my students, and I teach novels that I feel engage kids," and "In my poetry unit, I am going to assign poetry about language and cultures." In both statements, Chrissy was in charge of selecting the texts, and she wrote primarily about the content of those texts. Therefore, she is prioritizing, analyzing, and thinking about the authors' literacy actions and not those of the students.

### **Discussion**

Because they know that representation (Applebee, 1992), engagement, and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) all matter, high school teachers are concerned about the texts that they are selecting for their classrooms. The teachers in this study expressed the belief that canonical texts were important, but they tended to have students read noncanonical texts because they believed those were more relevant to students' lives both academically and individually.

However, teachers noted that they lost something when they exclusively used independent young adult reading rather than whole-class texts. They expressed concern that their classrooms lose the conversation and community that comes from the whole class focusing their thinking and analysis on one common text.

These tensions and possibilities provide a rich environment for practitioners and researchers to slow down and carefully consider what the issue is. While the dichotomy has been set up to be between canonical and noncanonical texts, perhaps we can focus on the difference between student and author/text-directed literacy acts and how those acts are being enacted in the classroom (individually or collectively). The teachers in this study did not focus exclusively on the act of selecting a text. Instead, they spoke about whose literary acts were being prioritized in the classroom: those of the venerated author or those of the student? The teachers wanted a balance of the two, and, to achieve that, wanted to incorporate both kinds of texts.

Teachers could achieve some of the whole group cohesion and examination that they want by conducting a whole class read-aloud of a canonical or young adult text. Students would not be required to read it alone, and it could be a brief addition to each day. In this way, teachers could highlight the important moves that they see authors making and enjoy the connection with the class and the learning that comes from thinking in a group.

Another possible way to address the teachers' concerns could be to run book clubs where students in each club are all reading the same book together. The teacher could make a point to attend the students' meetings, providing support and encouraging deeper engagement with the texts. In this way, teachers could help students navigate canonical texts. Teachers could ensure that students are engaging in both collective and individual responses and engaging in student-directed literacy acts and author-directed literacy acts.

The literacy acts teachers discussed could be considered as a spectrum, with student-directed acts on one end of the spectrum and text-directed acts on the other end (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Tension in the spectrum between student and text directed acts.

While the teachers in this study tended to be one end of the spectrum or the other, they also shared the tension they felt between the two, and they explained how they tried to create balance for their students.

Teachers have been making these decisions based on the previous argument over canon versus young adult literature. Instead of continuing to wrestle with argument, we can instead change our thinking to focus on our instructional purposes for the reading and whose literacy actions we want to prioritize at the time: those of our students or those of the author.

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