

## STRATEGY 1

# Independent Reading

### What Is It?

Independent reading, also called *free voluntary reading*, *extensive reading*, *leisure or pleasure reading*, and *silent sustained reading*, is the instructional strategy of providing students with time in class on a regular basis to read books of their choice. Students are also encouraged to do the same at home. In addition, no formal responses or academic exercises are tied to this reading.

### Why We Like It

We believe the best way for our ELL students to become more motivated to read and to increase their literacy skills is to give them time to read and to let them read what they like! That being said, we *don't* just stand back and watch them read. We *do* teach reading strategies, conduct read alouds to generate interest, take our classes to the school library, organize and maintain our classroom library, conference with students during reading time, and encourage our students to read outside the classroom, among other things. All of these activities contribute to a learning community in which literacy is valued and reading interest is high.

### Supporting Research

Research shows there are many benefits of having students read self-selected books during the school day (Ferlazzo, 2011, February 26; Miller, 2015). These benefits include enhancing students' comprehension, vocabulary, general knowledge, and empathy, as well as increasing their self-confidence and motivation as readers. These benefits apply to English language learners who read in English and in their native languages (International Reading Association, 2014).

Encouraging students to read in their home language, as well as in English, can facilitate English language acquisition and build literacy skills in both languages (Ferlazzo, 2017, April 10). Extensive research has found that students increasing their first language (L1) abilities are able to transfer phonological and comprehension skills as well as background knowledge to second language (L2) acquisition (Genessee, n.d.).

## Common Core Connections

According to the Common Core ELA Standards, “students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts” in order to progress toward career and college readiness (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.b). The lead authors of the Common Core advocate for daily student independent reading of self-selected texts and specifically state that students should have access to materials that “aim to increase regular independent reading of texts that appeal to students’ interests while developing their knowledge base and joy in reading” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4).

## Application

Our students are allowed to choose whatever reading material they are currently interested in and are given time to read every day (depending on the day’s schedule they spend anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes per day). Our students’ use of digital reading materials in the classroom has dramatically increased in the past few years, and we discuss this in the Technology Connections section.

In order for this time to be effective—for our ELL students to experience the various benefits of independent reading discussed in the research section—we scaffold the independent reading process in several ways.

## SELECTING BOOKS

At the beginning of the year, we familiarize our students with the way our classroom libraries are organized—ours are leveled (beginner, intermediate, advanced) and categorized (fiction, nonfiction, bilingual). We organize our books in this way so that students don’t have to waste time looking through many books that are obviously not accessible to them. For example, a newcomer having to thumb through 10 intermediate or advanced books before he or she finds a readable one can easily lead to a feeling of frustration, not anticipation. Students, however, are free to choose a book from any section of the library, even if that means selecting a book at a higher reading level than we would select for them. That being said,

we do our best to help students find books they are interested in that are also accessible to them.

We also teach our students how to identify whether a book is too hard, too easy, or just right by reading the first couple of pages and noticing if most of the words seem unfamiliar (too hard right now), if they know the majority of the words (too easy), or if some of the words are familiar and some are new (just right). We also emphasize to students the importance of challenging themselves to improve (using a sports analogy works well—if you want to get better at basketball, you don’t just work on the same shot every day) by sometimes practicing a little out of their comfort zones. We do allow students to use their phones or classroom dictionaries to look up words, but we also explain that having to look up every word usually indicates a book is too hard for now.

If you are facing a situation-like we have at times-when your new ELL student knows no English, doesn’t have a cell phone, you don’t have a peer tutor to help him or her read, there’s no computer available in the classroom, and no bilingual book using that student’s home language, then we make sure to get a bilingual dictionary (ideally, with pictures) that students can read. These can easily be found online for most languages, though they can be expensive. It’s not ideal, but it’s something.

### **STUDENT-TEACHER CHECK-INS**

We use independent reading time to check in with individual students about their engagement, comprehension, and future reading interests. These are not formal assessments but are brief, natural conversations about reading (“Why did you choose this book? What is your favorite part so far? Which part is most confusing? How are you feeling about reading in English?”). We may also use the time to help students find new books, listen to students practice reading aloud, talk about new words they are learning, discuss which reading strategies they are using (see Strategy 10: Reading Comprehension), and glean information about their reading interests, strengths, and challenges.

### **WRITING AND TALKING ABOUT BOOKS**

Sometimes we may ask students to respond to their daily reading in a quickwrite, a drawing, or talking with a partner. Other times we ask students to respond to their reading in their writer’s notebooks (see Strategy 18: Writer’s Notebook for a more detailed explanation of how we use them for reader response). We may also have students participate in one of the activities described in Strategy 2: Literary Conversations, such as creating a book trailer, conducting a book interview, or identifying and writing about a golden line.

## PUBLISHING STUDENT SUCCESSES

We have our students keep track of the books they have read in English and in their home language, not as an accountability measure but as a celebration of their growth as readers. When they finish a book of any length, we give them a colored sticky note and they write their name, the title of the book, the number of pages, and a four-to five-word rating, or blurb (e.g., “sad, but good ending” or “best graphic novel I’ve read!”). Students then stick their notes on the finished books wall (made of a large piece of colored paper).

We also have students keep a list of finished books in their writer’s notebooks (see Strategy 18). We remind our students that it’s not a race for who can finish the most books, but that the most important goal is that each student is making his or her own progress.

At the end of each quarter, we ask students to reflect on their independent reading (see Figure 1.1: End-of-Quarter Reading Reflection). At the end of the year, we celebrate all the reading our students have done with a visual project called *My Year of Reading*. Students use their sticky notes and lists of finished books in their notebooks to create a list of all the books they’ve read. Then they design a visual representation of their reading journey (a chart, a time line, a map, a bookshelf, etc.). See Figure 1.2: My Year of Reading Visual Project for the directions and Figure 1.3: My Year of Reading Student Example.

## WORKING WITH STUDENTS NOT LITERATE IN THEIR HOME LANGUAGE

Independent reading can be especially challenging with English language learners who are preliterate, not literate, or who have low literacy skills in their home language. However, new research (which we share with our students and their families) shows that learning to read creates deeper, stronger, and faster connections in the brain, even for those who are late to reading (Sparks, 2017). We frequently do lessons with all our students about how learning new things changes and strengthens the brain (Ferlazzo, 2011, November 26).

In our experience, one of the best ways to engage students facing these challenges and to build their literacy skills is through online reading activities. The online sites we have found most useful are interactive and contain leveled texts, bilingual stories, visualizations, and audio support in which words are pronounced aloud in English and in the student’s home language. Many of our students especially enjoy sites that incorporate music lyrics and videos. For teachers who have limited technology in the classroom, another option is to access printable books online at sites such as Learning A-Z or edHelper. See the Technology Connections for a list of the sites we have found most useful. In addition, explore Strategy 35: Supporting ELL Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) for other ideas.

## Student Handouts and Examples

Figure 1.1: End-of-Quarter Reading Reflection

Figure 1.2: My Year of Reading Visual Project

Figure 1.3: My Year of Reading Student Example

## What Could Go Wrong?

Providing ELL students with access to high-interest books at their English proficiency levels can be challenging. Children's books, although often well written and available in multiple languages, are not always of high interest to adolescent learners. We've found that purchasing popular young adult fiction in English and in various home languages works especially well for our intermediate students. They can read the English version and use their home language copy as a reference—to check their understanding or to identify similarities and differences. As we stated previously, digital texts are another engaging option for adolescent ELLs and provide many features that support literacy development—glossaries, animations, audio tools, and so on (see Technology Connections for resources on digital reading).

Independent reading is a very important component of English language instruction; however, it is not a substitute for explicit reading instruction (see Strategy 10: Reading Comprehension). Ideally, it is a time when students can apply the reading skills and strategies they are learning in class to the texts they are reading independently. The teacher plays a big role in helping students reach this goal by consistently providing guidance and encouragement. It can quickly become an ineffective practice if students are not supported as they select books, read them, and interact with them. Teachers can fall into the trap of using student independent reading time to plan or catch up on paperwork. We certainly have done this and still do it now at times, but we try to resist the urge and we hope you do, too.

## Technology Connections

There are numerous online sites that provide free, high-interest reading materials for all levels of ELLs. Links to these sites can be found here:

The Best Websites to Help Beginning Readers (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/01/22/the-best-websites-to-help-beginning-readers/>)

The Best Websites for Beginning Older Readers (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/01/23/the-best-websites-for-beginning-older-readers/>)

The Best Online Resources for Teachers of Preliterate ELLs (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/12/06/the-best-online-resources-for-teachers-of-pre-literate-ells/>)

The Best Websites for Intermediate Readers (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/01/26/the-best-websites-for-intermediate-readers/>)

The Best Sources for Free and Accessible Printable Books (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2009/07/31/the-best-sources-for-free-accessible-printable-books/>)

## Attribution

Portions of this section are adapted from our books, *The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide* (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012, p. 125–127) and *Navigating the Common Core with English Language Learners* (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2016, p. 95–97).

## Figures

1. How many books did you read this quarter? List the titles (look at your sticky notes and your list in your writer's notebook). How do you feel about this number of books?
2. How do you feel about your progress in reading (what is getting easier, what is still challenging)?
3. What was your favorite book you read this quarter? Give at least three reasons why it was your favorite.
4. Are you reading mostly fiction books, nonfiction books, or a mix of both? Why do you think this is?
5. What strategies are you using to help you understand your book (summarizing, looking up new words, asking questions, etc.)?
6. What changes will you make as a reader next quarter (read more-challenging books, ask for book recommendations, read at home, etc.)?
7. What help do you need from your teacher or your classmates to become an even better reader (finding books, a quiet place to read in class, a partner to talk about my book with, starting a book club, etc.)?
8. Complete the following statement:

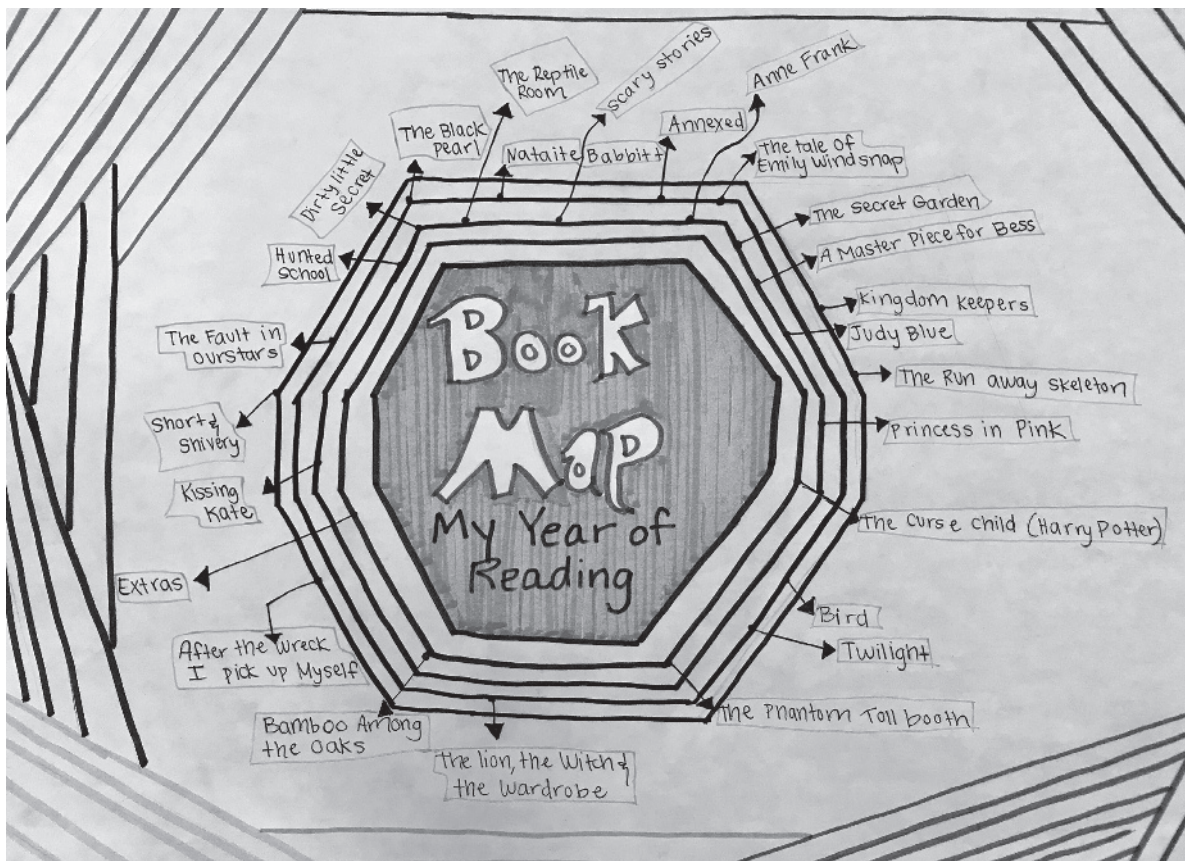
Reading is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

**Figure 1.1** End-of-Quarter Reading Reflection

You have read many good books this year! You will demonstrate evidence of your reading and celebrate it by completing a final visual project. Follow this guide to complete your My Year of Reading Visual Project:

- Look back over your finished books list in your writer's notebook and your sticky notes from the finished books wall.
- Look at the titles you have read and think about how you might like to tie all of these books together.
- You may present your books on a poster in the form of a map, time line, game board, video game, advertisement, list, or any other creative way you want. You must include the title of each book.
- Complete a quick draft on a piece of scratch paper to show me your plan *before* I give you the final poster paper.
- On the poster paper, *sketch* your design with pencil before you use ink or color.
- You may use a combination of colored pens and colored pencils to complete your poster.

**Figure 1.2** My Year of Reading Visual Project



**Figure 1.3** My Year of Reading Student Example

