

### **Lars's Story: Determining Whether a Text Is Culturally Appropriate**

Lars is a first-grade English learner. His teacher, Mr. Harkenback, struggled in reviewing the series of leveled readers provided by the curriculum. “This one is about a birthday party!” he moaned to a colleague. “This one is about snow! Are any of these readers culturally appropriate?” Freeman and Freeman (2007) offer a guide to help students and teachers determine the cultural relevance of a narrative text. They focus on how similar the characters, events, and settings are to students’ own experiences. This is indeed one important way to assess whether a text is culturally accessible. Another method is to focus on the background knowledge required to successfully comprehend the text, as long-standing research has shown that background knowledge and cultural familiarity impact comprehension (Steffensen, Joag-Deve, & Anderson, 1979). A simple question teachers can ask and answer is, “Will my EL students need additional background knowledge, in comparison to my non-EL students, to understand this text? If so, what is the most efficient and equitable way to impart that knowledge to them?” For example, when Mr. Harkenback’s students read the leveled book about a snowfall, he first places them in groups to look at pictures of snowstorms, snowmen, and snow-covered fields. He then has students take turns sharing their experiences with snow or other interesting weather events. Finally, students compose and illustrate a three-sentence story about what they would like to do in the snow. By the time students have completed and shared their stories, English learners have a stronger sense of what snow is, making them better equipped for the story, and all students in the class have had a high-quality opportunity for oral language development.