With the Help of a Crocodile

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I teach English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in a middle school with many students who have recently arrived from Haiti, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cameroon and Ethiopia. This year, my experience with our district’s critical thinking initiative led me to wonder, “How can I help my students think critically about poetry without subjecting them to something as childish as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star?”

I wanted my students to read a poem, dissect its meaning, identify figurative language and reconstruct all of this in a meaningful way. Once I began to think critically about the most effective way to teach this, the lesson plan began to come together. I remembered that the poet Shel Silverstein had already built this house for me; all I had to do was get my students to the door. Via the magic of technology, Mr. Silverstein and I, along with a crocodile with a toothache and a slightly vicious dentist, were going to teach my students to think critically about poetry.

In order for the students to discuss imagery in a poem, I had to show them what it was. I created a flipchart on the interactive whiteboard that allowed the students to interact with the idea of imagery. Next, they read the poem The Crocodile’s Toothache with me. Despite my changing tones, the poem fell flat. I wanted this to be the case because I needed the students to think about why they couldn’t “see” the poem in their minds or “hear” the crocodile’s pain.
A video of The Crocodile’s Toothache, recorded by Silverstein himself, exists on YouTube. My students listened to Silverstein’s reading while they watched a simple animation of the dentist climbing into the crocodile’s open jaws and pulling out teeth. They heard the dentist laugh at the crocodile’s pain and, finally, they saw the dentist disappear.

Although it isn’t directly stated in the poem, my students all agreed that the crocodile ate the dentist. When I asked how they knew, they told me, “We see him eat the dentist.”

“But, I said, the poem doesn’t say the word ate. So, how do you know?” I’m not exaggerating when I saw every student went back to the text and showed me the lines where it says, “Then suddenly, the jaws went SNAP, And the dentist was gone, right off the map…”

I followed up from there, “But I still don’t understand how you know the crocodile ate the dentist. I need you to work in groups and create a sentence explaining how you know this is what happened.” My wonderful students did just that; they worked together and were able to explain, using their combined language skills, that because the dentist was mean to the crocodile and hurt him, the crocodile ate him up. They were clear that what they saw, heard, read, and felt from the tone of the poem, could only support that conclusion.

What did I learn from this? I learned that before a teacher can get students to think critically about content, the teacher must think critically about what tools the students need. If we give the students what they need to access the material, they can build their own bridge to learning.