"MAESTRA! THE LETTERS SPEAK." ADULT ESL STUDENTS LEARNING TO READ FOR THE FIRST TIME

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ABSTRACT

Young adult and adult students with little or no literacy in their first languages are tackling a double challenge: acquiring English while learning to read for the first time later in life. There is a considerable lack of research in this area of ESL, but the available research and professional wisdom can guide our practice. Five general principles help us create vibrant, successful classrooms for our low-literacy students: keep lessons contextualized, combine bottom-up and top-down approaches, cater to a variety of learning preferences, tap into students' strengths, and nurture their confidence. This report outlines these principles and connects them specifically to serving adult emergent readers.

INTRODUCTION

What happens when a child learns how to read? Librarians and teachers assert that reading opens up the world to a child, and middle-class parents in literate cultures surround their children with books and print. Children in modern, literate cultures generally learn to read as young children. In fact, we say that kids spend their first years in school learning to read, and then all their school years thereafter are spent reading to learn. Throughout our adult lives, we rely on print for learning new things: textbooks, pamphlets, instructions, manuals, references books, dictionaries, websites, etc. When we learn, as products of a literate culture, we are naturally drawn to print for information and memory. We write notes in margins, make lists to remember, and use highlighters to focus our attention. We tend to be visually oriented, and we are generally confident in our abilities to learn new things (Brod, 1999).

Childhood literacy has a tremendous impact developmentally and socially on an individual. This first language (L1) literacy has "transformative power" (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004, p.692), as L1 literacy transforms how one thinks and processes language (Olson, 2002; Ong, 1988, cited in Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). But what if a person doesn't learn to read in his first language, before he begins learning a second language? Many of our ESL students are from oral traditions, and their languages perhaps have never been written down. Others speak first languages that do have written forms, but due to distance, poverty, civil unrest, or a host of other reasons, some of our adult ESL students never learned to read in their first languages. Many of them reach adulthood having never learned to read, and only encounter literacy after immigrating to the United States. They enter our ESL classrooms, then, with a double purpose: to learn English and also to acquire literacy for the first time. These emergent readers are beginning the challenge of connecting meaning with print, and they are doing so in a second language.

Students with low L1 literacy (or "literacy level students") often have proficient oral skills and high communicative competence. There may be a strong 'mismatch' between students' speaking and listening abilities and their written language proficiency. As ESL teachers, we are charged with boosting students' language in all four modalities. Literacy is such a critical part of American culture. It is essential to becoming a full participant in the community. However, literacy instruction at this level can be a slow and difficult challenge for both learners and instructors. To complicate the matter, there is not a great deal of research for practitioners to draw on. As Bigelow and Tarone (2004) point out, "…despite the unfortunate prevalence of such high levels of illiteracy worldwide, research on second language acquisition (SLA) has virtually ignored the impact of L1 literacy level on a learner's acquisition process…" (p.689).

Reading is a skill that you learn to do only once, regardless of what language you learn to do it in (Genesee, 2008). Our older (post critical-period) students in high schools and adult education programs are learning to read for the first time in a new language. Given the lack of definitive research in this area of SLA, what do we know for sure? What research and professional wisdom is out there to inform our practices? This article attempts to fill in the blanks by outlining five guiding principles that should be part of any literacy-level instruction. These five principles overlap a great deal with what we know about good teaching, with added emphasis on how to serve older emergent readers. They include using contextualized lessons, combining top-down and bottom-up reading instruction, catering to a variety of learning preferences, drawing on learners' strengths, and boosting their confidence as learners.

1. Keep it in Context

> *The message is a simple one: that people learn best when learning starts with what they already know, builds on their strengths, engages them in the learning process, and enables them to accomplish something they want to accomplish* (Auerbach, 1997).

Learning rarely occurs in a vacuum, and ESL literacy is no exception. From the first moments of the first day of class and thereafter, we must engage students in topics that are interesting and meaningful for them. We must seek out and listen actively for what's important to our learners, and then, within those themes, find ways to incorporate needed vocabulary, grammar, phonics instruction, cultural competencies, and a great deal of meaningful practice. Most ESL textbooks are thematically organized, and this is no coincidence. Students learn best when there is a useful, relevant topic that serves as the backdrop for all other language learning.

Building reading in emergent readers does NOT begin with the alphabet. It begins with a conversation, serious questions that stretch students' thinking, and with a genuine interest in learners' responses. Once we have established strong rapport, students have shared with us what they think and know about a topic and what they would like to find out, then we are ready to go to print. We are ready to begin reading and writing tasks based on real-life applications.

Wrigley (1993) writes, "To help contextualize ideas, initial print is supported by pictures from magazines, family photographs, and pictures drawn by learners. By starting with the images, concepts, words, and expressions that are familiar to the learners, rather than with the alphabet, innovative programs provide opportunities for "meaning making" from the first day of literacy education" (p.1). Perhaps nothing is less engaging and less memorable to an older student than bland alphabet work that is not connected to meaningful content. Start with a topic, generate interest and enthusiasm, and then begin to pull out key vocabulary words, look for patterns, and together, discover the rules beneath the language you are using.

David and Yvonne Freeman (2006) advocate using theme-based, meaningful curricula in their book, *Closing the Achievement Gap*. They write, "What [students] need are activities that will stretch them. Effective teachers organize their curriculum around themes based on big questions designed to push students' thinking. Without a challenging curriculum, older English learners will not develop the academic English they need to close the achievement gap" (p.16). Keep in mind that older students come to ESL classes with tremendous life experiences. They are capable, competent, intelligent people who have a great deal to share. It is critical to tap into this life experience and build literacy skills within meaningful contexts. As Fish, Knell, and Buchanan (2007) assert, "Preliterate students are beginning readers, but they are not beginning problem solvers; therefore, it's important to utilize materials and methods that can connect to students' immediate needs" (p.2).

2. Go Up and Down the Ladder

Years ago, when teachers and researchers discussed how best to teach reading, the debate between whole language versus phonics received a great deal of attention. Today, most reading and ESL professionals agree that reading is an interactive endeavor that includes *both* top-down and bottom-up processes, and teaching reading should be balanced to include both types of instruction (Campbell, 2004).
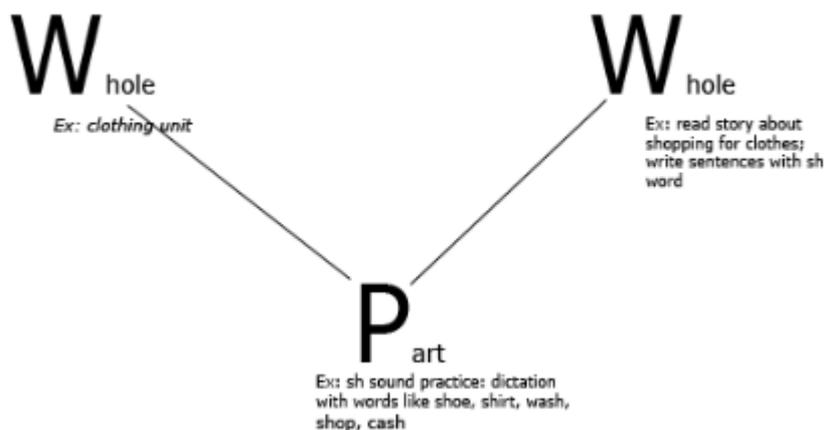
Top down instruction begins with meaning, and gradually moves to print knowledge. It traditionally means that students actively construct meaning by discussing their own previous experiences related to the text, that teachers value activating background knowledge, and also that comprehension is facilitated by using realia, pictures, and hands-on projects related to a reading text (Fish, Knell, & Buchanan, 2007). Bottom-up instruction, on the other hand, begins with the text and builds its way to meaning. It is more focused on the text itself, building decoding (sounding-out) skills, learning patterns of sounds, syllables, and word families in order to eventually construct meaning from texts.

Building reading in emergent readers requires instruction that is both top-down and bottom-up. We cannot expect pre-literate students to learn to read within the vacuum of a de-contextualized lesson, nor can we expect these students to acquire alphabetic knowledge by osmosis, without deliberate attention paid to symbols and sounds. Our

reading instruction must be both meaning-based *and* explicit. Effective instruction for emergent readers requires first finding a meaningful topic, engaging the learner, and then looking for ways to *pause*, focus on individual words, sounds, and patterns, and then go right back to the topic to continue to talk about it, read, problem-solve, do projects, etc. This kind of reading instruction is called Whole-Part-Whole, and refers also to an innovative way to incorporate phonics instruction into a meaningful, theme-based lesson.

As Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos (2007) describe it, the Whole-Part-Whole method includes teaching whole words in context, then examining particular words to present and practice a phonics or phonemic awareness skill, and then returning these words to the larger context to continue practice. As Brod (1999) further explains, "Thus sound/ symbol correspondence is introduced after they have acquired a bank of familiar words, giving them a chance to discover for themselves how letters and sounds are related" (p.16).

Figure 1: Whole-Part-Whole (*Trupke-Bastidas, 2007)*

Whole

Ex: clothing unit

Whole

Ex: read story about shopping for clothes; write sentences with sh word

Part

Ex: sh sound practice: dictation with words like shoe, shirt, wash, shop, cash

For example, perhaps you are studying family and family members in your class. You have shown your family's photo, and students have brought in photos of their families as

well. They are comfortable with this vocabulary and are interested in saying and hearing more about this topic. Now, you pause to focus on the sounds /m/, /s/, /f/, and /b/ and their corresponding letters.

Teacher:
   What family words begin with the sound /s/? (sister, son)
   What about /b/? (brother, boy, baby)
   Now let's make four columns on the board, one with each of these letters. Come up and write one of the family words we've used in the right column.
   What do you notice about these words: mother, brother, father? What do they have in common? (-ther)

Students could continue working with these four sounds and the –*ther* word family in a variety of ways. After 20 minutes or so, the teacher again brings the class together and asks students about their own brothers and sisters and where they live. Then students continue with a mingle and chart activity that has them ask several classmates about their siblings, their names, and where they live, and make notes on a simple chart.

In the Whole-Part-Whole method, going back and forth between top-down and bottom-up activities is critical. As Croydan (2007, personal interaction) puts it, every day with literacy level students, we must go up and down the ladder, all class long. Emergent readers need the constant engagement and high interest of top-down learning, as well as the systematic and building-block approach of bottom-up learning.

We have to keep going up and down the ladder.

3. Provide a Buffet of Learning Opportunities

Much has been written in recent years about learning styles, learning preferences, and multiple intelligences. It is now commonly accepted that learners learn differently, and that teachers should provide learners with a variety of ways of processing information and demonstrating what they have learned. Instructional approaches such as project-based learning, language experience approach, competency-based education, and the participatory approach, to name a few, aim to serve students innovatively. Drawing on multiple approaches when teaching ESL has become the norm (Parrish, 2004). When we apply this professional wisdom to teaching low-literacy ESL learners, the results are profound. We cannot expect students with limited formal schooling to immediately excel in a traditional 'Western' classroom. It is important to assume that that these students will learn differently, and to provide an array of opportunities for them to receive, process, and master the material in our lessons.

Pre-literate learners often hail from oral traditions, where learning typically takes place in informal settings. This learning is done largely through observation in a cooperative, relevant manner, where learners are performing a task that is necessary and works

towards the family's or community's well-being (Adler, 2000). This is in sharp contrast to the traditional Western classroom, where learning is largely done through print (textbooks, workbooks, chalk boards, overhead projectors, written tasks). Western learning is generally based on independent initiative, and is done with teachers students don't know well. This model is quite abstract, while learning in an oral tradition is much more concrete (Adler, 2000).

As ESL instructors, and particularly as teachers of emergent readers, we have a lot to learn from the oral tradition. Research confirms again and again that in order for adult students to learn well, it must be relevant and meaningful for them (Imel, 1994). The most memorable tasks are those that are interesting and immediately useful to the students, and that push them just beyond what they are already capable of doing. Cunningham and Cunningham write, "All instruction must help learners develop cognitive clarity and become engaged with what they are learning. All instruction also must be as multi-faceted and multi-level as possible" (cited in Farstrup and Samuels, 2002, p.88).

There are plenty of activities in the classroom that engage students in a concrete way with reading. The first step, as described in principle #1 above, is to seek out relevant themes and to create an engaging learning environment. Then we need to move from more concrete tasks to more abstract ones. Reading is an extremely abstract task, so we need to start by activating schema about the topic and tap into learners' prior knowledge (Parrish, 2004; Vinogradov, 2001). Bringing in real objects to spark discussion can be a formidable tool with new readers. For example, at the beginning of a unit on travel, a teacher could bring in a suitcase and ask students to talk about what goes inside, why, where you have taken a suitcase recently, and where you might like to visit someday. When students can immediately relate to the topic of discussion, they will be more likely to contribute. By the time they begin to read a text about travel or write a story about a place they heve visited (perhaps LEA style, discussed in the next section), they are already in that mindset; the topic has been made concrete for them.

Besides bringing in real objects to the classroom, using pictures, flashcards, story strips, picture stories, hands-on projects, field trips, guest speakers, songs and chants, internet websites, etc. can reach students who may otherwise struggle to connect with the lesson. By mixing up instruction to include whole class work, group work, pair work, and individual work, teachers can cater to a variety of preferences. When we provide a wide array of learning opportunities, we create many, many ways for our students to succeed.

4. Tap into Strengths

There is a tendency for teachers and researchers to define emergent readers in terms of what they lack: formal schooling, L1 literacy, print awareness, etc. This is a very 'deficit' way of approaching instruction. While these learners may not have the same approach to learning as those socialized in modern, literate societies, they are of course no less capable or intelligent, and in fact, they may have many skills that literate students do not. For example, as Bigelow and Tarone (2004) point out, members of oral cultures have a great number of well-developed strategies for remembering content without

notes, and their lack of literacy may actually guide them toward a less analytical way of learning the L2, one that lends itself to acquisition versus learning (Krashen, 1981, in Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). In addition, many emergent readers have L2 oral skills that are quite proficient, so much so that oral intake assessments can often misplace students into high levels of ESL, with staff only later realizing that students' written skills are not at the same level.

The fact that emergent readers often have more developed listening and speaking skills is a tremendous resource for literacy teachers. One very promising practice that capitalizes on students' oral ability is Language Experience Approach (LEA). In LEA, students first share a common experience, whether it's a field trip or an experience like making a salad in the classroom. Then, the teacher guides them to re-tell the experience aloud. Students recall what happened, and the teacher or another scribe writes down their words. Later, these words are printed and used as students' reading texts. From here, a number of bottom-up focused techniques can be used to focus on particular sounds and structures. Later, students revisit the entire text they have created, and perhaps add to it. LEA taps into students strengths by connecting what they are able to communicate orally to what they are learning to do in writing. It is a very efficient technique in working with emergent readers (Crandall & Peyton, 1993).

The Language Experience Approach is one way to create student-generated texts. Whether done formally starting with a shared experience like a field trip or an in-class project, or much less formally by simply looking at a photograph together or providing engaging prompts, when students are writing, they are creating reading texts as well. ESL teachers often have students journal or free-write during class time, and these student-generated texts can create abundant opportunities for looking at bottom-up strategies, too. The advantage of using student-generated texts is that the text is already comprehensible, meaningful, and interesting to the learner. Since the learner created it, he/she has ownership over those words and that story. By using these texts within the Whole-Part-Whole method, we can focus on particular sounds, word families, or other reading skills within content that the student created him/herself. This creates an engaging and memorable lesson for learners.

Tapping into oral skills is but one way to capitalize on students' strengths. But students come to us with a wide array of talents and interests that can also serve as "jumping off points" for literacy lessons. At one adult education site in St. Paul, we learned that a number of our students were gifted seamstresses. We created a sewing class, purchased sewing machines, and worked on literacy within this meaningful, interesting context. We researched fabric stores, examined patterns, measured and cut fabric, considered various options for our sewing projects, and eventually created a large quilt together. Throughout the process, teachers were drawing on students' background knowledge and talents to create literacy tasks as we talked, read, and wrote about the experience along the way.

Whether it is music, gardening, cooking, automotive repair, child rearing, soccer, or something else entirely, effective literacy-focused lessons can be created within any

context. The key is to keep listening to your students and to find the themes and strengths that they bring with them to class (Weinstein, 1999).

5. Nurture Learners' Confidence

Older, struggling English learners often lack confidence. They may not see themselves as capable. They may not understand how schools work, or they may have concluded that schooling does not offer them any benefits. Effective teachers help all their students value school and value themselves as learners (Freeman & Freeman, 2002, p.17).

For many of our emergent readers, school is a fairly new experience. As mentioned above, the bulk of some students' learning experiences may have been in informal settings. Or, on the contrary, they may have had a great deal of school experiences either in the U.S. or at home, but without a great deal of success. Older learners, in particular, often lack confidence in their ability to learn English and acquire literacy (Brod, 1999). One of the main goals teachers need to have for emergent readers is to nurture their confidence as learners.

One promising practice in working with emergent readers works toward both boosting reading skills and building confidence at the same time. While used a great deal with higher levels and in college programs, extensive reading has not received the attention it deserves with lower levels and emergent readers. Extensive reading, or reading for pleasure, involves providing a wide variety of readings texts to students and giving them time to choose something that looks interesting and read on their own. The texts students choose should be easy for them, things they can read without the use of a dictionary. While usually we are trying to challenge students, using Krashen's I + 1 theory (Krashen, 1985), in extensive reading we should provide reading texts that are "I – 1". We want students to work on reading fluency, to gain confidence in their ability to read, and to find pleasure in reading. In establishing a "reading lab" or "free reading time," as it's sometimes called, a large selection of interesting, level appropriate reading materials is key. While there is not a great deal available yet from publishers that is as low-level and high interest as required, there is some. Ask your publishers' representatives about reading texts for low-literacy, older learners. Many publishers have begun producing short, interesting books for adults that have only one or a handful of words on each page. Even if your newest readers are only focusing on the pictures, they are involved in the act of literacy, and they are becoming more confident readers and learners through this practice.

Emergent readers need time and practice to work on their new skills. Often, ESL textbooks don't provide nearly enough practice for our lowest-level students. They might cover an important skill or text in just one or two pages, when our students could benefit from several lessons. One thing teachers of emergent readers notice time and time again is that *repetition* is key. Students need to spend a great deal of each class time reviewing previously covered materials, texts, and tasks. In fact, consider dividing

your class time daily with one-half or even two-thirds of the day devoted to re-activating schema, review, and re-visiting material, and only one-half to one-third devoted to new material. This doesn't mean doing the same tasks over and over. With minor adjustments, the task can become new while the content is not. For example, in the family example discussed above, students were working on the sounds /m/, /s/, /f/, and /b/. They listed family words on the board that begin with these sounds. Several other options can give students this same practice, but in a slightly new way. For example, students can be handed slips of paper with the family words on them, and then asked to sort them onto the /b/ table, the /m/ table, etc. Or students can divide their own papers into four blocks, and with a partner, write the words in the appropriate blocks. Then they could use letter tiles to spell out the words that the teacher or another student calls out. Then they could search these same words for those sounds in final-syllable or middle-syllable position. All of these tasks are working on the same set of words, and the same set of four sounds. We are providing a great deal of repetition without necessarily doing the same task again and again. This kind of sequence sets students up for success and creates confidence in their ability to learn.

As ESL teachers and literacy coaches, we can work to create successful, confident learners. Some of the "school skills" that students may have missed can be taught explicitly to encourage success. Teachers can establish routines, post agenda and objectives, teach organization skills and strategies that will serve learners in and beyond school. A sense of predictability goes a long way when nurturing learners' confidence. By creating simple classroom routines, whether it's to begin the day with calendar work and a journaling prompt, or having a consistent time for reading lab, or maybe to have a specific part of the day devoted to open questions and conversation, we can help boost learners' confidence by taking some of the 'mystery' out of the school experience. As Cummins (1989, cited in Ortiz 2001) points out, "Preventing school failure begins with the creation of school climates that foster academic success and empower students."

CONCLUSION

There is no simple answer to how to best serve our emergent readers. A lack of research in this area of ESL makes our work more difficult, but the available research and professional wisdom can go a long way to guiding our practice. Five general principles can help us create vibrant, successful classrooms for our low-literacy students: keep lessons contextualized, combine bottom-up and top-down approaches, cater to a variety of learning preferences, tap into students' strengths, and nurture their confidence.

The process of learning to read for the first time later in life is a slow and difficult undertaking. But there arrives a moment when it all comes together for a learner, when the strange lines and curves on the page begin to make sense, and literacy emerges. As one learner said at this very moment, "Maestra! The letters speak." Exactly. No scholar could say it better than that.

AUTHOR

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