

L1 Literacy and ESL Reading Instruction: Strategies for Maximizing Student Success

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Teaching reading to low-level ESL students is, quite simply, a challenge. At times, we are teaching adult students to read in English when some in class are not literate in their first language. In such a situation, we are not mapping a sound-symbol correspondence onto a known oral language, as in native-language reading instruction, but instead teaching the decoding of language while also teaching vocabulary and oral/aural aspects of language. Furthermore, literacy students—those learning to read for the first time—are often a minority in ESL classes to students with higher levels of formal education and thus, have an advantage in learning to read—often more swiftly. Accommodating the needs of literacy students alongside “traditional” low-level ESL students is an organizational and pedagogical challenge for even the most seasoned ESL professionals.

I have noticed the following challenges in working with literacy students:

- How can teachers know if our students have a low literacy level or education level? Even when low-level students are proficient enough in speaking and listening to make such a conversation possible, the subject matter is quite sensitive. What are teachers permitted to ask while honoring a student’s privacy and/or comfort level?
- Even when we know that a student has low or no literacy in L1, we might not know why. Is it the result of a learning disability? Is it simply because the student never attended much/any school, or

because the methods in school failed to serve this particular person?

- It’s difficult to teach literacy students along with traditional low-level ESL students. A student who possesses a doctorate may be sitting next to a student who has never operated a pencil sharpener. These two students will have different paths to proficiency in ESL. Students who are not literate in any language typically have little to no awareness of grammatical structures meaning that their language-learning process will differ from that of a student who can transfer grammatical knowledge from an L1 (Spiegel & Sunderland, 2006).
- It’s not easy to find appropriate materials for literacy students. Many series start above literacy level, making the work inaccessible for someone who is just becoming accustomed to taking meaning from print or holding a pencil and forming letters. Others begin at an appropriate point but advance at a faster rate than a literacy student can progress.

With these challenges and characteristics in mind, and with a commitment to maximizing the success of this vulnerable student population, I began to focus on how my students’ literacy level in their first language affected their process of learning to read in English. My goals, based on the aforementioned concerns and my experience, for this research were:

1. To develop an understanding of how

awareness of adult ESL students' L1 literacy level and education level can inform teachers' decisions about which strategies and materials in ESL reading are most appropriate.

2. To explore and/or invent teaching strategies, materials, and innovative practices in order to maximize students' success and progress in L2 (English) reading.

Methods of Observation

My process was to:

1. Have interpreters administer surveys and conduct interviews with selected and willing ESL CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, 2006) levels' 1 and 2 students outside of class in order to determine (a) L1 literacy and (b) education level in their native country, among other information.

2. Explore, develop, and implement techniques and strategies in reading instruction in my classroom of level 1-2 ESL learners based on the results of interviews, surveys and observations.

3. Assess and determine the effectiveness of the techniques and strategies.

Step 1 of the process, having interpreters administer surveys and conduct interviews with consenting students from my level 1-2 ESL class, yielded interesting and helpful information I do not usually possess about my students. These details, along with what I observed about the students, established a baseline from which to consider their needs and appropriate strategies for instruction.

Results

In the case of Fatima, a 45-year-old resident of the United States for nine years, she reported to her Arabic-English interpreter that she was unsuccessful during her six years of primary school in Saudi Arabia. She could read and write a little in Arabic, but had found no pleasure in school at that time. This information supplemented my observations in the classroom: Fatima, who could neither write nor recognize her name in English at the beginning of class, had very undeveloped small motor skills, extreme disorganization and forgetfulness, and inappropriate behaviors for a classroom setting (for example, until gently corrected, she would sometimes approach me at the board to share an interesting illustration in a book or to offer me something to eat while I was in the midst of whole-class instruction).

Some of my observations left me with the impression that she could have a learning disability, a notion that was strengthened by some of the difficulties she described to the interpreter. However, some of her challenges are typical of a beginning ESL reader/writer (Spiegel & Sunderland, 2006).

Fifty-four-year-old Maria, who had arrived from Mexico nearly twenty years ago having had only one year of schooling in that country, was a so-called zero beginner in all skills and not literate in English or Spanish. During the first days of class, I noticed her slow and juvenile handwriting, her unfamiliarity with a world map, pencil sharpener, and other classroom materials as well as her confusion with page orientation and printed tasks. Being new to the classroom and everything that happened there (Shaughnessey, 2006), she fatigued easily and seemed to

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have trouble concentrating. I learned from the interpreter that she also suffered from chronic pain due to a shoulder injury, making it even more difficult for her to learn and perform.

Peng, a 38-year-old man who had arrived in the United States two years before, had had a few years of primary education in China. He told his interpreter that he could not read or write well in Mandarin and that his current work schedule allowed him very little time to study or even sleep. I had observed that he seemed tired and disorganized in class and was also uneasy about working with his peers during group or pair tasks. I learned from the interpreter that Peng had different expectations of the classroom, his classmates, and the teacher. Due to his education in China, albeit short, he expected whole-class instruction and little student-student interaction (Koda & Zehler, 2008).

These are just a few examples of literacy students and their obstacles to learning. My past experiences with students like these and my foray into academic research on such students provided ideas for strategies and techniques in reading instruction.

For Fatima, emphasis on study skills and organization of her materials was instrumental, as was becoming familiar with the process of taking a standardized paper-pencil test such as the CASAS (Shaughnessey, 2006). Games, hands-on materials, and group work suited her social nature; her speaking and listening were a bit stronger than that of a typical level 1-2 student, and she greatly enjoyed working and interacting with other students in the classroom. Working with a tutor outside of class, often with the textbook *Literacy Plus A*, helped her to

improve her handwriting and writing fluency, which in turn resulted in better reading and word recognition. Now better able to recognize words by sight, she is beginning to learn how to decode, which is a hallmark of reading mastery (Dehaene, 2009). Most importantly, she feels successful and is pleased with her progress.

Maria's breakthrough came in learning about the relationship between letters (and blends and diagraphs) and their sounds, partly through use of the *Taking Off Literacy Workbook* and its phonics section. Additionally, due to her minimal educational background and her physical pain, Maria

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received permission from the ESL program director to postpone CASAS testing until a subsequent quarter of instruction. A student like this will require more time to make progress (Shaughnessey, 2006). Nevertheless, it was a joy to watch Maria become more comfortable and familiar with the conventions of a classroom. While still working hard on literacy issues, she is happy with her progress, particularly in listening and speaking, as these skills feel more urgent to her.

In Peng's case, collaborative tasks provided a refreshing break from the more tedious paper-pencil tasks, particularly when he was fatigued, once the interpreter was able to explain the purpose and rationale of these practices. Peng then became less resistant to working with partners and playing educational games. He also made time in his schedule to attend a weekly pronunciation class, which assisted him in learning to sound out words when reading as well as improving his spelling (Koda & Zehler, 2008).

Implications for the Classroom

Based on these and other close examinations of literacy students in my level 1-2 ESL class, and considering the challenges and goals presented earlier, I propose the following solutions and conclusions:

Challenge 1: “How can teachers know if/when our students have a low literacy level or education level?” and Challenge 2: “Even when we know that a student has a low literacy level/education level, we don’t always know why” are related to Goal 1 of my research: To develop an understanding of how awareness of adult ESL students’ L1

literacy level and education level can inform teachers’ decisions about which teaching strategies and materials in ESL reading are most appropriate. I

believe teachers should ask about students’ educational level, or refer to files and paperwork as permitted to obtain such information. Additionally, observing students carefully in class will allow teachers to notice behaviors of difficulties that might indicate a low level of literacy or education level, such as fine motor problems, visual discrimination difficulty, or trouble with spatial organization (Croydon, 2011). Teachers can also make an effort to accommodate students with little or no educational background by providing specific strategies for testing, studying, and organization.

Challenge 3: “It’s difficult to teach literacy students along with low-level students with more education/proficiency in L1” and Challenge 4: “It’s not easy to find appropriate materials” relate to Goal 2 of my research: To explore and/or invent teaching strategies, materials, and innovative practices in order to maximize students’ success and

progress in L2 (English) reading. Classroom management can help address these challenges: teachers can vary the grouping of students by sometimes pairing literacy students with their traditional-student peers for mutual benefits and other times grouping literacy students with others like them. It would probably be useful for all ESL students to receive direct instruction in phonemic awareness as they learn to read English—literacy students didn’t learn it, or much of it, in their L1; traditional students need to see how the English system works as their L1 utilizes a different system (Koda & Zehler, 2008). Teachers should allow students to obtain some proficiency in English

before inundating them with phonics work.

Additionally, because it can be difficult to find appropriate

materials, teachers can make their own. Stations allow students to work autonomously, freeing the teacher to offer different activities or assignments to various groups or individuals. This may be the most effective way to accommodate literacy students (Sunderland & Spiegel, 2006). Stations offer a multisensory approach to learning—and a break from paper/pencil tedium—that lends itself to a more universal design in terms of curriculum.

Conclusion

Through this research, I obtained a deeper understanding of the process of learning to read and the effects of low literacy and low educational level. It is difficult to quantify the results of these texts and techniques in CASAS scores and reading assessment results. Instead, to assess and determine the effectiveness of the techniques and strategies, I turned to qualitative information: the

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students' sense of progress, their proud remarks, and their confidence. The question of effectiveness is ever-present, but students will respond differently depending on their learning style, goals, background, and particular challenges.

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Table 1: Resources for student use

<i>Taking Off Literacy Workbook</i> with audio CDs Fesler & Newman ISBN 0-07-331433-1	Offers practice in basic writing and letter formation.; the phonics section serve as a systematic introduction of the English sound-spelling system
<i>Literacy Plus A</i> Saslow ISBN 0-13-099610-6	Aimed at pre-literate adult immigrant students, this text begins at the beginning: tracing lines, recognition of shapes, tracing numbers,; Ancillaries include audiocassettes, teacher's edition (including CD-ROM with tests), flashcards, and a guide for native-language tutors.
<i>BOB Books</i> , set 1 Maslen ISBN 0-439-145-449	Designed for native speakers of English ages 4+, this initial set of 12 mini-books uses simple line drawings and brief, simple sentences.
<i>Sam and Pat 1: Beginning Reading and Writing</i> Hartel, Lowry, & Hendon ISBN 1-4130-1964-1 Audio CD ISBN 1-4130-1966-8	Reading and writing lessons focus on introduction and practice of target sounds and how they are represented in print; flashcards included.
<i>Focus on Phonics</i> Rice ISBN 987-1-56420-942-9	A four-level series of word-attack skills; aural/visual discrimination.