Reading, Writing, & Learning in ESL

A Resource Book for K–12 Teachers

THIRD EDITION

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response groups and the strategies that may assist them in working together. In the next sections, we discuss strategies for helping students move ahead in reading ability while developing their sense of literary elements.

DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES IN SECOND LANGUAGE READING

We view the developmental phases of second language readers as a continuum, and a fuzzy one at that. We don't see identifiable discrete stages, with crystal-clear categorization. In our experience, real students defy categorization. However, for the purposes of discussion, we offer two general categories of second language readers to guide your teaching decisions initially: beginning and intermediate. For each category, we provide some general descriptions of learners and strategies to help them progress. As with writing, your task will be to help students move from one developmental phase to the next by challenging them to ever higher levels of performance. As we describe strategies for beginning and intermediate second language readers, keep in mind that only you know your own students. Thus, you are in the best position to combine our suggestions with your own analysis and intuition as you plan for your class. Therefore, feel free to use any strategy, beginning or intermediate, with any learner, according to your own judgment.

BEGINNING READERS: CHARACTERISTICS AND STRATEGIES

In general, beginning-level second language readers, like their first language counterparts, are just beginning to pull meaning from reading short texts. They may still be somewhat unfamiliar with the English alphabet and its unusual, if not unruly, spelling patterns. Chances are they recognize a number of sight words but they need more reading practice to develop a larger sight word vocabulary. Most beginners can read simple texts, such as predictable books, through word recognition strategies, language knowledge, and memorization. However, they may have difficulty processing information beyond sentence-level texts. Regardless of their age, beginners need more experience with written language. If they have never read before in any language, they need frequent reminders of the many ways we use reading and writing for practical purposes and enjoyment. If they are literate in their first language, they probably have some idea of what reading and writing are for, but their literacy concepts should be broadened. In summary, beginners need to be immersed in reading and writing for readily perceived purposes. They need

practice to solidify sound/symbol correspondences in English and to remind them that English reads from left to right, top to bottom. Finally, they need enough practice to move them toward being able to read simple texts independently. In this section, we describe a number of teaching strategies that have proven useful for beginning readers.

Language-Experience Approach

The language-experience approach is one of the most frequently recommended approaches for beginning second language readers (Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Tinajero & Calderon, 1988). The beauty of this approach is that the student provides the text, through dictation, that serves as the basis for reading instruction. As a result, language-experience reading is tailored to the learner's own interests, background knowledge, and language proficiency. It builds on the linguistic, social, and cultural strengths and interests the student brings to school. Not least important, this approach works well for those older preliterate students who need age-appropriate texts dealing with topics that interest them.

The core of the language-experience approach builds on stories dictated by individual students, small groups, or the whole class. As a rule, the stories are written down verbatim, after which students read them back. Students are usually able to read their own stories with minimal decoding skills because they already know the meaning. Through this approach, students learn to see reading and writing as purposeful communication about their own interests and concerns. Moreover, they observe the process by which their own meanings, expressed orally, are put into print form. Important learning about the English writing system is thus conveyed indirectly, preparing students to write. Finally, when they read their own stories back, students are able to experience the success of independent reading. Lan Huong used the book *Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni, to relate her own version and then read the story to her friends; she created a watercolor for the illustrated page of a book she planned to "write" using the language-experience approach (Figure 7.3).

While dictation itself provides a useful literacy event for beginners, the language-experience approach (cf. Stauffer, 1970; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1990) provides systematic follow-up to solidify learning. For example, students may underline words in the story that are most meaningful to them, write them on a word card, and place them in their word bank in alphabetical order. In addition, students may cut their stories into sentence strips and rearrange them again to form a coherent piece. The language-experience approach thus bears resemblance to Ashton-Warner's key-word approach (Ashton-Warner, 1963) and to Freire's generative-theme approach

Lan —
The big
fish eat
the little
fish.
Swimmy
swam away
and he scared
and sad.
Swimmy saw
the sea and he
was happy. The
little fish are
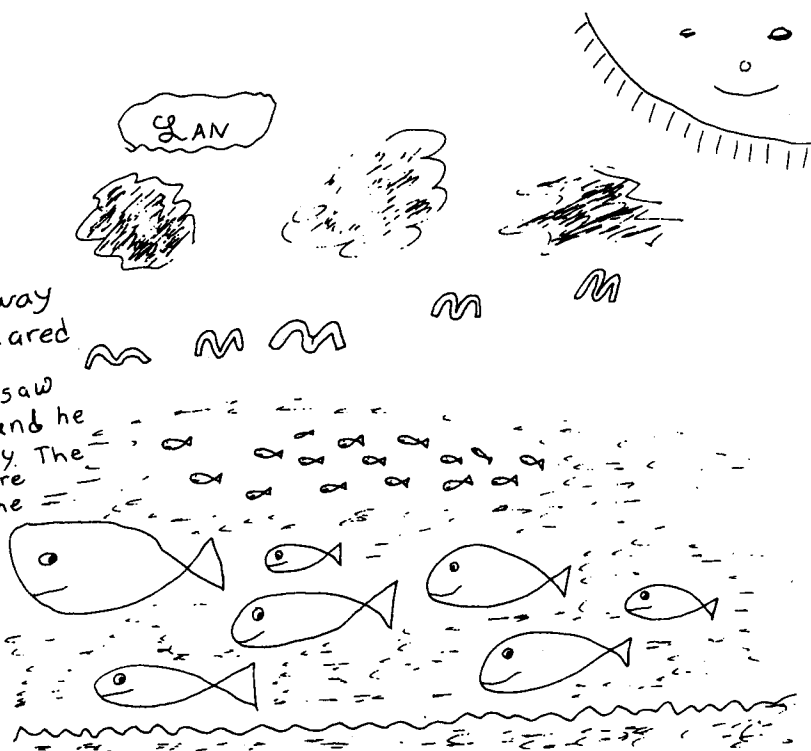scared of the
big fish.
Swimmy
said, "Let's
make a big
fish."

FIGURE 7.3 Lan Huong's "Swimmy" Story

(Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). All three approaches base early literacy instruction on the immediate concerns of students. Thus, as an introduction to reading, the students' own stories become the core of instruction in composition, comprehension, word recognition skills, and general conventions of English print.

One first-grade teacher, Lydia Tanaka, sees language experience as an important part of her literature-based reading program. She reads daily to her students from Big Books and little books, she helps her students make their own Big Books based on predictable story patterns, and she responds to them weekly in their interactive journals. She also uses language-experience stories. The following example shows how.

After an earthquake, Lydia decided to let the children talk about the tremor and share their feelings. She started by asking them to share in groups and brainstorm their ideas for a dictated story. She told them that they were going to create a newspaper about the earthquake and that the front page story would be written by the entire class.. When children finished brainstorming

and talking in their groups, they began sharing with Lydia, who wrote their statements on the board.

CHABELA: I hear a sound first. Then it shook.

JOSE: Pictures in my house move and dishes too.

LISA: My dad looked at us. He said we better move. We got under tables.

KELLY: We turned on television.

JOE: We watched the world series and it happen.

SAMMY: Glasses broke.

Students continued in this manner until they had related the most important things about the earthquake. At this point Lydia read the group story to the students, pointing to each word as she read it. Next, the students read with her as she pointed to the words. Afterward, she framed individual words and asked the students to read them. Then she asked them to illustrate their story for the newspaper, working in pairs. The class selected one picture to be used for the front page, and the other pictures were presented with short captions on other pages. When the groups had finished their pictures, Lydia asked them to copy the group story.

The next day, students read their story to one another and underlined words in the story they were sure they knew. These words were then copied on separate index cards to be filed alphabetically for each child. Periodically, the child's knowledge of the word bank was checked to make sure the student hadn't forgotten words learned previously.

Lydia's class used the original story and others to create their own newspaper about the earthquake. They then used a computer so that they could publish the paper. Later, the English learners read individual articles to one another and took the newspaper home to read articles to their parents and friends. The initial group sharing of a critical event allowed children to express their fears about the earthquake, helped them become involved in an initial literacy experience, showed them that the words they speak can be written, and gave them a newspaper with words they knew and could share with others.

Lydia doesn't always have events as dramatic as an earthquake (although a year later children wanted to talk about a war), but she uses whatever her students are interested in at the time to develop language-experience stories. She is also quick to point out that these are not the only stories students hear in her class. She reads aloud daily from quality literature, they write in journals, and they hear and act out many stories from the first day of school.

The following text was dictated by a first-grader. First she drew a picture, then started to write her story. After having some difficulty writing the story,

Yukka asked a student teacher to write down what she wanted to say. We include Yukka's writing attempt along with the story she dictated.

YUKKA'S WRITING: I like horse becuss they hav lovely fer.

YUKKA'S DICTATION: They run fast. If I could have horse, he be brown. I ride him in park. I ride him to school and I leave him on the bus.

As Yukka gains experience, her writing will be coordinated enough to keep up with her vivid imagination. Meanwhile, dictation empowers her by providing an adult scribe to get her ideas down on paper. Knowing this, Lydia will encourage Yukka to continue her own writing while taking her dictated stories from time to time. Language-experience stories provide but one important part of Lydia's scheme for assisting children to become literate in their second language. She feels that students must do much more than just read their own stories; therefore, she provides a print-rich environment full of literature to be heard and read throughout the day. This environment, supplemented with language-experience stories, will enhance the growth of students like Yukka throughout the year. By using English learners' experiences and language, Lydia scaffolds their learning to read and share experiences.

Providing Quality Literature for Beginners

For beginning readers, you will need to create a classroom designed to assist them in making decisions about selecting and responding to quality literature. This does not mean that you won't ever choose a book for students. In fact, you may first want to select a book your entire class reads in order to model response to literature. Overall, your goal will be to assist students with making choices about what they read, about what they do with what they select, and with their own responses to literature. You will want them to share their reading with one another and to accept different responses to the same literature. However, you'll give beginning level readers a little more early direction to assure success with their first encounters with a text or story. We have selected several literature-based strategies, sequenced from simpler to more complex, that work well for beginning level readers. These strategies all fit the criteria for literacy scaffolds discussed earlier, by working with meaningful and functional communication found in whole texts, by making use of repetitive language and discourse patterns, and by supporting students' comprehension beyond what they could do alone. All of these strategies are meant to provide temporary support to beginning-level students who will drop the scaffolds when they no longer need them.

Pattern Books

Pattern books contain stories that make use of repeated phrases, refrains, and sometimes rhymes. In addition, pattern books frequently contain pictures that may facilitate story comprehension (Heald-Taylor, 1987). The predictable patterns allow beginning second language readers to become involved immediately in a literacy event in their second language. Moreover, the use of pattern books meets the criteria for literacy scaffolds by modeling reading, by challenging students' current level of linguistic competence, and by assisting comprehension through the repetition of a simple sentence pattern.

One popular pattern book is Bill Martin's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin, 1967). The story, amply illustrated with colorful pictures, repeats a simple pattern children use to begin reading. In one first-grade class, for example, Rosario Canetti read *Brown Bear* to a group of nine children with varying English proficiencies. Having arrived recently from Mexico, four of the children were just beginning to learn English as a second language. After hearing the book read once through, the children responded to the second reading as follows:

> ROSARIO READS: Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?
> *[Rosario turns the page and children see a picture of a red bird.]*
> CHILDREN REPLY: Red bird!
> ROSARIO READS: I see a red bird looking at me!
> Red bird, Red bird, what do you see?
> *[Rosario turns the page and children see a picture of a yellow duck.]*
> CHILDREN REPLY: Yellow duck!
> ROSARIO READS: I see a yellow duck looking at me.
> Yellow duck, Yellow duck, what do you see?
> *[Rosario turns the page and children see a picture of a blue horse.]*
> CHILDREN REPLY: Blue horse lookin' at me.

The story continued in this way as other colorful characters were introduced: a green frog, a white dog, a black sheep, a goldfish, and finally pictures of children and a teacher. As a group, the children began to elaborate their responses to include the full pattern: "I see a _____ looking at me." A few children, however, just mouthed the words, participating in the story in a way that was comfortable for them with the support of the group.

After reading several pattern stories to the group, Rosario gives her students opportunities to read the books to each other during self-selection activity time. She also invites them to create their own Big Book versions of the story or to tell each other the story using flannel board pieces or their own drawings.

One group of Chinese first-graders in Audrey Fong's class created their own Big Book after hearing the pattern story *Meanies*. In the story, the ques-