LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

Recommended citation of this article

Vinogradov, P. (2010). Balancing Top and Bottom: Learner-Generated Texts for Teaching Phonics. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *5*(1), 3–14. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8004038

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2009 Symposium held at Bow Valley College in Banff, Alberta, Canada. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Wall, T., & Leong, M. (Eds.) (2010). Low-educated adult second language and literacy Acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 5th symposium. Bow Valley College. https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/470

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BALANCING TOP AND BOTTOM: LEARNER-GENERATED TEXTS FOR TEACHING PHONICS

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1 Introduction

Adult learners learn best when instruction is consistently grounded in meaningful, relevant contexts and is closely connected to learners' daily lives and needs (Auerbach, 1992; Imel, 1998; Knowles, 1973). LESLLA learners[1] are no exception. At the same time, reading research places a high value on explicit phonics instruction for emergent readers: the direct teaching of "alphabetic skills" such as phonological awareness, decoding, and encoding. While these two needs may appear to pull instructors in different directions, this report offers practical options for balanced instruction that addresses both priorities. After briefly exploring the tenets of balanced literacy and the value of phonics instruction for adult emergent readers, classroom practices are illustrated that use learner-generated texts as a basis for developing alphabetic print literacy.

2 Balanced literacy: Weaving top and bottom

The "whole language vs. phonics great debate" among reading experts is largely a thing of the past (see Chall, 1967). Reading is viewed as an interactive, meaning-making endeavor that includes *both* top-down and bottom-up processes (Birch, 2007; Campbell, 2004). While adult language classrooms vary greatly, generally instructors include both bottom-up and top-down reading instruction in their classrooms, as each approach develops different skills that strong readers need (Campbell 2004; Parrish, 2004; Vinogradov, 2008). LESLLA learners, as adult emergent readers new to alphabetic print literacy, need lessons that both focus on meaning and also bring attention to the building blocks of literacy. Effective LESLLA literacy lessons are balanced: grounded in interesting, relevant contexts that emphasize meaning, while also explicitly teaching patterns of sounds, syllables, and word families (Fish, Knell & Buchanan, 2007; Vinogradov, 2008). As Michael Pressley writes, "balanced-literacy teachers combine the strengths of whole language and skills instruction, and in doing so, create instruction that is more than the sum of its parts" (1998, p. 1).

One method that integrates such explicit phonics instruction into meaningful, theme-based lessons is termed Whole-Part-Whole (WPW). Here teachers begin with a topic that is interesting, important, and familiar to learners. They elicit words, phrases, and stories from students, and they strengthen their vocabularies surrounding the given topic. Then, once learners are engaged in the topic, they examine particular words to present and practice alphabetics (phonics and

[1] "LESLLA learners" refers to adult language learners with little or no literacy in their first languages. The acronym is derived from the LESLLA: Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition, www.leslla.org, which is specifically focused on such learners.

phonemic awareness skills). Later, they return these words to the larger context to continue reading and oral language practice (Haverson & Haynes, 1982; Trupke-Bastidas & Poulos, 2007). Instead of presenting phonics in a decontextualized way with nonsense words and endless worksheets on word families, WPW strives to provide a balance: on one side of the coin is meaningful language, and on the other side are the building blocks that combine to create this language. When students are familiar with a given topic and have a bank of words, teachers can then spend time on sound-symbol correspondence, and learners can discover how letters and sounds are related (Brod, 1999, p.16). This creates a much needed connection between the larger topic at hand and the emergent reading activities.

3 Explicit phonics instruction

Adults who lack print literacy generally also lack critical pre-literacy skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics skills (Gombert, 1994; Kurvers & van de Craats, 2007; Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006). The LESLLA research study by Young-Scholten and Strom shows that while all the study's participants "demonstrated solid knowledge of the alphabet in their ability to read letters in different fonts and out of order…many demonstrated no phonemic awareness and no decoding ability" (Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006, p. 63). Such findings indicate that teachers should include explicit instruction of phonemic awareness and decoding in their classrooms, since such skills do not develop with alphabet knowledge alone. Anecdotally, many of my own LESLLA learners have shown similar patterns; when shown a word, they may be able to name the letters, but they are often not able to assign sounds to the letters or to combine them to sound-out the word or to derive meaning from it.

There is much more to reading than simply knowing the alphabet, a fact that decades of reading research have proven. LESLLA instructors struggle with exactly what should be taught and how. Can these literacy skills be taught to LESLLA learners? And how should precious instructional time be spent to develop such skills? While the research surrounding literacy instruction for low-literate adult second language learners is growing, it is still quite limited. The field of LESLLA can draw from the large reading research base done with children both in first and second language literacy and also from research on adult first language literacy development.

A remarkable number of studies have been done that focus on reading development in children in the early elementary years. The National Reading Panel (2000) reviewed relevant research, and their conclusions support explicit and systematic literacy instruction. While these conclusions were based on research with native speaking children, another important research review by Kruidenier (2002) focused on adult literacy development in native speaking adults, and it also supports explicit and systematic instruction. A few small practitioner research projects have demonstrated the positive impact on reading ability when specific, concentrated phonics instruction is implemented into instruction of LESLLA learners (Evans, 2008; Trupke-Bastidas & Poulos, 2007). While further research is needed in this area, evidence points to the high value of such interventions.

What exactly is meant by explicit and systematic? Kruidenier's review states that such instruction should focus on both phonemic awareness, the ability to manipulate sounds within a spoken word, and phonics, the knowledge of sound-symbol relationships. Specifically, he suggests that teachers build phonemic awareness by (1) focusing on one or two types of phonemic awareness tasks at a time; (2) focusing on segmenting and blending, which may be most useful to learners; and (3) using letters as well as sounds for instruction (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 50). "Decoding," or mastering how sounds relate to the alphabet, requires that learners 1) recognize letters, 2) identify and produce the sounds represented by the letters, 3) blend the individual sounds in sequence, and finally 4) recognize the word (Kruidenier, 2002).

Research on the language and literacy development of children who are non-native speakers of English can also inform LESLLA practice. The American Education Research Association advocates explicit phonics as one of four critical components of reading instruction to help English language learners (ELLs) catch up to their native speaking peers (AERA, 2004, p.3). Interestingly, the other three recommendations include intensive vocabulary instruction, a focus on reading comprehension strategies, and oral language development. This package of critical components for reading constitutes a balanced literacy approach. Additionally, research studies focused on English language learning children were reviewed by the National Literacy Panel (Grant & Wong, 2003) and indicate a strong relationship between oral proficiency and literacy skills. The LESLLA research done by Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen (2009) further explores this connection between oracy and literacy, and they too conclude that practitioners must connect oral language and the written word, and they must do so in a balanced, engaging, multi-faceted way. LESLLA instructors need a toolbox full of effective balanced literacy activities, and the use of learner-generated texts is one of these tools.

4 The value of learner-generated texts

As stated at the beginning of this report, decades of adult learning research demonstrates the importance of meaningful, engaging lessons for adults (Knowles, 1973; Imel, 1998; Weinstein, 1999; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Learners' lives must be central to instructional approaches and materials (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Lado, 1991; Williams & Chapman, 2007). As Gail Weinstein writes, "ESL and literacy classrooms can and should be settings where adults find opportunities to develop language and literacy skills while reflecting, as individuals and in collaboration, on their changing lives" (1999, p. 6). Learning should be contextualized, relevant, and lessons should draw upon the actual experiences and concerns of learners (Auerbach, 1992). Adult learners have pressing needs and interests in their communities, and they must manage a great deal of environmental print. And yet when teachers reach for reading development texts and materials to build literacy in their LESLLA learners, they may find very little that is fitting for adults, and even less that combines learners needs and interests with level-appropriate literacy work (see CAELA, 2009). Much of the emergent reading curricula available and created by teachers is childish in nature, and tends to replicate the literacy work done in early childhood classrooms and primary grades. While reading-level appropriate,

such material is not engaging for adult learners as it is neither age-appropriate nor relevant to the daily needs of LESLLA learners.

Creating and capitalizing on learner-generated texts is one classroom practice that exemplifies balanced literacy instruction. Learner-generated texts immediately provide relevant, meaningful, level and age-appropriate reading material. In creating learner-generated texts, teachers tap into learners' often more developed listening and speaking skills to build literacy (Geva & Zadeh, 2006). Oral processing skills and print literacy skills are interconnected and interdependent (Tarone, Bigelow & Hansen, 2009), and as learners practice and build their oral abilities, learner-generated texts provide a means to connect these skills and to present oral language on paper. The result is an array of rich and interesting readings for students.

The traditional method of producing learner-generated texts is the Language Experience Approach (LEA). In LEA, students first share a common experience, perhaps a field trip or an experience like making a sandwich in the classroom. Then, the teacher guides them to re-tell the experience aloud. Students recall what happened to a teacher or another scribe who writes down their words. Later, these words are then used as reading texts. From here, a number of bottom-up focused techniques can be used to focus on word analysis and particular sounds and structures. Then, students revisit the entire text they have created, and perhaps add to it (see Whole Part Whole description above). LEA is an efficient technique in working with emergent readers as it connects what they are able to communicate orally to what they are learning to do in print (Crandall & Peyton, 1993).

- Shared experience
- Students' newsletters
- Picture stories
- Responding to a photograph or visual
- Transcribed taped conversations
- Journal entries
- Texts for wordless books
- Photo books
- Class posters
- Overheard student stories

(Liden, Poulos, & Vinogradov, 2008)

Figure 1: Ways to Generate Learner Texts

The Language Experience Approach is one way to create learner-generated texts, but texts can be created less formally as well (see Croydan, 2005). For example, a teacher and students can look at a photograph together and write about what they see and think. Journaling, free-writing, or a teacher simply transcribing a story a student shared during break-time all create learner-generated texts. *Figure 1* above lists more ways to generate learner texts. Such stories provide abundant opportunities for looking at bottom-up strategies. The advantage of using learner-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, teachers can then 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.

5 Examples of learner generated texts and phonics activities

Once a learner-generated text has been created, teachers can draw on the text in many ways to practice bottom-up reading skills. To explore some of these activities, we turn to a sample of LESLLA learner writing. This text *(Figure 2* below*)* was generated in an adult English as a Second Language class for low-literate adults in Minnesota, USA. This particular class consists mostly of Southeast Asian learners, refugees from Burma, Laos, and Thailand. A summer project for this LESLLA class involved creating a community garden near the school. As a shared experience that allowed students to share their farming expertise, the gardening project provided a rich resource for language and balanced literacy lessons. As they worked in the garden throughout the summer months, their instructor elicited and helped learners write a number of stories. During classroom time, she capitalized on these stories to widen their vocabularies, build their conversation skills, and develop their emerging literacy skills.

<u>Hot Day</u>
Today is summer.
Today is sunny.
Today is hot.
Today we are sweating.
Today drink water.
Today wear t-shirt.

Figure 2: Hot Day

Once meaning is well established ("whole" in WPW method), the teacher can focus on pieces of language ("parts" in WPW). A number of active, engaging tasks can help students build word recognition and sound-symbol correspondence skills with this text. While by no means a comprehensive list, a sample of such tasks is listed below.

Sequencing tasks

- *Order the Story (with group).* Write each word or phrase of the story on cards and place one full set of cards on each table. In small groups, learners need to re-create the story on their tables and practice reading it to each other.
- *Stand Up and Sequence.* Hand out a card with one word or phrase from the story to each student. Have students stand up and come to the front of the room to re-order the story, saying their words aloud as they read together.
- *Pocket Chart.* Write the story on index cards, one word on each card. Hand out the cards and have student re-create the story in order in the pocket

chart. Mix up the words the next day, or after break, and have pairs or individuals repeat ordering the story.

- *Order the Story (individually).* Type up the story for the next day, and have students cut the story into sentences, words or phrases and re-order.

Word Recognition Tasks

- *Circle the Word in the Text.* Have students circle all the times a certain word is repeated in the story. For example, following "Hot Day," students can circle "today" each time it appears, either on the board or on their own copy of the story. Repeat with the word "is."

- *Choose the Word You Hear.* Create a worksheet that lists words from the story alongside other words. Students must circle the word that is called out. For example:
  Teacher: In number one, circle the word "hot."
  (Learners choose from a worksheet; the options are hot/sunny/we).
  Teacher: Number two, circle the word "we."
  (Learners choose from the words wear/we/water.

- *Flyswatter Game.* Tape each card (with a word or phrase from the story) on the wall or board and have two learners sit in front of the board, each with a flyswatter. As the teacher or a fellow student calls out a word, the two learners race to hit it first.

- *Nine-patch.* Each student receives a piece of paper that has been marked to create 9 squares (3 X 3). Have small pieces of paper with words from the story ready for each student. As the teacher calls out a word from the story, the learner must find the slip of paper with that word and place on the grid. More advanced students can write the words on the grid.

1. summer	2. sunny	3. sweating
4. wear	5. we	6. water
7. today	8. is	9. are

- *Same or Different?* This activity helps build the 'automaticity' that fluent readers use when reading. Create a pile of paper strips with a line in the center, and write two words on each paper strip that differ only by one or two letters. Students turn over a strip very quickly, just for a moment, and they must quickly determine whether the two words are the same or different. Then turn the paper over to check.

shirt	skirt

Phonemic Awareness Tasks

- *Sound Chain.* Choose a word from the story and say it aloud. Students must listen for the final sound of that word and say a word that begins with that sound. Continue listening for the final sound and stating a word that uses that sound initially. For example:
  Teacher: Today. What's the last sound in "today?"
  Learners: /eɪ/.
  Teacher: Right! What's a word that starts with /eɪ/*?*
  Learners: Age.
  Teacher: Good! And what's the last sound in 'age'?
  Learners: /dʒ/
  Teacher: Yes. What's a word that starts with /dʒ/*?*
  Learners: Jump.
  Etc.

- *Where's the Sound?* Give each student or pair of students 3 paper cups, one for the first sound, one for a middle sound, and one for the final sound. Have student label the cups appropriately 1, 2, and 3. Say a word, and then ask students where one of the sounds in the word occurs. They must drop a bean or penny into the appropriate cup. For example, if the word is "hot," and you ask, "Where is the /t/?" Students drop a bean into the final cup, or number 3. You can then ask, "Where is the /h/ sound?" and students will drop a bean into the first cup.

- *Blend the Word.* Say a word from the story and have students say the word back in segments, emphasizing each sound. For example:
  Teacher: Summer.
  Learners: /s/, /u/, /m/, /er/
  After several words, repeat the process. Teacher says a word's phonemes, and learners must blend them mentally and say the word. For example:
  Teacher: /t/, /iy/, /sh/, /ir/, /t/
  Learners: T-shirt!

- *Does it Rhyme?* Emphasize through examples that rhyme concerns the ends of words. Have students listen to three words (at least one from the learner-generated story) and identify the one that doesn't belong.
  For example: *hot, pot, pat.* Alternatively, students can identify rhyming words in a story or the teacher can say a word (for example, *pot*) and students must find a word in the story that rhymes (*hot*).

Phonics Tasks

- *Large Cards.* Put letters or letter combinations on large cards, hand to each student, and have students "spell out" words, starting with one from the story, at the front of the room.

Teacher: D-R-I-N-K, now D and R *sit down, S come up. What word do we have now? (sink) Now I sit down, A come up. What now? (sank)* Take time to point out similarities and differences among the words and to have students

physically 'blend' the cards together in front of the room to demonstrate the combining of sounds.

- *Sort the Words.* Sort pictures or words by the letter sound. This can be done with the word cards from the story (see sequencing tasks above). Or, give students a worksheet with empty boxes for each sound, and they sort the pictures under the sound or words under the sound.

W wear, we, water	S sunny, summer
T today	Sh shirt

- *Fill in the Missing Letters.* To review the vocabulary words for your unit, give students a list of words that have one or more letters missing (try to choose ones that they could easily hear the sound of). Have students write the missing letters (without dictation).

  su___ ___y
  su___ ___er
  ___ ___irt

- *Dictation.* The literacy task of assigning symbols to sounds is a major undertaking, and students will need a great deal of practice. Dictation is also a good progress-checking activity. Connect oral and written language by having students try to write the sounds or words you (or fellow students) call out. Encourage new readers to write only the first sound they hear, or the final sound, and later the entire word if possible. Encourage "inventive" spelling.
- *Word Families.* Using a starter-word from the learner-generated text, elicit or introduce more words that fall into this word family. For example: *hot (pot, rot, shot, dot, got, not),* or *wear (pear, bear),* or *drink (sink, think, blink).* Students can sort words on cards or slips of paper into particular word families, or you can do a number of the other phonics activities listed above working not on specific sounds, but on this specific word family pattern.

- *Letter Tiles.* Put a handful of letter tiles (similar to Scrabble® tiles) on each table for use by 2-4 students. You (or a student) call out words that the learners must spell with their tiles. They can work individually, in pairs or groups. Make it into a game: Assign teams and award points to the team who can spell the word correctly first.

Clearly, once a text has been generated by LESLLA learners, teachers need only read it carefully to find a treasure chest of bottom-up tasks that can build emergent literacy skills. Some of these tasks are described above, but innovative teachers can no doubt create many, many more. The final step in the Whole-Part-Whole method is to then return to the whole text and again focus on meaning, perhaps expanding the original text in the process. By taking the time to work on the pieces of

language, including word recognition, phonemic awareness, and phonics, students then return to the whole text with deeper understanding and increased attention to how print functions.

6 Conclusion

LESLLA learners face a unique set of challenges: acquiring literacy as adults while learning a new language and resettling in a new culture. While tackling these incredible tasks, learners bring with them remarkable resources for learning that can be capitalized on by skilled teachers to build literacy. In this report, learner-generated texts are presented as one route to effective, balanced literacy instruction that addresses the top-down needs of adult emergent readers while also nurturing bottom-up skills. LESLLA teachers can capitalize on students' oral language abilities to build literacy by recording their spoken stories and using their words as reading texts.

Using the Whole-Part-Whole method, teachers can focus first on meaning and comprehension, and then they can turn attention to specific readings skills such as sequencing, word recognition, phonemic awareness, and phonics. Then returning to the 'whole' text, students gain new understanding of the building blocks of language within their own stories. Such practice uses language that is familiar and engaging to learners to nurture their emergent reading skills. In this way, teachers and learners work together to create motivating, achievable lessons that gently move LESLLA learners to becoming proficient readers and writers.

For discussion

Below is another text gathered from a LESLLA class at the Minnesota Literacy Council. What kinds of emergent literacy activities could be done with learners based on this text?

Beautiful Garden
Mr. J tiller on the dirt.
Many students clean the stones and grass.
Dirt in the pot and plant tomatoes, chilies, cilantro, eggplants.
Put in the stakes and put in the fence.
Plant broccoli, onions, green beans, flowers in the garden.
Water the plants everyday.
We like cucumbers, carrots, broccoli, onions, radishes.
We feel happy.

Figure 3: Beautiful Garden

Acknowledgments
The presentation at the LESLLA conference was adapted from a presentation at TESOL in 2008 with Astrid Liden and Andrea Poulos. As always, I am grateful for their support and encouragement.

Thank you to instructor Andrea Echelberger of the Minnesota Literacy Council for allowing me to visit her classroom and to share her students' stories in this article. Your learners are in excellent hands.

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