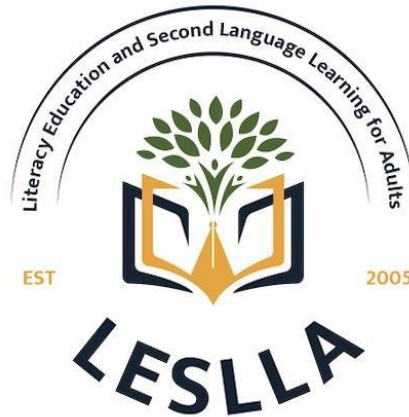


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About the Organization

LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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A Personal Account:

Ruth Colvin has long been an advocate of beginning with first language literacy as a foundation for second language instruction. At the Banff conference, Mrs. Colvin shared insights from her experience working in literacy. As a leader in this field for over sixty years, she has much to share with other literacy professionals. This personal account shares a snapshot of her global contribution to literacy.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE TO THOSE WHO ARE NON-LITERATE IN THEIR FIRST LANGUAGE

Ruth Colvin

Introduction

What is the fastest growing minority in the USA? Yes, the Hispanics or Latinos. In this modern mobile world, every country is facing fast growing minorities. Most of our minorities, including Hispanics, want and need to learn English, and many are doing that. But what about those who cannot read or write the language they speak? Research and experience suggest that it's more difficult to learn English or any second language if one is not literate in one's native language. If illiteracy in the native language is the barrier, why not then teach English (or any second language) by teaching basic native literacy as a first step?

The value of L1 literacy

For over twenty years I have been exploring and experimenting with native language literacy training in many developing countries, adapting not only my own experiences but also the Language Experience Approach from the work of Sylvia Ashton Warner of New Zealand, and illustrations/key words and syllables from the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil. I've written native language literacy books not only in Spanish, but in Tok Pisin for Papua New Guinea, in Malagasy for Madagascar, in Af Maay for the Somali Bantu, in Urdu for Pakistan, in Creole for Haiti – as well as done training in African languages.

I believe that everyone should be able to read and write in the language they speak for several reasons. They should be proud of their background and culture, and they should be able to communicate with others in their native language, not only orally but through the written word as well. But learning to speak, understand,

read and write a second language, particularly when it is the dominant language, is important for living a productive life in a new country.

How do we help those who are not literate in their native language learn a second language? My work is in teaching English as a Second Language, but the techniques described here can be adapted to teaching any second language to those who are not literate in their native language. My demonstrations will be for Spanish speakers who cannot read or write in Spanish and who want to learn English.

Many Hispanics want and need to learn English as a second or third language. I'll repeat – research and experience show that it's more difficult to learn English if one is not literate in one's native language. So, by learning to read and write in Spanish, a person should improve more rapidly in learning English.

Let me share a quote from "*The Role of First Language for ESL Learners*" by Burt and Peyton(2003) - "Learners who are literate in some writing system [and in this case Spanish] have the advantage of experience with deciphering and assigning meaning to print and using print [in this case English] to enhance their learning."

Using the Language Experience Approach

People who are non- literate are often ashamed, have low self-confidence, and expect the teacher to somehow pour knowledge into them, that is, they expect a "teacher centered" approach. Instead, I'm suggesting we become "learner centered," focusing on the students' needs, interests, goals, problems and concerns. Using the Language Experience Approach is an excellent way to break the ice for that first meeting. It's a meaningful way to get the students talking, and to have a collaborative teaching and learning situation.

Many educators use the Language Experience Approach for children, but I've found it even more useful for getting adults to share their thoughts – their successes as well as their problems – giving us, as teachers, opportunities to make realistic lessons that focus on the students' interests.

The Language Experience Approach involves asking your students to share with you their concerns, or dreams, or what they like best to do. You, the teacher, write the students' words and teach them to read their own words.

It's an ice-breaker for a new teaching situation and, as a result, you've found out something about your students, which will help you to pick out meaningful books for them to read. As well, your students probably know more about some subjects than you do, giving them more self-confidence, and giving you a better appreciation of your students. And finally, your students become authors themselves, first dictating, and later writing their own thoughts, dreams, or interests.

LEA in action – Swaziland

I use the Language Experience Approach as I give literacy training in developing countries. One such place I provided training was in Swaziland. Swaziland is a tiny kingdom, the size of New Jersey, completely land-locked, surrounded on three sides by South Africa and one side by Mozambique, ruled by a king and his mother.

In order to help in their training, I insisted that I wanted to visit the rural areas, to see the literacy classes in the villages. One class met under a tree, with a crude blackboard nailed to the tree. But the one I remember best was in a rondoal. A rondoal is a traditional round hut made of sticks, stones and mud, with a thatched roof, a door, and only slits for windows for light – there was no electricity in these villages. Eight women sat on mats on the floor.

I asked through my interpreter what was going on in the village. The ladies couldn't understand why I asked, for no one had ever seemed interested in *their* opinions. They talked among themselves in siSwati, and I learned that two of their children had died last month. How sad! They were concerned because they had to spend much more time home taking care of their children. It was hard to take care of the crops too, and they couldn't get to their peddling jobs, making money scarce.

Peddling? What was that? I learned that nearly fifty percent of the Swazi women were peddlers. One must get a license to be a peddler, giving them the right to sell goods in a limited area of Swaziland. The women would go to South Africa by bus, buy consumer goods that were unavailable in Swaziland – pots, pans, bedding – and resell them in Swaziland at a modest profit. Indeed, they were small business persons and entrepreneurs.

But times were changing, they said. They used to be able to go to South Africa and register with only a thumb print. Now they must sign their names and keep records of what they bring out.

A wonderful story. I suggested *they* put the story in their own words and I'd write it down, teaching them to read their own words. Yes, the Language Experience Approach. They were excited for they had never before been given the opportunity to choose the text for their studies. They made their own reading book. They were now authors.

But as we worked together, I noticed that several of the women rubbed their eyes, bringing their faces close to their writing books. It was dark in the rondoal. Didn't they have any kerosene lanterns? Too expensive. What about candles? Too expensive.

I then realized that I had my reading glasses on. I took them off and gave them to the first lady. She hesitantly put them on, and then came a big grin and a stream of words in siSwati – she could see. She took the glasses off and passed them to the next lady – and they made their way around the group. Several of these women needed glasses. My reading glasses, which enlarged the print on the page, were what they needed. How I wanted to leave them, but they were the only pair I had and I needed them. Right then and there, I knew what I wanted for Christmas – four pairs of reading glasses to pass on to my new friends. Yes, sometimes it's as simple as getting reading glasses.

LEA in action – Zambia

I also used the Language Experience Approach, through a translator, in a maximum security prison in Kabwe, Zambia, Africa. The Commissioner of Prisons said that he felt that ten percent of the inmates were literate, that fifteen percent semi-literate, and that seventy-five percent totally non-literate in any language.

As I walked into a bare room in the prison in Kabwe, I saw perhaps twenty men dressed in ragged white shorts and tops made of old mealie-meal sacks. They

stood with heads down, listening to the instructor talk in Bembe, their language. Soon the instructor indicated it was my turn to talk. What does one say to rugged men who are in prison, who cannot read and write their own language?

I plunged in, and through a translator, asked what they wanted to talk about. There was no response. In fact, they were surprised for they'd never been asked what they wanted. Again - "What do you like best to do?" When I pointed to one young man, he looked up in surprise, and then said, "*Ulimi*" which means *farming*. I had the translator write *Ulimi* on the board. I asked the next man - *woodworking* - we wrote it on the board in Bembe. A third said, *dancing*.

With three choices, I reminded them that Zambia was now a democracy and in my classes each man had one vote. They could vote for what they wanted to talk about - *farming, woodworking or dancing*.

Heads came up; they talked among themselves; they became alive as they voted by raising their hands. I counted in English; the translator in Bembe, and what clapping there was when *Ulimi* won.

I reminded them that they knew more of farming than I did. We could hardly keep up writing the words that spilled out. They disagreed. They changed the wording. But they finally agreed that their story would start, translated to English,

Farming is important to give us food.

So you can use the Language Experience Approach not only for one-to-one work but also for working in a small group or in a classroom setting. Let the learners suggest three topics, and have them vote on their favorite.

Using Lectura y Escritura en Español

Yes, these students learned sight words with the Language Experience Approach, and there's nothing wrong with sight words. Eventually we read all words by sight; we don't sound them out. But the students must eventually learn the sounds of all the letters, and it's easier in Spanish and many other languages than it is in English because, unlike English, Spanish is phonetically regular – each letter sound is constant.

In addition to using the Language Experience Approach, the teacher might also use a text such as the *Lectura y Escritura en Español*. Referring to *Lectura y Escritura en Español* – student's book – the teacher and student together look at the first illustration, a picture of two women (or two men) greeting each other. All the conversations, of course, are in Spanish. The teacher asks open-ended questions about the picture (e.g. Who are they? How do they know each other?) as the student responds – there are no right or wrong answers. The teacher leads with questions until she asks what the student thinks the people in the illustration are saying, leading the student to "*Hola, amigo mio,*" the key words for the first chapter. The teacher teaches these words as sight words, eventually breaking them down into syllables, teaching the five Spanish vowel sounds and connecting these vowels with other consonants.

Exercises include writing and reading words both out of context and in the context of a short story, with comprehension questions at the end. The same pattern of teaching new key words and new consonants, of reading a short story

with comprehension questions, is used for the following non-controversial subjects: greetings, family, market, clinic, school, visit to a farm, visit to a city, and a final chapter gives a surprise ending. Details of how to use the student book are in the teacher's guide.

The next step - Tools for L2 instruction

The teacher now faces the next challenge: When do we start teaching English and how? Having learned the basics of reading and writing in his own language through the use of the Language Experience Approach and the *Lectura y Escritura en Español*, the learner now has enough self confidence to start to learn English or another second language.

I suggest you start teaching English when students complete Chapter 5, 6, or 7 in *Lectura y Escritura en Español*. Continue teaching half the lesson in Spanish using the book, and then switch to teach the remaining half of the book in English. I encourage teaching English in the following sequence: listening, speaking, followed up by reading the same words or sentences, and, finally, writing these same words or sentences. =

Using Total Physical Response (TPR) and simple commands is a good place to start. The teacher demonstrates as she gives a command in English and the students respond. The students listen and understand (stand up, sit down, open the window, etc.).

Using colored papers as props (adapted from Gattegno, 1963), you can teach simple sentences, adding new vocabulary as quickly or as slowly as students respond. I demonstrated this exercise in Shona, an African language, to show how one can easily understand first, then speak, and eventually read and write the simple sentences in a new language. Detailed instructions are found in *I Speak English*.

I encourage teachers to go back to the early chapters of *Lectura y Escritura en Español*, familiar to the students, and use similar techniques of teaching but this time in English. After you've read the chapter stories aloud in English (remember, your student knows the stories – having read them in Spanish), ask your student to paraphrase, tell the story in his own words, and check comprehension by asking the questions, this time in English. All words and stories in the student's book have an English translation in the teacher's guide.

You're starting to teach English with subjects already known to your students and you are doing it in the same format as you used when teaching reading and writing in Spanish. Your student is learning English in the most effective sequence – listening with understanding, and speaking. As he gains proficiency and confidence in understanding and speaking English, you can add the reading and writing of those same words, and continue teaching English as suggested in “*I SPEAK ENGLISH*.”

Summing up

I hope you're as enthusiastic as I am about teaching basic native language literacy as a first step to learning a second language to those who are non-literate in their spoken language. In this presentation, I have used teaching Spanish literacy as

a first step to learning English for those Spanish speakers who have low literacy levels in their native Spanish. This is just a glimpse into the techniques suggested for teaching English to those who are not literate in their native language. I hope all of this made sense to you; unless it's practical, it's of no use.

You've learned why teaching basic Spanish literacy or basic native language literacy is important to help students who have limited or no literacy in their native language to learn English. You've learned how to teach using the Language Experience Approach and how to use the book *Lectura y Escritura en Español* to teach basic Spanish literacy. You've learned basic steps in teaching conversational English.

As individuals we can't teach the millions who need our help, but we each can teach one person – and your one person multiplied by thousands of individual teachers, just might make a difference – but there's a big *if*. That is, *if* teachers are willing to use learner centered lessons and *if* teachers are willing to try new approaches, new techniques, and new ways to solve problems those who are non-literate in their native language might encounter while learning a new language.

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Lectura y Escritura en Español - Student's book – by Ruth J. Colvin
(New Readers Press)

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RUTH JOHNSON COLVIN, Founder of Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. (LVA)

Ruth Colvin is the founder of Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc., a national, non-profit, educational, volunteer organization, to help combat the illiteracy problems in the USA. LVA has merged with Laubach Literacy International and is now ProLiteracy Worldwide.

Since 1962, when Mrs. Colvin started LVA, she and her husband, Bob, have traveled all over the United States and the world (visited 62 countries, worked in 26), giving workshops in Basic Literacy (BL) and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The recipient of nine honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters degrees, Mrs. Colvin also received, in 1987, the President's Volunteer Action Award presented by President Ronald Reagan, and in 2006 the Presidential Medal of Freedom presented by President George Bush. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1991.

Mrs. Colvin is an author of books on literacy for the USA, on teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, on travel, as well as basic native literacy books in Tok Pisin, Malagasy, Spanish, Af Maay, Urdu, and Creole. She and her husband, Robert Colvin, live in Syracuse, New York, USA.