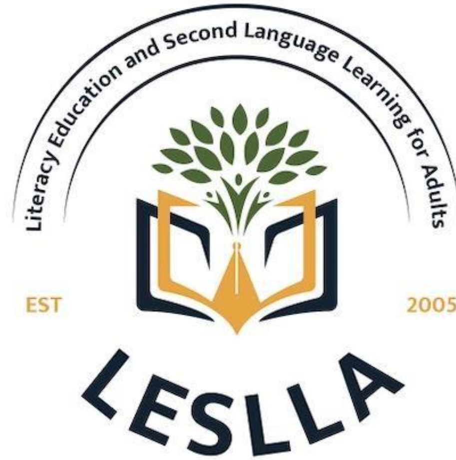
LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



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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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LOW-LEVEL LEARNERS: PRIORITIZING TEACHING TOPICS

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Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council

How can instructors best choose learning topics, an instructional sequence, and which language skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing—to stress for results that are both measurable and meaningful to our LESLLA students?

Many refugee students come to ESL classes with so much to learn, and low or no literacy skills. When students need so much English language learning, where do we begin? How do we proceed? Many programs, when faced with low-literate learners, want to "be all things to all people," which results in a "smorgasbord of educational offerings," or a 'whatever works' philosophy that engulfs the learners in an endless variety of activities" (Wrigley, 1993, p.463, as cited in Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). This paper explains the process two instructors followed to restructure what was once a 'smorgasbord' Foundations level class into a systematic, low-level 'pre-literacy' ESL class focusing on daily life topics, basic communication and acculturation, and skills that may help prepare for literacy instruction. We detail the typical structure of a class and present the learning goals we have for our students.

Background

The work we do with our refugee students happens at Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC), a community-based organization located in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. GPLC provides instructional programs in English as a Second Language, basic skills (reading, writing, math), GED Preparation, workplace skills development, and family literacy. All services provided to students are free. Volunteer tutors provide one-to-one and small group instruction throughout the city while professional instructors are responsible for classroom instruction at a central location. The professional instructional staff is responsible for creating curriculum, lesson planning and some materials development.

Incoming ESOL students are assessed with the *BEST Plus (Basic English Skills Test*[1]*)*. *BEST Plus* is an individually administered, face-to-face oral interview designed to assess the English language proficiency of adult English language learners in the United States. *BEST Plus* is a combined test of listening and speaking skills. As an oral assessment, *BEST Plus* provides a short, practical test that meets the accountability needs of publically funded programs that report to the National Reporting System (NRS). The following chart illustrates the *BEST Plus* scoring and the corresponding SPL (student performance levels) and NRS levels.

ESOL Speaking/Listening Correlations Using Best Plus

Scale Scores	SPL Levels	Nrs Level
400 and below	0-1	Beginning ESOL Literacy
401-417	2	Low Beginning ESOL
418-438	3	High Beginning ESOL
439-472	4	Low Intermediate ESOL
473-506	5	High Intermediate ESOL
507-540	6	Low Advanced ESOL
541-598 complete level = 599+	7 and above	High Advanced ESOL

From: http://www.nrsweb.org/foundations/related_documents.aspx

1 The BEST Plus assessment was created by the Center for Applied Linguistics, and more information can be found at: http://www.cal.org/aea/bestplus/index.html.

Our students are mainly newly arrived Bhutanese refugees along with some Burmese and Iraqi refugees. They range in age from 30-70 years old, and the majority of these students spent nearly 20 years in refugee camps. Students entering our Foundations level class scored at a 0-1 SPL level/Beginning ESOL literacy level, with over two-thirds of the class scoring under 200 on the *BEST Plus*. The Spring Institute's updated speaking and listening descriptors categorize these students as ranging from no ability in English to minimum functioning skills, understanding a few isolated words to understanding a limited number of simple learned phrases. Native English speakers have great difficulty communicating with these students at this level. (see http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/slspls.html)

In addition to the *BEST Plus,* GPLC also uses a writing sample to assess students. Many Foundations level students can write the Roman alphabet with varying degrees of success and difficulty. Some can write their names; some can write their addresses. At the highest Foundations' level, some students can write a few words in their native language. Some students have no writing ability and even refuse to hold a pencil. Based on these writing samples, we believe most of the students in our Foundations class are either nonliterate (learners who have had no access to literacy) or semiliterate (learners who have had limited access to literacy instruction).

GPLC has always offered a Foundations class, but the class grew and the students' needs changed as more refugees

at this skill-level resettled in the greater Pittsburgh area. This is when we began to restructure the class, realizing we needed more instructors and a more systematic plan specifically directed at low-literate learners with little or no educational background. Currently, our class accommodates between 20-30 students daily (over 30 students are enrolled); it meets Mondays through Thursdays for two hours per class. The class is separated into three groups by level, and we have three teachers. The class is open-enrollment, open-entry and open-exit; new students can join the class at any time (and most refugees join soon after arriving in Pittsburgh), and students leave the class when test scores and informal assessments show they can advance or when they begin jobs.

The Kind of Teaching We Value

We began restructuring this class by reminding ourselves of standard components of effective teaching. As experienced teachers, we believe instruction should be student-centered; students learn best what they most want to learn. Many educators maintain that adult education is most effective when it is "experience centered, related to learners' real needs, and directed by learners themselves" (Auerbach, 1992, p.14). Secondly, we believe that effective instruction should be explicit and systematic. It should follow a logical, progressive sequence, one that introduces fundamental skills and then builds on them. Also, instruction for adults should be explicit: the instructor needs to know exactly what she wants students to learn, and students should have a clear sense of these expectations plus an understanding of why the knowledge is important (Knowles, 1978). Finally, instruction should be routine-based. Routine is important for all learners, but it's crucial for adults with little or no formal education. When learners lack an understanding of 'doing school', a standard daily routine can help prepare and organize their minds for learning, and it can be comforting: they know what to expect when they enter the classroom (Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

With these components of effective teaching as the overarching principles for our class, we addressed the questions of *where to start* and *how to proceed* in order to make the best use of our class time. We looked to ESL textbooks for guidance.

Looking To Textbooks

While beginning ESL textbooks gave us good ideas for learning topics, we found them not suitable for students with no or low literacy. Typically, these books contain too much text on the page, the pace of the learning is fast, and they require an understanding of how to quickly maneuver around standard school-like text skills. For example, a matching activity that requires different tracking skills than reading a sentence (students have to draw a line connecting elements from two columns) shares a page with a listen and circle exercise and a fill-in-the-blank activity. With low-educated adults, each of these school activities needs to be explicitly taught, a time-consuming and often confusing task. Also, often exercises assume students have a visual/cultural literacy necessary to make sense of a task (Bruski, 2011). For example, images of hugging as a greeting or pictures of an American police car are used as part of an exercise while no explanation is provided to help understand the graphic component.

Next, we turned to beginning literacy ESL textbooks. These texts focus on different approaches to teaching beginning reading skills, with a strong emphasis on writing and/or copying. Though we don't want to discount the importance of writing, we know that for many of our students, writing ranges from a difficult to an exhausting task. We also find that the more students focus on writing, the less they are able to concentrate on speaking and listening. Though the beginning literacy texts reminded us of important functional literacy skills, these texts helped us solidify a priority: we wanted to provide our students with instruction that would help them connect and communicate with others around them in their daily lives.

A 'Pre-Literacy" Class

Research indicates that students with more oral language facility have more success with literacy (see Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009). It has also been noted that pre-literacy instruction should precede print-based literacy instruction. In addition, cognitive research indicates that a great deal of preparation is needed before actual reading instruction begins (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). With this in mind, we decided to design a 'pre-literacy' class, one that addresses speaking and listening skills in order to develop a large working vocabulary and a sense of language structure, and explicitly teaches some aspects of 'doing school' that might help prepare students for literacy work in the future. Two questions guided our class design: *Where do our students encounter English?* And, *How is what I'm teaching relevant to my students' communication needs?*

Where Do Our Students Encounter English?

Research suggests that instruction at this low-level should have "a highly functional, personal focus—more so for them than for other adult language learners" (Bigelow& Schwarz, 2010).

To establish this practical, personal focus, we asked ourselves, *Where do our students encounter English?* We came up with the following list:

- school (ESL classes plus their children's schools)
- bus
- shopping
- social service agencies
- doctor's offices
- work (some of our students have jobs)
- apartment complexes, including interactions with apartment management
- traveling between these places

This question, and this preliminary list, is what we use to choose topics for our instruction. Though the topics

aren't so different than what you may see in a beginning ESL textbook, our instruction is much slower, not wholly reliant on 'school skills', and focused on communication and acculturation.

Communication Needs

Since oral communication is our goal in this initial class, we came up with a pivotal question that guides our curriculum and our daily work: *How is what I'm teaching relevant to my students' communication needs?* We ask ourselves and each other this question whenever we are surveying what to teach and how to teach. If we can't find a practical, pertinent answer to this question, we don't follow through with a lesson.

The daily plan

Key components of effective teaching, an emphasis on daily-life encounters with English, and a communication goal guide the structure of our classes, which follow the same general routine every day. Our routine consists of three distinct parts. We begin class as a large group, and then break into three small groups to carry out essentially the same lesson designed for success at different levels.

The Three S's: Small Talk, Social Etiquette, and Situating

As a large group, we begin class with work on The Three S's: small talk, social etiquette, and situating. As students settle into the classroom, we start with small talk, which consists of practicing simple language chunks featuring typical American cultural content. We ask about the weather (Americans frequently talk about the weather), and we talk about who arrived early, on-time, or late. We ask standard questions Americans may ask of foreigners: *Where are you from? Where do you live now? How long have you lived in Pittsburgh? Do you like Pittsburgh?* We teach this information by modeling, and since the class is open-entry, we backpedal and review as new students join class.

Next, we practice some kind of social etiquette, communication that will help students interact with each other, their teachers, other staff and students at the center and people in the community. At school and in the community, we had witnessed students' inability to tune in to their surroundings because of a lack in cultural knowledge (specifically cultural etiquette) and a basic lack of vocabulary. One incident involved a field trip to a drugstore to examine prices. As the students huddled in the aisle, native English speakers repeatedly said 'excuse me' in attempts to get past, but the students did not register that request. This resulted in them receiving dirty looks (and in the teachers having to physically move the students). Our social etiquette lessons include simple ways to initiate and negotiate greetings (*how are you, have a nice weekend, see you tomorrow*, etc.) and saying 'excuse me' in a variety of situations from finding a seat in class to moving down a crowded hallway. We even teach the correct way to cough, sneeze, and blow your nose in order to not spread germs or offend American's sense of politeness. We teach social etiquette lessons through modeling and precise repetition. For example, we emphasize the exact same 'how are you' dialog in every class with no variation. (*How are you? / Good, thanks. And you? / Good, thanks.*) This rote learning assures mastery of one kind of social interaction. We reserve about 20-30 minutes for small talk and social etiquette activities.

Finally, 'situating' involves preparing for school-like activities. We do this by focusing on calendar activities. While the first two activities have a more relaxed feel about them, with students answering and asking questions in a more free-flowing style, our situating activity sets the stage for school learning. The students become visibly more serious, focused, and quiet when asked to take out their monthly calendar (which we copy on different colored paper each month). Our instruction for this segment of class also is more typically school-like. We begin with a classic listen and repeat choral activity to practice ordinal numbers. We ask the same

calendar questions in the same order every day: *What day is today? What day was yesterday? What day is tomorrow? What was the day before yesterday? What is the day after tomorrow?* We conclude this section by asking how many students are in class, and then counting to check the number. By the conclusion of these activities, students are ready to break into their leveled groups and continue their learning.

Number Activities

Based on the list of where our students encounter English, numeracy instruction emerged as a priority. Our students encounter numbers in many daily situations. They need to know bus numbers, dates and times, prices, phone numbers, and addresses. What follows is a summary of the number instruction we do by levels. This part of our daily routine takes approximately 30 minutes.

Low-level Number Instruction

Instruction for our lowest-level students focuses on counting to 100, emphasizing how the pattern of numbers increases by 10's, and reading numeric (not written) numbers from 1-100. Daily life applications of number skills include counting objects in our room and in their lives (*How many chairs are there? How many sons do you have?*) and reciting, hearing and understanding phone numbers, social security numbers, and bus numbers. We also introduce coins and dollars at this level, emphasizing sight recognition and a knowledge of value and basic money counting. We use real coins and copies of dollars copied onto light-green paper so they are the correct size and approximate color. We count money in a very systematic way, starting with mastering counting pennies. Next, we begin with a nickel and add pennies; then we being with a dime and add pennies; then a quarter and add pennies. We do the same with dollars. At this level, students also practice hearing and reading numeric prices and understanding the dollar symbol and decimal point.

Mid-Level Number Instruction
At the middle level, students focus on counting by 5's, 10's, and 25's; understanding, hearing, and reading numeric dates and digital times; and reading numeric numbers in the hundreds. Instruction focuses mainly on daily life applications of reading, counting, and understanding larger monetary amounts. Students also learn comparison language, how to say if a number is more or less, least or most. Though we still do a lot of hands-on work with coins and dollars, at this level, we introduce 'school-like' activities, such as listening and circling worksheets and number writing. Worksheets are typed in large-print Century Gothic font and are sparse, containing only 8-15 items and no graphics (see appendix). It's important to note that we explicitly teach, through modeling and repetition, how to read these worksheets, and this is often a long process. We also work on communication skills focused on prices and shopping. Students learn how to ask how much items cost, how to estimate approximate totals, and how to engage in checkout conversations involving appropriate greetings, in addition to listening for totals and change.

High-Level Number Instruction
Our highest level students focus on hearing and writing larger numbers, counting large amounts of money and making change, in addition to mastering numeric dates and digital times. We do more work with listening/circling worksheets and with writing numbers. We also emphasize more complex communication at this level. Students learn how to read appointment cards and communicate appointments to their instructor and fellow students. They also learn to check the accuracy of change they receive and practice different shopping check-out dialogs to express if they've been given enough or not enough change.

Daily Life Picture Stories
At the center of our instruction are daily life picture stories.

These stories focus on familiar daily-life situations in order to teach vocabulary for the things that surround our students, provide opportunities for students to communicate about their daily lives, and teach cultural etiquette and appropriate interpersonal communication.

We create some of our own picture stories, but mainly we adapt stories from texts. These texts, though great resources, are *not* designed for students at this level and require many changes to make them easy for the students to understand and 'read.' Some adaptations we make are to simplify the narrative by cutting frames, add bodies to pictures, add details to make materials more applicable to our students' experiences (for example, we added a Pittsburgh city bus fare box for a story about riding the bus). Also, we always use color photos to introduce the story's vocabulary and then clarify the connection between the photos and drawings in a story. Studies have shown that nonliterate subjects are better at naming two-dimensional representations of real objects when presented as colored photos as compared to black and white drawings (Reis, 2006).

Most importantly, we simplify and regulate the story's syntax to highlight basic sentence structure. As much as possible, we write story scripts that follow subject + verb + object structure or subject + verb + object + prepositional phrase structure, either in simple present or continuous present tense. We aim for highly repetitive noun and verb use.

Stories follow a logical sequence. For example, one sequence of stories begins with Shopping for Food, then progresses to Paying for Food, Cooking Dinner, Clearing the Table and Doing Dishes. Another sequence we teach begins with Getting Dressed, then progresses to four related stories: Leaving the House, Riding the Bus, Walking Somewhere, and Coming to School. (We created Walking Somewhere and Coming to School specifically for our students to address problems we witnessed: students didn't understand crosswalks and negotiating crowded sidewalks, and they weren't

following the proper procedure to enter our building, which requires showing ID and interacting with a front desk person.) (See Appendix B)

We follow a four-step routine with the picture stories:

- Teach vocabulary using large color photographs.
- Tell the story using large pictures while students only listen. (We do this several times.)
- Provide copies of the story without text. Students listen and repeat many times. Next, they listen, repeat, and answer questions. Then they listen, repeat, and personalize.
- Provide copies of the story with text. Students listen and repeat. (The version with text is given out only on the final days of working on a story.

We realize *we are not teaching reading* by giving out a story with text. We use the text to model tracking of words and to teach accurate counting of words, reinforcing how text looks and works on the page. We also know that many of our students have children who are literate and who may be able to reinforce the language we've been teaching by reading the story.)

Stories range from five to 12 picture frames. Generally, we take approximately two weeks to complete each story. (This gives a sense of the amount of repetition we stress.) Approximately every six weeks, we take time to review past stories. Our goals for story work vary by level.

Low-Level Story Goals

At the lowest level, we expect that students will learn new vocabulary for nouns and corresponding verbs and will have some success with placing verbs and objects together (*sweep the floor, wash the dishes*). We expect students to excel at listening exercises that ask them to identify which picture matches which sentence from the story. We also expect an understanding of prepositional phrases (*in the bag, on the table)* even if students have difficulty with the syntax of this

structure. At this level, we also begin work with listening for the number of words in a sentence. We tap or count out words so they can hear when one word starts and another ends. Students should be able to answer basic questions to show story comprehension (yes or no questions using do/ does; what/ where questions). Also, students should be able to answer yes and no questions to personalize the stories. (*Do you wipe the table? Do you sweep the floor every day?*)

Mid-Level Story Goals

With middle-level students, we work on mastering vocabulary for nouns and verbs while emphasizing the syntax of a complete simple sentence with particular emphasis on the order of verbs and objects. In addition to the goals for the lower-level students, we expect mid-level students will be able to repeat a simple sentence from the story script with a high degree of accuracy. Students exhibit more retention of vocabulary, showing an ability to talk about a single story picture when the story sentence hasn't just been said to them. (The syntax may be wrong, they may omit a subject, but they can communicate the general idea without being prompted.) Students at this level have greater success with hearing and counting individual words in a sentence and can complete verbal cloze exercises with high accuracy (particularly when the missing word is a noun or verb). Mid-level students can work in pairs to place cut-up picture frames in the correct story order.

These students can also communicate more complex connections between the story and their lives. They should be able to answer the beginning-level questions in more detail, in addition to like/don't like questions and who and when questions (*Who washes dishes? When do you wash the dishes?).* Again, the students' syntax is not exact, but their answers exemplify comprehension and appropriate communication. Finally, at this level, we begin some explicit verbal instruction in basic grammar points, such as gender-appropriate pronouns.

High-Level Story Goals

Our high-level students master story vocabulary and the simple syntax of the stories. We emphasize hearing the number of words in sentences and replicating sentences with exact precision. Students can often explain two or more picture frames with a high degree of accuracy. At this level, we put more emphasis on precise pronunciation of key words.

We work on more complex questions to personalize the stories. In addition to the questions noted above, students are asked to tell about their daily activities in relation to the story. For example, after the story 'Cleaning the House,' students explained their cleaning routines. They made comparisons to what was the same as the story and what was different.

Though we don't expect mastery, at this level we explicitly teach some grammar points, such as singular pronouns. We begin modeling present tense conjugations, and as explicitly as we can, we teach the difference between simple present tense and continuous present tense.

What Success Looks Like

Success, for our funders, is defined by an NRS level gain on the BEST Plus test after 50-100 hours of instruction. However, with low-level, low-educated students, this goal is most often not realistic. Success, instead, presents itself in different ways, some of which we can quantify, but many of which are difficult to quantify.

Our first measure of success is retention. We keep in mind research that shows adults with no print literacy did poorly in beginning ESL classes that stressed literacy, and they dropped out in much larger numbers than did more literate students. (LaLyre, 1996, as cited in Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). After we restructured this class, we saw a sharp increase in hours of instruction. The average student is now staying in class 6-12 months, which results in 200-400 hours of instruction. Next, we are seeing gains in *BEST Plus* assessments, gains we think are relatively large for this level. On initial retesting after 60 hours, many students' scores went from 88 (the lowest possible BEST Plus score) to the 200's. Students who initially tested in the mid to high 200's are making NRS level gains, sometimes after 100 hours, though more often after over 200 hours of instruction. Many students are nearing level gains, but are topping out in the high 300's. We continue to evaluate our practices to determine how we can help them advance.

We have noted, but not quantified, changes in students' abilities to comprehend questions and to string words together using more accurate syntax. For example, when we are talking about their daily lives, many of our students now place verbs and objects in the correct English order ('washing dishes') which is opposite of Nepali syntax ('dishes washing'). Students are quick to answer random, though common, questions in short, complete sentences. (Were you late? *I was early.* How's the weather? *It's cloudy and cold.*)

What is more difficult to quantify are the changes we see in the students' interpersonal communication skills. Students are more socially engaged with us, one another, and with the staff at the center. We see this when they learn each other's names or talk with students who are not part of the same ethnic group. They greet the receptionist when they come in and say goodbye when they leave. Students now say and respond to 'excuse me' in appropriate situations. They say 'thank you' and 'you're welcome'. They tell us and each other to 'Have a nice weekend.' They are eager to communicate news: *No class, appointment tomorrow.* Or, *Deepa coming Saturday, Sunday.* Finally, when asked what they like about the United States, they answer *English class.*

Conclusion

What is frequently missing in low-level classes for low-literate English learners is a systematic, intentional approach. By narrowing our focus to communication and acculturation in addition to teaching some pre-literacy 'doing school' skills, we've been able to create a class with clear, pertinent goals.

The teachers have a clear vision and a clear sense of logical progression, which helps us better define what we can do to help our students advance in their language learning to feel more connected to and more comfortable in their new lives.

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Appendix A

Listen and circle.

(Example: Low-level number worksheet)

a.	11	21	33
b.	45	52	60
c.	5	8	19

Listen and circle.

(Example: mid-level number worksheet)

a.	$33 .33	$30.13	$50.53
b.	$19.19	$90.19	$19.90
c.	.67	.76	.69

Listen and circle

(Example: high-level number worksheet)

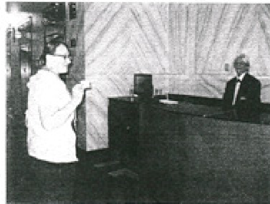
a.	$32.99	$23.99	$43.99
b.	$66.16	$66.60	$16.60
c.	$525.25	$555.50	$500.00

Appendix

Coming to School

Jenny enters the building.

She smiles. She says 'hi' to the guard.



She shows her I.D. card.

She smiles. She says 'hi' to the elevator man.

She waits for the elevator.

She gets on the elevator.