

Teaching Beginner ELLs with Picture Books

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Tellability is applied to selecting pictures books with features that mirror the types of adaptations used by language teachers. These books provide students with scaffolds for comprehension, expression, language-focused study, and fluency. The report features a Language Experience Approach lesson using a picture book with tellability.

Keywords: ELLs; ESOL; TESOL; Communicative Language Teaching; Picture Books; Tellability; Instructional Conversation; Language Experience Approach (LEA); Beginner ELLs

Picture books communicate meaning through direct experiences with text and visual media (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2013; Sipe, 1998; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2000). Authors and illustrators embed their texts, graphics, and formats with features that purposely prompt interaction. Typical features include large fonts for readers to shout, flaps to lift, and questions to answer by examining an illustration. Texts and visuals are static; they do not change. In comparison, the socially mediated means of

communication by the teacher and the students' responses are on-the-spot language that is fluid communication. Taken as a whole, picture books are a multidimensional medium that is a rich resource for a broad range of instructional situations.

Some picture books are ideal for teaching beginner English Language Learners (ELLs) because they have embedded features that direct students' experience with English that is accessible. The book's features scaffold oral instructional conversations which prompt the type of language needed for successful communicative language teaching (Lado, 2012). These types of books save teachers from having to plan mediation activities between the language in a book and the language abilities of the ELLs.

Finding the right book for teaching beginner ELLs requires going beyond a readability or leveled book formula. These formulas focus on text and not the difficulty of the overall language presented through the combined experience of the text, graphics, format, and oral experience. Most annotated lists of picture books do not have enough information about levels of difficulty for oral instruction because they address readability. Teachers of beginner ELLs need information about a book's tellability. They need information about

features that prompt successful participation of ELLs during communicative language teaching.

I have developed a list of picture books for ELLs by applying the concept of ‘tellability.’ Although the study of tellability covers many types of narratives including instructional conversations (Baroni, 2014), few studies have applied it to teaching ELLs. Tellability was coined by sociolinguist, William Labov in 1972. He coined the term while analyzing solicited narratives of African-American youths about specific personal experiences. Labov’s analysis began with asking the question “why this narrative...is felt to be tellable; in other words, why the events of the narrative are reportable” (p. 370). The study of an oral story’s tellability is dependent on a specific context and includes examination of the discourse features used by storytellers to keep the audience’s interest. We know that an insignificant incident can be made noteworthy at the hands of a good storyteller and a noteworthy incident can be ruined by a poor storyteller. We also know that a good story teller will tell the same story differently to different types of listeners. For example, a story that is told with a lot of detail to a native English speaker will be told with less detail to beginner ELLs.

Picture Books with Tellability

Teachers use picture books with beginner ELLs to support and prompt interactions. These interactions combine the communication mediums of the picture book and the teacher's oral communication. Teachers engage ELLs in accessing the English in the book's text and the English in the real life instructional conversation about it. Meaning is accessed through the interplay of text, image, and the experience (Sipe, 1998). The tellability of a book lies in the interplay of the static features of the book and the fluid features of a teacher's oral language presentation of the book.

Just as some teachers are better storytellers for beginner ELLs than others, some picture books contain better scaffolds for English comprehension and language learning than others. The best books for beginner ELLs contain particular types of features in their text, illustrations, and formats. These books will free a teacher from having to develop extra mediation between the English in the book and that of the ELLs. These books also free ELLs from depending on the teacher for help with recall of newly learned English because they can refer to the book for help.

Teachers scaffold conversation in order to avoid the typical breakdowns inherent in interactions with beginners. Typical linguistic scaffolds include limiting the amount of language that the ELL must process by providing repetition, pauses, and nonlinguistic scaffolds, such as gestures, pictures, and objects. Let me describe some of the ways picture books prompt language learning in beginner ELs.

Instructional Conversations Based on Picture Books

The following examples illustrate ways that picture books mirror teacher adaptations. In each case, assume that comprehension was aided by transparent illustrations of the content. *In these text examples, the forward slash indicates a new page.*

Example #1 Text with Sentence Patterns

This is the sugar / that makes the pie filling. / This is the bowl / that holds sugar that makes the pie filling. / This is the flour / that makes the pie crust. / This is the pan / that holds the flour that makes the pie crust. /
Explanation This type of text helps beginners in two ways. First, the page breaks create a pause between sentences. This allows the student to process the input and mirrors the frequent pauses teachers make when interacting with beginners. Second, this text has a grammatical pattern in its sentences. When texts have patterned sentences, it lends itself to explicitly directing students' attention to the grammar. I provide it by showing the sentence with blanks and having students substitute words in the same class in the blank. <i>This is the <u>sugar/bowl/flour</u> that <u>makes/holds</u> the <u>pie filling/pie crust</u>.</i> Once mastered, students can substitute other objects in the environment into the sentence pattern.

A number of the books provided at the end of this article have patterned sentences. Some examples are *The Cazuela that the Farm Maiden Stirred* (Vamos, 2011), *The Apple Pie that Papa Baked* (Thompson, 2007), *The Breakfast We Made for Mother* (Neitzel, 1997) and *The House I'll Build for the Wrens* (Neitzel, 1997). In the next example, the text and format differ from this patterned text example in that it is a picture dictionary and does not have sentences but labeled illustrations.

Example #2 Picture Dictionary

FRUITS Apple Banana Orange Grapes /
BAKING Sugar Flour Butter Baking Soda /
Explanation
Teachers of beginners can use this second text in two ways. First, it provides students with opportunities to engage in processing vocabulary by asking them the same question of each of the examples on the page, “Is this a fruit?” or “Is an apple a fruit?” But this picture dictionary does not include a question and answer example explicitly in the text. Second, this format lends itself to explicit teaching of semantic categories. I would have students make word cards to mix and sort and in this way learn vocabulary through association with semantic categories. Once students have mastered the vocabulary for each semantic category, they can add words for other fruits and baking ingredients to their stacks of cards.

Some examples of books that have labeled pictures are *Feast for 10* (Falwell, 2008), *Bembo’s Zoo: An Animal ABC Book* (de Vicq de Cumptich, 2000) and) *One Potato: A Counting Book of Potato Prints* (Pomeroy, 1996. These are listed in the booklist provided at the end of the article. In the next example, the text and format differs in amount of features as well as the type of features that are compatible with communicative language teaching activities.

Example #3 Sentence Patterns, Repetitions, and Active Verbs

<p>This is how a snake slithers. Can you slither like a snake? / Yes, I can. Watch me slither. / This is how a kangaroo hops. Can you hop like a kangaroo? / Yes, I can. Watch me hop. / This is how a bird flies. Can you fly like a bird? / Yes, I can. Watch me fly. /</p>	<p>Explanation</p> <p>Teachers of beginners can use this text for several reasons. First, students can chant the repetitive phrase, “Yes I can.” Second, it lends itself to making word cards for animals and actions. Like in the example above, these can be used for matching and sorting. Once mastered, students can expand by adding words for familiar animals, such as bats for flying. Third, it contains a model to use in teaching a question and answer routine. This question and answer discourse pattern lends itself to teaching students to ask yes/no oral questions about actions. Once mastered, students can expand the question to ask about other actions, such as asking them to imitate other animal actions or student’s actions. Finally, the meaning of the active verbs in this text can be demonstrated through gestures showing slithering, hopping and flying.</p>
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Examples of books that have similar text features compatible with communicative language teaching that are found on the booklist include *Piñata* (Emberley, 2004), *What’s Cookin’?* (Coffelt, 2003) and *Perfect Square* (Hall, 2011). An example of a lesson using Hall’s book is included in another section of this article.

These three examples of text are illustrations of picture books' texts and formats that prompt highly contextualized and successful conversations. They scaffold instructional conversations and accelerate language learning. Each example prompted different instructional activities. The first text had patterned sentences that prompted substitution of words in the same word class (nouns for nouns). The second text was a picture dictionary that lent itself to making words cards to sort by the semantic categories. The third text provided scaffolds for more instructional interactions. Students could easily learn to chant the repetitive phrase, copy and match word cards, engage in question and answer routines, and to learn the active verbs using physical gestures, such as Total Physical Response (TPR). In TPR the language learner responds to a teacher who gives verbal commands and by imitating the teacher's actions.

A teacher might decide to use TPR with a picture book about baking a pie. The active verbs might be implied in the text and shown in illustrations of people mixing sugar, rolling crust, and pouring filling. However, when active verbs are not in the text or in a labeled illustration, it requires the teacher to produce them. When the teacher adds the verbs on-the-spot, the transient nature of this oral input might make it difficult for beginner ELLs to later

recall them without the teacher present. The key to finding books for ELLs is to examine them for features that match teacher instructional adaptations.

Teacher adaptations are based on instructional strategies and approaches. I like using those that integrate oral and written language instruction. One that works well with using picture books is the Language Experience Approach (LEA).

The Language Experience Approach and Beginners ELLs

LEA integrates and reinforces oral and written language using a recursive process (Nelson, & Linek, 1998). The written material is derived from the students' telling the teacher about an experience and the teacher taking it down in a dictation. Then the students learn to read this dictated material. In its purest form it does not depend on having a prewritten text. However, I found that using picture books increased participation of beginner ELLs.

LEA provides students with integrated oral and written language and covers the four strands of balanced communicative language teaching (Nation, 1996). The four strands are independent of any particular methodology. Comprehension activities provide students essential opportunities to

understand the message. Without comprehension no language learning takes place. Expression activities provide deeper processing of English as students engage in saying or writing a message to someone. Language learners benefit from opportunities to explicitly attend to language items, for example studying spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse patterns. Finally, students need to develop speed and accuracy of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Books with tellability features address oral and written comprehension, expression, language-focused study and fluency strands.

LEA lessons lend themselves to accomplishing each strand.

Comprehension is supported with the real objects and when accompanied by a picture book. Expression is supported when students engage with each other, such as asking “Can you pass me a potato?” “What did you make?”

Teachers conduct language-focused learning by explicitly directing ELLs' attention to writing conventions, such as difference between the writing in the book and which appears as a list (*What you will need: potatoes, paint brush...*) and other types of text (*The teacher said that we needed a potato, a paint brush...*). Finally, LEA creates many opportunities for building fluency through

repeated rereading of the book and the dictated chart. The figure below replicates an LEA chart I used after making potato prints.

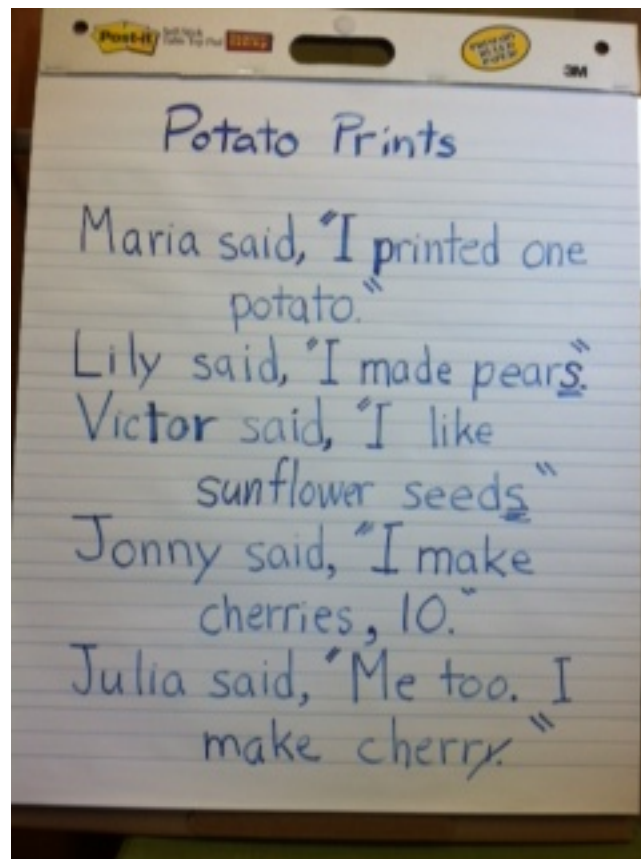


Fig. 1: LEA Chart

Lesson Plan using LEA and a Picture Book

Let me give an example of a LEA lesson used with one book. *Perfect Square* (Hall, 2011) is essentially a poetic narrative about resilience. The text follows a pattern. Each day of the week something is done to the square, for example ripping or shattering. Each day of the week this is followed by the

square making itself into something new. For example, after being cut into pieces and poked full of holes on a Monday, the square makes itself into a fountain.

The First Step: Sharing An Experience

Using this book as a prompt, the lesson begins with ensuring comprehension of the language sample, i.e. the text. Hall has transparently illustrated the meaning of each patterned verse. For example, students see examples of the actions (cut, poked, torn, shredded...) and of the things the square becomes (fountain, garden, bridge...). You can reinforce oral comprehension by asking ELLs to mimic the actions of verbs or point to objects on the page. You can reinforce written comprehension by having them copy words and phrases from the text onto separate cards for matching activities. Finally, they can listen to the teacher's intonation and imitate the ways this can further their understanding of the text.

Second Step: Creating a Student Generated Text

There are plenty of opportunities during the next phase of the lesson to imitate the teacher's reading. The essence of LEA is an experience. So ELLs would continue by imitating the book by ripping, poking, shattering... paper

squares and rebuilding them into fountains, mountains, windows... As they engage in this, students can describe their actions to each other. This experience becomes the basis for their story. The students are placed in small groups and individuals dictate their experience to the teacher. The teacher writes what the students say on a large chart. If a student is silent, the teacher prompts him or her to consult the picture book or to ask a buddy. Once the dictation is complete, everyone reads it.

Third Step: Reading and Assimilating the Language

This dictated story is used for explicit teaching of English. For example, as can be seen in the example of a dictated LEA story, the teacher directed students' attention to the use of direct quotes. Other follow-up activities with the LEA story chart help students assimilate English by continuing the gradual move from controlled to independent activities, such as having students copy a favorite page and then create a new one of their own.

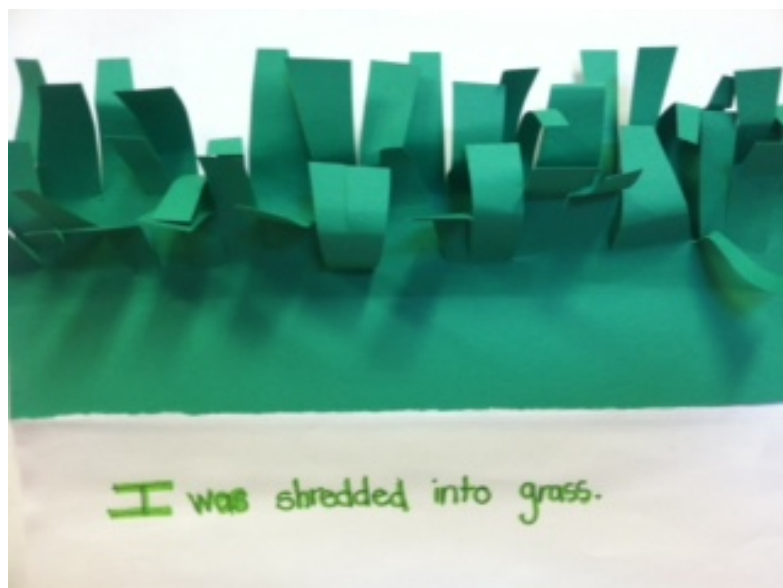


Fig. 2: Example of Student Created Page.

It is also very important to conduct some language-focused study of the text. First, I wrote the sentence for each day of the week on the board making sure that these lined up one after another so that the sentence pattern is obvious. This made it easier for students to substitute and rewrite them. Students transposed and substituted the days of the week (Wednesday/Thursday), the action verbs (shattered/shredded), or the nouns (park/bridge). For example:

On _____ (day of the week),
the square was _____ (action
verb). So it made itself into a
_____ (object).

Second, with *Perfect Square*, I wrote the text onto sentence strips for each day of the week, placed these randomly on a table, and had students order them. I taught them the ordinal numbers, first, second... and made a list of the ordinal numbers on the board. Students learned to list the days by number, “Monday is the first day of the week.”

Fourth Step: Extending Language Learning

LEA leads to independent work. I had students brainstorm new verbs and objects to generate new sentences. We wrote a new book about another shape, such as a perfect rectangle, triangle, or circle. Once we completed this class book, students wrote one of their own. Finally, they engaged in repetitive fluency activities. They chose to either reread or recite Hall’s *Perfect Square*, the class book, or the one they generated.

The steps to using a picture book to generate successful instructional conversations with LEA are summarized below.

LEA Dictation Using a Picture Book with Beginner ELLs

Step 1: Shared Experience

Begin with a class experience, such as a field trip or hands-on activity with a picture book about the experience. The book should provide scaffolds for comprehension and expression of the language used with this experience.

Step 2: Create the Text

Have students take turns dictating their experience as you transcribe it onto a chart. For example, Linea said, "I made a perfect green square." Lee said, "I poked my square."

Step 3: Read the Text

Read the chart story aloud together in a variety of ways. Then conduct oral and written activities to gradually release them into being able to use the newly acquired English on their own.

Step 4: Extension

Engage in a variety of instructional conversations and written activities utilizing the language learned.

Fig. 3: Steps to an LEA Dictation

Reflections

Hall's book *Perfect Square* was used to illustrate the way picture books with particular features provide ideal support for beginner ELLs. This book had tellability for implementing LEA. It enriched their experience with comprehensible English, supported their engagement in oral conversation, and provided scaffolds for their production of their own written material.

This book was not selected based on readability criteria but its tellability features. Specific features in all three mediums of communication, text, graphic,

and format, made it a perfect match for teaching beginner ELLs with the LEA. The following is a list of other books that are compatible with LEA for beginner ELLs. A list of other picture books with features that are compatible with other communicative language teaching strategies can be found in my book and in its accompanying online annotated list.

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