

# Teaching Kids, Not Subjects

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## **Older Non-Readers**

English learners come to us in all grade levels, not just in kindergarten. Some come to school with very high levels of preparation, including knowing several languages including English. At the other end of the spectrum, some have had little or no formal schooling at all. There are also those who experience school in short stretches as migrants or students with interrupted formal education.

In the United States they are often placed with their age cohort in schools and somehow expected to "catch up". Teachers in middle and high schools who have expertise in a specific subject area sometimes find that they have students who are struggling with English and that tools such as a bilingual dictionary are not always helpful when students are not literate in their home language. We have to begin the challenge of teaching the students we have, not just teaching the subject matter we know.

Middle school and high school teachers are not generally trained to teach beginning reading to adolescents nor are schools equipped with adequate materials, scheduling options nor specialists who know reading techniques. I describe below a routine that draws on existing techniques used for years in early literacy programs for young children and adults and applies it to a unique student group. It can revolve around content area subject matter so that these older learners don't fall completely behind in content and can still maintain participation in the mainstream of the school experience.

## **Language Experience Approach**

For years we used the English utterances that our students could contribute as the basis for beginning reading. The Language Experience Approach presumes that if you said it, you understand it and can learn to read it with comprehension. A great deal of emphasis is placed today on the decoding aspects of early reading because once English speaking students crack the code they are simply sounding out words they already comprehend. A major difference for English Learners is that they may learn to sound out the symbols on a page but after blending the sounds together miss the "ah-ha" that comes when a native English speaker does so because there may be no mental image to attach to the blended sounds. For example, /h/ /e/ /n/ may be blended correctly but if the reader has no clue that in English a hen is a winged, egg laying barn animal, the reading is not very satisfying and cannot mature to the expected skill of reading for comprehension more abstract, academic material.

## **Teaching Basic Literacy with High Level Content**

The academic challenges for Middle and High Schools has not been met well without teaching reading. For English Learners who have not yet developed basic reading proficiency, secondary teachers must consider new ways to deliver their subject matter.

# Content Literacy Approach

## **STEP ONE**

Oral discussion of common material. This could be an experience such as a field trip or science experiment, it could also be a subject matter topic that the teacher reads aloud from the textbook first.

## **STEP TWO**

Students discuss what they understood with the teacher leading the discussion. Graphic organizers can be used to collect student language.

## **STEP THREE**

Students dictate a group summary of the reading. Teacher writes down on an overhead transparency or on an easel pad exactly what the students say. This draft becomes the first reading material.

## **STEP FOUR**

Students read back what was recorded in writing. Teacher asks students to point to particular words in the summary. A cloze paragraph can be prepared ahead of time as a model or example that the group can complete for experience.

## **STEP FIVE**

Teacher prepares some sentence strips and word cards for matching. Students match cards to the group text. High frequency word cards are given to students to practice. (e.g. The, is, was, on) Key vocabulary is added to students word books.

## **STEP SIX**

On day two students re read their group summary. Teacher has prepared a phonics lesson or other ELD instruction from the group text. For example a lesson on plurals might come right out of the students' dictated text. Students are given a copy of the group summary from which to read.

## **STEP SEVEN**

On day three students re read their group summary. They add new information to their summary by repeating step one with a new section of textbook as their source material. A story frame or cloze exercise can be prepared for students to complete in order to begin independent writing experiences when students are at the very beginning stages of literacy development.

# The Role of Technology

## **Thinking Inside the Box**

For older students who face the task of learning to read in English while keeping up with their achievement in other subjects, technology tools are an untapped resource. In the case of students who have a high level of academic preparation in their home country before coming to the United States, learning English may consume much of their day as schools often assign them to 2 or 3 periods of English Language Development putting a diploma out of reach since these classes don't always count toward high school graduation and rarely are credited by institutions of higher education toward college entrance. The rationale for this placement is that until a student understands academic English, they surely cannot benefit from the required Math, History and Science courses needed for college preparation.

**Distance learning** may be an excellent tool for these students to continue their academic pursuits, especially in schools where communities of immigrants from the same language group have come to live. For example, recently arrived Spanish speaking high school students could enroll in Spanish Language chemistry or algebra courses taught in escuela secundaria in Mexico City for example via distance learning. Using a televised image on a TV monitor and nothing more than a phone line hook up so students and teacher can interact, students can receive high level coursework while they are intensively learning English as well. They could be enrolled in the local chemistry course for credit and receive content ELD to be sure that they are focused on learning the targeted academic vocabulary and grammatical structures needed for chemistry or algebra in English.

**Individualized Learning Systems** are computer programs that have been developed to teach basic course skills and adjust automatically to the level of the individual student's knowledge. This is accomplished through assessments which present the student with a variety of "test" questions or tasks. Correct and incorrect answers are sifted by the computer software management systems to yield printed reports to the teacher and targeted, individualized instruction for the computer user. These hold several specific advantages for English Learners; 1) Students can hear English spoken while seeing illustrative examples on the screen which heighten the comprehensibility of the task, 2) The computer provides private, patient, repetition so that no older student is embarrassed by working at a lower level than same age peers, 3) working on a computer helps close the digital divide in that many students who would not have a computer at home, learn to use the machine and its systems with ease, and 4) the targeted nature of the leveling ability of many software programs ensures that precious school time is not wasted for each student who is enrolled with peers who have years more experience with speaking and learning in English.