1 Using Picture Books With English Language Learners

I love everything about children's picture books. They appeal to me visually, linguistically, and socially. I find the complex synergy between image and word fascinating (Galda, Sullivan, & Sipe, 2007; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). By far, picture books are my favorite resource for teaching language and literacy. I like the classics, and I also enjoy postmodern picture books that engage readers by blurring the traditional boundaries between written and spoken communication with interactive questions and other innovative formats (Galda et al., 2008; Nolde, 2008).

Picture books are a flexible resource. They are well suited to teaching beginner English language learners (ELLs) in grades K–12. Although a smaller percentage of picture books have topics of interest to high school beginners, some books can be found to match their needs. In fact, picture books can be found to meet the needs of ELLs from a diversity of backgrounds and in different levels of English language proficiency (ELP).[1]

BOOKS FOR ELLS

ELP is a developmental continuum. For practical programmatic reasons, it is divided into identifiable levels of ability (Boyd-Batstone, 2006; Richard-Amato & Snow, 2005; Rothenberg & Fisher 2007).[2] For communicative

language teaching (CLT) to be effective, instruction must use materials and strategies within ELLs' ELP range. Although programs differ, the beginner level of ELP is composed of ELLs with common novice-level characteristics. The materials and strategies used with them should reflect their instructional range and unique linguistic needs.

One of the most basic principles of second-language teaching is based on the fact that the English spoken between native speakers is too difficult for beginner ELLs. It is not within their range and does not meet their linguistic processing requirements. When listening to native speakers, beginners are overwhelmed just trying to grasp the basic units. Breakdowns in communication are the norm. In order to avoid breakdowns, teachers of ELLs modify their speech. They simplify it. For example, when talking about or reading a book, the teacher adjusts the amount of simplification depending on the difference between the English in the book and that known by the ELL.

The most common mediation strategies enhance ELLs' comprehension and access to English. These strategies are multidimensional (August & Shanahan, 2006; Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2006; Tabors, 1997; Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006). For example, teachers scaffold comprehension with verbal and nonverbal scaffolds, such as pictures, gestures, objects, and native language. They provide models of English with controlled language, such as short, simplified, patterned, repeated, and highlighted samples. Teachers focus on providing beginner ELLs with comprehensible and accessible English.

In CLT, the use of a controlled language sample is necessary and usual. It focuses attention on a manageable amount of language, and, thus, reduces miscommunication and accelerates language learning (Chaudron, 1988; Lado, 1988; Long, 1985; Rost, 2006). Carefully selected picture books offer one way to provide a controlled language sample. Their inherent scaffolds provide models for written and oral beginner responses. These books are relevant, accessible, and authentic, and they provide opportunities for deep language processing. They pave the way for further communicative tasks and foment language development.

The current practice in book selection for ELLs combines the two fields of reading and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). In reading, a book's difficulty level is generally determined using a readability formula. These formulas incorporate relevant linguistic variables, such as syntactic complexity and vocabulary complexity. In addition, Harris and Hodges (2005)[3] emphasize the importance of other variables associated with reader characteristics, such as age, and the instructional context, such as grade-level connections of the reading material.

Each of these—the linguistic, student, and contextual variables—is distinct and considered in book selection in TESOL. In selecting books for TESOL, it is imperative to consider linguistic variables associated with

different ELP levels. Books with simpler syntax and vocabulary are easier. Reader characteristics are an important variable in TESOL. In addition to age, book selection often considers student backgrounds, education, and culture. Additionally, TESOL instructional contexts are distinct from contexts for reading, because oral language is taught along with literacy.

Unfortunately, ELP-level designations of trade books are broadly construed. Designations for books found on lists will over- or underestimate the ability of ELLs. The beginner ELP level, in particular, incorporates a wide range of books, many of which are beyond the abilities of ELLs at the earliest stages. Teachers have several options in adjusting to this situation (Allen, 1994; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Hadaway, 2009; Rost, 2006; Smallwood, 2002). Unlike reading teachers who mediate with English speakers using oral language elaborations to fill in meaning, teachers of second-language learners simplify their language. Simplification combines linguistic scaffolds, such as easier English, with nonlinguistic scaffolds, such as pictures. Its purpose is twofold. It facilitates ELLs' participation by bridging the gap between their English abilities and the difficult English required in a given situation. It also promotes language learning.

SIMPLIFICATION

Teacher simplification between text and students is complex. A typical example of planned simplification is when a teacher divides a book into sections and also teaches the oral and written responses separately. Teachers plan the language they use according to the ELLs' abilities. When that preplanning does not go far enough, teachers spontaneously implement more adjustments. Their linguistic adjustments are flexible and highly dependent on student responses. Simplification, a teacher's adjustment to the linguistic abilities of ELLs, is an essential CLT tool. It is manifested in a variety of strategies, such as scaffolding,[4] accommodating, frontloading, and contextualizing.[5]

These simplifications are focused on helping ELLs grasp the layers of interrelated linguistic forms associated with meaningful communication. "*Scaffolding* [emphasis added] refers to providing contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning" (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003, p. 345). *Accommodations* refer to practices intended to increase access to grade-level content. *Frontloading* is providing essential information and key vocabulary before a lesson begins (Calderon, 2007). *Contextualizing* refers to providing explanations and meaning through situational information. The use of context helps ELLs grasp the meaning of new language by using information from the circumstances in which something happens as well as from the other words or phrases surrounding the new language.

The amount and type of simplification are directly proportional to the difference between the language of a book and that known by the student (Gottlieb, Cranely, & Oliver, 2007; Opitz & Guccione, 2009; Pantaleo, 2004). In the case of beginners, teachers incrementally expose them to new units and patterns of phonemes, morphemes, sentence units, discourse structures, and other aspects of communicative competency (Davison & Kantor, 1982; Rothenberg & Fisher, 2007). To be successful, beginners must dedicate attention and effort, and teachers must simplify across many levels of English communication.

TELLABILITY

My approach to simplification is to lessen the gap between student's ELP and the books the student uses. I select books with features that closely match beginner abilities while promoting language learning. These features provide teachers with built-in simplifications, thus reducing the amount of teacher adjustments and giving ELLs more access to the English of the text. Every picture book has a combination of embedded verbal, visual, and experiential scaffolds.

The most interesting features of picture books for our purpose are those that combine to make a picture book close to the English ability of an ELL. These include the typical types of simplifications used in CLT, including simpler forms of English, but also certain text patterns, illustrations, themes, and formats.

An examination of these features allows us to rank picture books within the beginner ELP level. Beginner-level picture books can be divided into four groups of language difficulty. For ELLs in the first stage of the beginner level, we want to use books with the simplest language with many embedded simplifications. For example, Stage 1 books meet the earliest beginner's need for pictures that make the meaning of the text clear. In contrast, at the other extreme are books for beginners in the last stage of the beginner level. Such Stage 4 books include more language and have fewer embedded simplifications, because at this stage the ELLs are able to process more English.

As stated in the preface, I describe picture books for teaching beginner ELLs with the terms *tellable* and *tellability*. I use these terms as a reminder to focus attention on oral language learning and creating synchronicities between many different aspects of communication. Books with tellability are accessible to beginners and compatible with beginner ELL needs. They provide the following:

1. comprehensible input, meaningful expressive output, language-focused learning, and fluency building;

2. thematic vocabulary;

3. incremental exposure to English within the beginner ELP level; and

4. models for responding to books.

As the following Dr. Seuss Day vignette demonstrates, using a book with tellability makes a striking difference in student success. It also reduces a teacher's need to develop materials for simplification.

DR. SEUSS DAY VIGNETTE

On Dr. Seuss's birthday I was tapped to read books in Spanish with a small group of beginning ELLs. The idea was to help them fully enjoy the event. As soon as I finished sharing the first Dr. Seuss Day book in Spanish, it became obvious they wanted to participate in English when a girl picked up a picture dictionary. She methodically turned the pages until she reached the illustration of a giraffe. Deliberately tracking each letter of the labeled picture, she said, "giraffe" then "like." She then continued paging through the dictionary and proudly pointed to a picture and said, "zebra." Her interest in the picture dictionary made me shift gears in several ways.

First, I taught them noun phrases in groups of four phrases. I divided a paper into a two-by-two grid (four sections) and wrote one noun phrase in each section, for example, *big zebra, little zebra, big giraffe,* and *little giraffe.* They practiced reading the grid, made a picture card for each phrase, and matched cards to it. Gradually they were weaned off the grid and could read the cards randomly and substitute them into a question/answer routine: "Which animal do you like?" "I like the ___."

Second, I took a book from the shelf with tellability features. This book, *From Head to Toe* (Carle, 2003), has simple repetitive language and clear pictures. It presents 12 animals, 12 body parts, and 12 actions in patterned sentences. The students learned these with the aid of pictures and gestures. They substituted words, "I am a(n) (animal name)" and "I (action taken) my (body part)." In playful give and take, we expanded to responding with negatives and plurals.

Third, they memorized the repetitive lines, the animals each asking whether the boy can do take the given action, and the boy always answering that he can.

Finally, as an expansion activity, they made a sequel[6] using a fold-a-book[7] technique resulting in a tiny eight-page book. *From Head to Toe* was the right book from which to explore, discover, stretch, and develop their English abilities.

This book is probably on every book list for beginner ELLs. It has a low readability level, is easy to understand, has a culturally neutral topic, and is produced by an award-winning popular author–illustrator. It supports the basics of CLT by having pictures as scaffolds for comprehension, oral style sentences for expression, patterns for language-focused learning, and repetition for building fluency. However, I also selected it because its topic matched the age of the students, their specific stage of beginner ELP, and the CLT strategies that I use with beginners. I like unison oral repetition, choral reading, substituting words in patterned sentences, and gesturing.

Using *From Head to Toe,* a book with so many features that matched the ELLs' needs, was such a contrast to the picture dictionary on many levels, all of which are reasons to categorize it as being tellable. The following section provides examples of books with tellable features. The theme of the examples is butterflies.

BOOKS WITH TELLABLE FEATURES FOR A UNIT ON BUTTERFLIES

Picture books about butterflies represent an enormous variety of styles and links among textual, visual, and format features. Butterfly-themed books provide opportunities for recursive learning of vocabulary and incremental pacing of instruction. The idea is to guide beginners through the early language acquisition process with the simplest books until they are ready for more challenging content. For example, some of the books introduce science concepts, such as the life cycle, and help ELLs develop comprehension.

The samples listed here begin with the simplest books in order to focus on teaching basic comprehension, the first strand of a balanced CLT program. They are followed by other types of books usable for developing expression, the second strand. Different genres of picture books are included to provide ELLs with opportunities to practice oral and written expression, such as first person narratives for dramatic activities and patterned formats for reading aloud. ELLs also need opportunities for language-focused learning. An example of a book addressing this strand is one with maps about butterfly migration. ELLs can focus on learning the content language used with mapping. Finally, a balanced CLT program includes a fourth strand, building fluency. Fluency is promoted in several ways, such as the recurrence of thematic vocabulary, the use of books with repetitious text, and the use of short books that can be reread.

First Strand: Focus on Comprehension

Beginners need to comprehend the language sample in order to learn it. A balanced language-teaching program begins with teaching comprehension of essential words presented in oral and written forms. The first teaching strategies empower ELLs to demonstrate receptive comprehension skills independently from expression skills. ELLs learn vocabulary about concrete concepts by hearing, seeing, and imitating words as separate units. They learn to identify words within a phrase or sentence. The teaching strategies should engage them in activities that demand comprehension and forming associations between a word's oral and written forms.

Strategies for teaching comprehension empower ELLs to demonstrate receptive comprehension skills independently of the ELLs' ability to express themselves in English. The earliest beginners do not have to be overwhelmed with both receptive and expressive skills at once. They can focus on demonstrating ability to understand and leave learning the expression for later. Thus, many beginner comprehension strategies use visuals, objects, gestures, and native language. These allow the ELL to show comprehension by nonlinguistic or non-English means while, at the same time, ensuring the student is connecting the concept with the correct English word or label. For example, ELLs demonstrate that they understand the word by pointing to a visual, selecting an object, physically moving in response to a directive, or saying the English word in their native language. Several picture books about butterflies lend themselves to CLT strategies focusing on beginner comprehension. These strategies include visualizing, realia, total physical response (TPR), and reenactment.

Using visuals is one of the most common strategies used with beginner ELLs. Its use includes everything from photographs to picture cards, to student drawings, to text illustrations. The term *visualizing* in education can refer to a number of different activities. Here it refers to a language-teaching strategy based on visuals. The book *Born to Be a Butterfly* (Wallace, 2000) lends itself to visualizing, because each sentence in its text is accompanied by a photograph.

Using objects is another popular language teaching strategy. Concrete manipulatives help ELLs grasp the distinctive words and retain them in memory. The term *realia* is used for strategies using instructional objects, artifacts, and models. Realia help beginners demonstrate comprehension of nouns and actions with them, such as following directives, for example, to touch, select, give, bring, or put away a particular object. Examples of books that lend themselves to realia are *Caterpillar Spring, Butterfly Summer* (Hood, 2003) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar Pop-Up Book* (Carle, 2009). *Caterpillar Spring, Butterfly Summer* contains a slinky caterpillar on every page. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar Pop-Up Book* has embedded paper objects that lift from the page, for example, a half-cylinder tree trunk.

Using gestures is a standard strategy in teaching ELLs comprehension of verbs. Two well-known language teaching strategies using gestures are total physical response and reenactment. *Total physical response* is so popular with beginners that teachers often refer to it as TPR. In TPR, teachers act out the meaning of a verb, and students learn through imitation. It is a useful strategy to use with texts with active verbs. Teachers can preview the verbs with TPR. Once each is understood, the ELLs can proceed to learning the rest of the text. *Reenactment* is simply the strategy in which students act out the scenes of a story. It is useful because ELLs can demonstrate their understanding of a sequence of scenes. Both TPR and

reenactment are easy to use with *Caterpillar Spring, Butterfly Summer,* mentioned above. A tiny board book with a short poem, *One Little Butterfly* (Lewison, 2000) also lends itself to TPR and reenactment, because its poetic text contains ten verbs.

Second Strand: Focus on Expression

A balanced CLT program includes teaching expression. It is essential that ELLs be provided opportunities to learn to express their needs, make their desires known, exchange information, and give opinions. Several picture books about butterflies lend themselves to CLT strategies focusing on expression: retelling, the language experience approach (LEA), and model-based writing.

Retelling is one of the easiest ways to build expressive skills. Picture books lend themselves to it, because students use the pictures as a scaffold. In addition, stories with sequential plots and books about a sequential concept lend themselves to retelling. The fascinating process of metamorphosis is a natural match for retelling. Some book examples for retelling are *Butterfly* (Canizares, 1998), *From Caterpillar to Butterfly* (Legg, 1998), and *Butterflies and Caterpillars* (Ganeri, 2007).

The *Language Experience Approach* teaches written language by using students' oral language to create reading material. In its most frequently used form, the students dictate their experiences, and the teacher writes their words on a LEA chart. For beginner ELLs, this strategy requires modification, because they need models to express themselves about the experience. Books about projects, memorable experiences, directions, or procedures provide the ELLs with models for oral and written expression. They can use the text or pictures to guide them during the experience and later in the dictation. The end pages of *Monarch Butterfly* (Gibbons, 1991) and *Butterfly House* (Bunting, 1999) contain directions for making a butterfly habitat. Ross's *Crafts for Kids Who Are Learning About Insects* (2008) contains procedures for making six butterfly crafts.

Model-based writing is used with beginner ELLs because they are still developing written expression and benefit from controlled activities that explicitly focus on writing. In model-based writing, ELLs become familiar with a text, copy it as a starting point, use it as a template upon which to construct their own ideas, and go from there to developing writing that is intelligible, coherent, and cohesive. They gradually build the ability to use picture book texts as springboards for personally generated and creative written pieces. Two books that contain models of simple writing skills, such as appropriate pronoun usage, are *Waiting for Wings* (Ehlert, 2001) and *Born to Be a Butterfly* (Wallace, 2000).

Third Strand: Language-Focused Learning

Spending a reasonable amount of time in language-focused learning activities is of enormous benefit to school-aged ELLs (Calderon, 2004; Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2006; Nation, 2001; Uribe & Nathenson-Mejía, 2008). An efficient CLT program provides ELLs with explicit language-focused learning activities. ELLs benefit from opportunities to consciously practice the subsystems of English they are learning, because language-focused learning "involves deliberate attention to language features both in the context of meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output, and in decontextualised learning and teaching" (Nation, 2001, p. 1).

Language-focused learning strategies used with ELLs build upon the types of strategies used in teaching language arts to native speakers. They provide additional steps to scaffolding comprehension, adding practice opportunities, and involving ELLs in recognizing English patterns for imitation, substitution, analysis, manipulation, and utilization (Nation, 2001). With picture books, I use three types of language-focused learning strategies: compare and contrast, graphics, and guessing games.

Compare and contrast can be applied in different ways depending on the features of picture books. First, bilingual texts lend themselves to teaching English through having ELLs contrast, compare, and reflect on similarities and differences between their native language and English. An example of a book with this feature is the earlier mentioned *Butterfly.* There is a bilingual version, *Butterfly/Mariposa* (English/Spanish) (Canizares, 2003). Second, texts of different genres lend themselves to learning about different discourse styles. Teachers can use a single book that contains multiple genres or several books of different types. *Monarch Butterfly* (Gibbons, 1991) is an example of a multigenre book. The running narrative explains the life cycle, while the end pages are directions for raising monarch butterflies. The books *Butterfly* (Ling, 2007) and *I'm a Caterpillar* (Marzollo, 1997) represent different genres. Students can use these two books to compare and contrast nonfiction discourse and its use of photographs with fictional stories told by the insect with illustrations. Third, some books present content in ways that lend themselves to comparing and contrasting. A book with parallel descriptions of different types of butterflies is *Butterflies and Caterpillars* (Berger, 2008).

Graphics and graphic organizers are a staple in teaching students to represent information and relationships among concepts. Common examples used to teach ELLs vocabulary and text structure are story maps, story webs, concept maps, and semantic maps (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). Picture books with graphics provide an ideal venue for learning to interpret graphic information and transfer between verbal and visual representations. *Are You a Butterfly?* (Allen, 2000a) is an example of a simple way in which graphic information is represented in picture books. This book uses

a special font as an aid to meaning; for example, the word *grow* appears in letters that increase in size: **grOW**. *Monarch and Milkweed* (Frost, 2008) is an example of a text with a graphic organizer, a time line. It, along with *Hurry and the Monarch* (Flatharta, 2009), contains maps explaining butterfly migration. *A Monarch Butterfly's Life* (Himmelman, 2000) includes two types of text. Each lends itself to a different type of graphic organizer: the sequential narrative to a story map and the glossary to a semantic map.

Books with *guessing game* formats create opportunities to learn inquiry formulas and patterns. ELLs benefit from practicing routines with questions and answers using familiar, as well as new, information. When they are involved in inquiry about new information, this is referred to as an *information gap* task. Books mentioned earlier with interactive questions in the text are *Butterflies and Caterpillars* and *Are You a Butterfly?*

Fourth Strand: Fluency Development

Fluency is the fourth strand of a balanced CLT program. ELLs must be given time and sustained opportunities to practice language in order to increase their accuracy, intonation, and pace. Rereading and rewriting tasks improve fluency. Three types of sparse-text books lend themselves to repetition by using oral chanting, recitation, and reader's theater.

Chanting is an oral strategy requiring students to repeat phrases in unison. Oral-style picture books are compatible with chanting. Canizares's *Butterfly,* mentioned earlier, is easily reread and chanted.

Some of the books in this theme are short and poetic. These lend themselves to *recitation* and are used in a poetry reading or recital. *A New Butterfly: My First Look at Metamorphosis* (Hickman & Collins, 1997a) consists of repetitive cumulative verses, and *Caterpillar Spring, Butterfly Summer* (Hood, 2003) contains catchy rhymes.

Picture books with first person dialogue are useful for *reader's theater.* Reader's theater involves oral reading of a script or text with a focus on the oral expression rather than props. *I'm a Caterpillar* (Marzollo, 1997) is relatively easy, with about 150 words of running text. *Hurry and the Monarch* (Flatharta, 2009), mentioned earlier, is longer but contains humorous lines that older students enjoy.

BUTTERFLY BOOKS FOR ELLS

The books in Box 1.1 are listed in three groups. The first is a group of the easiest and shortest to use with the earliest beginner ELL. This is followed by a middle category for expanding vocabulary and opportunities for

interactions. The third group includes longer books that provide opportunities for deep processing of the thematic vocabulary but include much more variety and opportunities to learn English. The third group would have been overwhelming for true beginner ELLs. However, after exposure to the language and activities associated with the earlier books, they are better prepared for accessing and learning from these books.

Box 1.1   Butterfly Books in Alphabetical Order and Grouped by Difficulty

1. *Born to Be a Butterfly* (Wallace, 2000)*
   Butterfly (Canizares, 1998)*
   Butterfly/Mariposa (Canizares, 2003)*
   I'm a Caterpillar (Marzollo, 1997)
   One Little Butterfly (Lewison, 2000)

2. *Are You a Butterfly?* (Allen, 2000a)
   Butterflies and Caterpillars (Ganeri, 2007)
   Butterfly (Ling, 2007)*
   Caterpillar Spring, Butterfly Summer (Hood, 2003)
   From Caterpillar to Butterfly (Legg, 1998)*
   A Monarch Butterfly's Life (Himmelman, 2000)*
   A New Butterfly: My First Look at Metamorphosis (Hickman & Collins, 1997a)*
   Waiting for Wings (Ehlert, 2001)

3. *Butterflies and Caterpillars* (Berger, 2008)*
   Butterfly House (Bunting, 1999)*
   Hurry and the Monarch (Flatharta, 2009)*
   Monarch and Milkweed (Frost, 2008)*
   Monarch Butterfly (Gibbons, 1991)*
   The Very Hungry Caterpillar Pop-Up Book (Carle, 2009)

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*Appropriate for ELLs in upper grades.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and ELLs benefit when books match their second-language learning needs. Books must be within beginners' capacity to comprehend, express, practice, and engage in language-focused learning and fluency development.

Books that support CLT are important because they create synchronicities between students, text, visuals, and instructional experiences. The process of finding these books involves more than what is usually contained in formulas focused on reading. The best books are not just readable; they are tellable, as they meet the needs of beginner ELLs.

One of the specific ways to select books for their tellability is to focus on a theme. Themes maximize opportunities for language and content learning. Along with themes, select books according to whether the content is of appropriate difficulty, usability, and interest. These areas are discussed in Chapter 2.

TELLABILITY IN PRACTICE: USING CLT CRITERIA

Select one of the books from the list in Box 1.1. Evaluate it according to the concepts discussed in the chapter. Next, select a book from your classroom, library, or bookstore, and analyze it in the same way.

   1.1. What book features are associated with CLT lesson planning for comprehension, expression, language-focused learning, or fluency development?

   1.2. Which of these features does the book have?

NOTES

1. State departments of education divide ELP into levels. The TESOL organization divides ELP into five: starting, emerging, developing, expanding, and bridging (Gottlieb, 2006). Beginner-level ELP corresponds to what is often referred to as a *starting* and *emerging* level.

2. I also find the description of beginner second-language learners in the ACTFL proficiency levels useful; see http://www.actfl.org.

3. Formulas for estimating a text's difficulty vary (Bauman, 1995; Fountas & Pinnell, 2005; Fry, 2002; Gunning, 1999; Harris & Hodges, 1995). Every readability formula measures vocabulary and sentence variables. Leveled book formulas also include variables associated with initial literacy, such as the match of illustrations to text.

4. Scaffolding is the subject of a book by Gibbons (2002).

5. Frontloading is providing essential information and key vocabulary before a lesson begins.

6. Deeb and Jakar (2009) have a good description of how to do this type of "book after a book" project with ELLs.

7. For directions on making a fold-a-book, see Yopp and Yopp (2006). Also, online directions can be found at http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-after school-resources/games-tools/video/stapleless-book-a-30190.html and http://www.bookmakingwithkids.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/single-sheet -books.pdf