The ESL-A/B Book Project

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Introduction

Alan Blackstock and Sharon Snyder

For the past two years, the ESL-A/B department of Bataan has been providing our students with reading materials that are “predictable,” that involve situations and stories familiar and interesting to the students. This effort is based on the findings of current reading and writing research, which indicate that students learn language—both spoken and written—better when the language material is related to things they know about, care about, and are interested in. In other words, students learn to read faster when they are interested enough to try to predict what the language means, and they learn to write faster when they care enough to try to use the language to say what they want to say (Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1980).

Language can be used “predictably” in another sense, as well. Stories or poems can be written with repeated structures or words, lines can be rhymed, and perhaps most important, illustrations can be included to help the reader understand the characters, actions, motions, and objects referred to by the author. This second aspect of predictability is particularly important for second language learners of literacy; however, it does not replace the central importance of choosing stories and other material based on students’ backgrounds and interests.

We chose the genre of story as an instructional tool because story, or “narrative,” is a fundamental system humans use to think about the world. Although the structures of stories vary from culture to culture, the structure within a particular society is highly predictable. Not only is the structure predictable, but readers are also led to anticipate the consequences of each step of the story, making the story predictable in another way. Stories with surprise endings are surprising only because the reader has predicted what should have happened.

Another advantage of using stories in language instruction is that story language is usually natural, and stories use all the language systems. The alphabet is in use (the grapho-phonemic system), appropriate word order and other grammatical conventions are used (the syntactic system), vocabulary and grammar are used to create meaning (the semantic system), and the appropriate use of all these aspects of language in particular social situations (the pragmatic system) are shown in the story. Each of these systems support the learning of the others and are not fully understandable in isolation from them (Goodman & Burke 1980). If we provide beginning readers and writers with examples of simple but real language in use, and base that language on high interest or known stories, learners will be drawn into wanting to understand how language works.

Use of illustrated stories in A/B-level ESL classes led to the development of a series of large format books.

Photo by Jeff-Rey Villamora.

We began to search for high-interest stories based on students’ background knowledge and experiences, or on future experiences they were wondering about, with supporting illustrations to show the meanings in the story clearly.

We soon found that there were no commercial materials meeting these criteria. The simplest materials intended for adults were set at too high a reading level and dealt with American characters in urban settings and other situations alien to our students. We therefore decided to develop our own books, drawing on folk tales and descriptions of holidays from the students’ own cultures, experiences common to refugee life, and areas of American culture about which the students had some knowledge and desired more.

As the need for developing predictable, familiar,
high-interest materials became more widely recognized, an increasing number of supervisors and teachers became involved in seeking out stories known to students or of interest to students. A book committee was established to prioritize the stories submitted, using as guidelines the above criteria and keeping in mind the different refugee ethnic groups in the camp. In addition to prioritizing the stories, the committee oversees the editing, illustrating, and field testing of the stories, which are produced by the program’s Instructional Media Services (IMS) department.

Stories submitted to the committee include some written in class by the students themselves; others were adapted by supervisors and teachers from published materials or well-known folk tales. Still others are written by staff about American holidays or situations refugees might face in America. In keeping with our guiding criteria, the predictability of the stories is enhanced by highlighting or repeating key structures and vocabulary, and by including illustrations to represent the content of the story. The attractive illustrations make the books visually appealing, thus heightening students’ interest.

While the search for stories was under way, some of our teachers were experimenting with cartoon stories in class. These wordless picture books proved to be flexible and valuable, always generating language at the level of each student. As a result, a series of wordless cartoon books has been produced, as well.

ESL-A/B teachers are encouraged to plan their use of these books in the classroom in such a way that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are all included in the lesson. Teachers and supervisors have designed a wide variety of lessons using both the cartoon and regular books, which can be used to introduce, develop, or culminate a particular instructional unit. All books are produced in both bound and loose form, so the stories can be presented with the text or without it, allowing the teacher several options in introducing the language. Teachers are encouraged to lead the students in discussions of the stories and to have students write their own stories.

Stories Written by the Teacher
Srisuda Walsh

There were 12 students in the level B ESL class: six Vietnamese, three Chinese Vietnamese, and three Lao. They were writing stories about holidays in their native countries. Christian Vietnamese students described how they celebrated Christmas in Vietnam, and the others wrote about Buddhist celebrations in Laos and Vietnam. As I worked with them, I found their narratives to be very interesting, so I asked them to illustrate the stories and then to share them with the class.

reading the stories aloud as well as listening to them—especially the stories that were most familiar. The pictures helped the listeners a lot in comprehending unfamiliar material in the stories.

This experience gave me the idea of writing stories for our students. I asked whether they wanted to know how Americans celebrate Christmas, and they told me yes. That afternoon when I returned to my office, I wrote a U.S. Christmas story to present to them the following day. (See Figure 1.)

I posted the pictures on the board, and as I narrated the story, I pointed to people and objects in the picture. I did this two to three times, asking them to identify a person or an object. In this way, I made sure that they knew the vocabulary items before answering any comprehension questions. I told them to listen again while I read the story. Then the students and I read it together, and finally individual students read aloud. Toward the end of the session, students were able to read the story with no help from the pictures. I wanted to find out how well they understood the story, so I gave them a two-part test. In Part A, I pointed to things in the pictures, and the students wrote the word. In Part B, I dictated a word and the students wrote it down. When teaching this story to other classes, I have asked them afterwards to write a story of a holiday in their native countries. See Figure 2 for: "Tai," a story about Vietnamese New Year.

When I taught this story to Level A students, I used the same procedure, but toward the end I gave them a three-part test. In Part A, I pointed to a word and the students copied it. In Part B, I wrote words with missing letters, and the students completed the word. In Part C, I wrote sentences in which words were missing, and the students completed the sentences. Each part had five items.

I also wrote competency-based stories and used them with A/B students. "Somavinh’s Problem" is one of my competency-based stories. I used to live in California, and when I taught the unit on housing to A/B students in Bataan, I thought of a Lao friend in San Diego. This man had a lot of problems with his apartment—robbery, in particular. When I told the story briefly to my students, it completely captured their attention. Since it is an open-ended story, there was a lot of discussion after I presented it to them. The story is shown in Figure 3.

Stories in the Students’ Words
Helen Aguilar and Linda Mauricio

One language teaching approach that has been very effective with our level A/B classes is “Free Conversation and Composition through Cartoons” (see Figure 4). The objectives in using cartoons are to pro-
Christmas is a big holiday in the United States. Americans decorate their houses and put up a Christmas tree.

Christmas Day is December 25. Many Christian people go to church.

People invite their relatives to their house. They eat a big dinner and give presents. They usually put the presents under the Christmas tree.

In the weeks before Christmas, people send Christmas cards to all their friends, and listen to Christmas songs.

A lot of people go shopping, and the stores are

People have parties at work and at schools. Working
In Vietnam, the New Year is called Tet. Tet means Feast of First morning of the New Year.

The New Year is for many people the biggest of all holidays. Everybody gets up at dawn and puts on their new clothes to greet the New Year.

People go to temples or churches.

At home, they offer flowers, incense, wine, and meals to the ancestors.

Many families enjoy sitting around the rice cake pot to talk, eat red roasted watermelon seeds, and drink wine for the coming of the New Year.

People give their family and friends a New Year present of cash in a red envelope.
Somsavinh and his wife, Malaythong, live in San Diego. Their apartment is cheap, but it is in a bad neighborhood.

They don't have a lot of money, but they bought a car, a television, and a stereo on time payment.

Somsavinh and Malaythong both work every day.

One day when they came back home from work, they found that someone had broken into their house and stolen their television and stereo.

This is not the first time this has happened to them. They want to move to a better place, where there are not a lot of robberies and crime.

But they need to have at least eight hundred dollars in cash in order to pay the deposit and the first month's rent. They don't have the money.
build up students' confidence, while developing students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. By using cartoons, the teacher can help students expand and manipulate the language structures and vocabulary they already know. This approach allows them to use their knowledge to express feelings and reactions as they interpret what they see. For the most part, students find the cartoons humorous and interesting. They share ideas, help each other, and enjoy dramatizing the situations.

Each cartoon strip corresponds to one or more topics in the curriculum. The strip in Figure 4, for example, involves competencies on describing people and clothing. For this activity, I put the cartoon strip in booklet form, each page containing one frame. The last page has the complete sequence of cartoons to form a story. The cartoons lack captions and the booklet has no title, so students are free to create their own.

The Approach

After choosing an appropriate cartoon strip story, such as those in America, In Sight (Ligon & S.K. 1982), the teacher puts the strip into a booklet with one frame on each page. To begin, the teacher can distribute these booklets or simply post pictures on the board. To check the students' understanding of the

Reading through Folk Tales

by Alan Blackstock

When I arrived at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in May 1987, the book project was already well under way. I had previously seen several Vietnamese folk tales presented as plays at Galang Refugee Processing Center, and some of these I thought would be easy to adapt for A/B-level reading material. My goal in rewriting these stories was to use natural and simple vocabulary, while retaining, to the extent possible, the depth of meaning and feeling carried by the original story. The following example is a very simple, poignant folk tale, "Hon Vong Phu" (Stone Waiting Husband). The tale is familiar to almost all Vietnamese.

Long ago in central Vietnam, there was a happy family—a husband, a wife, and a baby boy. One day the husband was called to fight in a war far away from home. His wife was very sad and missed him very much. Every day she took her baby in her arms and climbed to the top of a nearby mountain to look for her husband. She stood there waiting, in the wind, rain, and storm . . . until at last she became a stone. And today, if you go to central Vietnam, you can see a mountain beside the sea.

On top of the mountain is a stone that looks like a woman holding a baby, still waiting for her husband, who will never come home.

My contribution is one of eight books based on Vietnamese and Lao folk tales that are now in use in ESL-A/B classrooms. In anticipation of the arrival of Hmong refugee students, stories are now being developed from Hmong folk tales as well.
ck the vocabulary and just point or act out an expression. In these cases, the teacher can supply the needed words by pronouncing it and adding to the word list on the board. The next step is pair practice—student A tells the story to student B and vice versa. As they check each other by looking at the key words and pictures, the teacher circulates, supplying words or explanations as needed. Then, several students repeat their stories to the whole class.

The activity then moves to writing. Students write their own stories on paper. They are encouraged to look at the pictures and word lists on the board and to ask for help from the teacher or a classmate. To check their work, the papers are collected and shuffled. An answer is chosen at random, and its author reads the story to the class. The teacher may interrupt to ask comprehension questions of the class or the writer.

Discussion

In Level A classes, the teacher may need to ask adding questions to get the discussion going. Any answer should be accepted, though, unless it is far from the target—in which case, a more accurate response could be elicited. Once they have experienced success in this free conversation, students become less shy about responding by pointing or acting out their ideas.

As noted above, one strip can be used for several topics. Using the cartoon in Figure 4, the teacher can ask, “If you were the person that the police brought to the police station, what would you do?” Students reply something like, “Call telephone.” The teacher asks, “Whom are you going to call?” Students respond, varied answers, providing a good review of kinship terms. The teacher asks, “What are you going to say?” Students answer, “Hello.” This continues until the students complete the dialogue and role play the situation.

When describing physical characteristics, the discussion goes something like this:

Teacher: How many people are there in the story?
Students: Three.
Teacher: Who are they?
Students: A big man, a small man, and a policeman.
Teacher: What does the big man look like?
Students: He is tall, strong, and about 160 pounds. He has long hair, a mustache, and long beard.
Teacher: And the small man?
Students: He is short and thin. He looks very clean and handsome.
Teacher: Why did the police bring the big man to the police station?
Students: Because he looks very dirty. He is very afraid. He looks like a robber, and he doesn’t speak English very well.

When describing clothing, the questioning can go along these lines:

Teacher: Who is the robber?
Students: The small man.
Teacher: Why did the police bring the big man to the police station, but not the small man?
Students: Because the big man looks like a robber. His clothes are very dirty and the small man is very handsome.
Teacher: What is the big man wearing?
Students: He is wearing a T-shirt, a cap, old pants, and rubber shoes. Very old and very dirty.
Teacher: What is the small man wearing?
Students: He is wearing a suit, a beautiful hat, and new shoes.
Teacher: So that you will not be mistaken as a robber, what will you do?
Students: I will be wearing a different kind of clothes.
Conclusion

Finally, the teacher may distribute the booklets and strips of paper. The students write a caption for each picture on the strips of paper and paste them on the appropriate pages of the booklets. After naming them, the students can add their booklets to the class library. While using the above example in our classroom, one student called the story, "The Stupid Policeman." When asked why, he said, "Because he just look at the person, bring and hold him at the police station without asking or questioning him." He added, "He has to bring both men to the station for questioning." Another title was, "The Thief Meets the Robber." The student's explanation was "The big man has just finished stealing something from one house. He is on his way home when he meet the robber on the street." Yet another title was "The Lesson." The student said, "It is a lesson that we have to wear old but clean clothes when going out on the street. Be sure we look neat and presentable."

This technique is perfect for reviewing a competency or topic area. Students consolidate the vocabulary they have just learned, using it to describe and interpret the pictures and give their own reactions. By involving them in listening, speaking, and reading-writing activities, the teacher is able to assess their progress in all skill areas on the topic, so evaluation is built in.

References