

COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF RECENT LITERACY-LEVEL TEXTBOOKS

Anne Lazaraton

Andrew Baker

INTRODUCTION

Teaching adult ESL at the literacy level presents challenges common to other ESL/EFL contexts – such as a lack of planning time, large classes, and issues of assessment – as well as others that are unique to that setting. Policies about rolling enrollment, the reality of multilevel classes, and ever-tighter funding pose additional demands on teachers when choosing materials and creating lessons. Where, and how, does an ESL instructor start with a group of learners who have varying amounts of literacy in their first languages and less, if any, in English? What are the immediate needs of literacy-level adults?

The purpose of this comparative book review is to consider a number of new and recent materials that are available to the literacy-level ESL instructor. These texts are evaluated on a number of criteria, including content and skill focus, activity types, physical layout, and additional materials available for users. Our comparative table at the end of this review summarizes our findings and should prove useful for instructors looking for guidance on textbook selection for this unique student population.

Literacy Plus A: Language, Lifeskills, Civics

Literacy Plus B: Language, Lifeskills, Civics

Joan Saslow, the author of the comprehensive ***Literacy Plus A*** and ***Literacy Plus B*** (2003) books, “recognizing the reality that adults can’t wait to become literate in order to work and carry on their lives” (*Literacy Plus A*, p. iii), employs a three-pronged approach to pre-literacy instruction: work in the basic literacy concepts of letters and sounds, practice with basic survival English, and an introduction to elementary civics concepts. A “teacher’s box” on each page of the student book describes the literacy aims or language/civics goals, providing the instructor with clear, observable objectives around which to plan lessons. A comprehensive scope and sequence table lays out these objectives for each of the ten units in each book. (Other materials include a teacher’s edition containing complete lesson plans for each page in each book, a CD-ROM with printable worksheets, achievement tests, and vocabulary, number, and letter flashcards; and a *Guide for Native Language Tutors* (available for free download from the books’ website)).

From the first unit in *Literacy Plus A*, entitled *Welcome*, learners are engaged with the colorful drawings and pictures that make up most of the content. Assuming no prior knowledge of English, page 1 teaches the language of self-introductions by having students look at simple pictures, listen to a short dialogue (on classroom audiocassettes, which are somewhat inconvenient in that they cannot be cued as a CD can), listen again

and repeat it, and finally engage in pair work using the simple structures "I'm/Nice to meet you." On the next page, learners are instructed how to hold a pencil in either the left or right hand, then trace lines from left to right and top to bottom to reinforce the directional nature of English text from the very beginning. Learners also trace their own names (written by the teacher), circle or cross out drawings of similar or different common items (books, folders), and practice saying goodbye using the appropriately informal "Bye" or "See you later."

Subsequent units provide a sequenced presentation of literacy concepts, from recognizing shapes, tracing numbers, and working with capital letters to recognizing sound-symbol correspondences, working with lowercase letters, reading and saying money words, determining word boundaries, and finally, writing name, phone number and area code on a form.

Both the *Welcome* material and the literacy topics covered in *Literacy Plus A* are reviewed, recycled, and expanded in *Literacy Plus B*. By Unit 4 in the second book, learners recognize and write cursive letters, decode rhyming words, practice short and long vowels, address envelopes, copy full sentences, and ultimately fill out a job application with personal information.

The thematic content of each unit is familiar to those who have worked with other survival-level ESL texts: occupations, housing, transportation, clothing, times, dates, seasons, food and meals, family, the human body, money, and work skills. For example, *Literacy Plus A*, Unit 6: *Common Foods and Drinks, and Meals* asks learners to first look at, then listen to, and then repeat the pronunciation of words for eight food drawings (chicken, meat, fish, cheese, bread, rice, pasta, fruits) and six drink/liquid pictures (milk, coffee, tea, juice, water, oil). A brief dialogue between a customer and a supermarket clerk introduces the question form "Where is..." and the response "... is in/ across from...." After listening to and repeating the dialog again, learners engage in a pair-work activity using six of the food drawings as stimuli. The civics objective for this page is "Supermarkets are organized by categories. Salespeople can tell you where each food is" (p. 100).

The identical sequence of activities is repeated with seven fast food items, which are practiced following a dialog on ordering food; students learn about small, medium, and large sizes, foods associated with meals, and ways to express likes and dislikes about food. To conclude, students are asked to provide personal information about their food likes and habits, and then role play conversations based on a picture of people in a supermarket.

As with the literacy skills material, *Literacy Plus B* covers the same topics as *Literacy Plus A*, but these are expanded on by including more survival language practice. So in Unit 4, in addition to clothing language, sizes and types of stores are introduced. Unit 6 on food and meals also covers condiments (e.g., salt, pepper) and stating opinions about the healthiness of particular foods, in addition to the food language presented in the first book.

Although the author does not explicate a teaching methodology or learning theory underlying these books, she adheres to many of the best practices in teaching literacy-level ESL postulated by Vinogradov (2001): visual aids help students learn; connecting the classroom to real life is important; connecting oral language to written language is crucial; and activities that encourage cooperative learning are beneficial. The predictable sequence of activities in each chapter and the extensive repetition, both of oral input and of written symbols, are certainly meant to lead to automaticity in the cognitive processing of spoken and written English.

Evaluation

As one of the few series aimed solely at the pre-literacy level, *Literacy Plus A* and *B* have much to recommend them, but they are, of course, not without shortcomings. Although books in color are attractive and engaging, they are generally more expensive. More substantively, there is no real connection between the literacy material and the survival language, which alternates within each unit. That is, letters in *Literacy Plus A*, and in *Literacy Plus B*, words, do not necessarily have a connection with the thematic content of a unit; the constant shifting of attention may be jarring to learners at this level. Finally, it is disappointing that *Literacy Plus A* and *B* devote no attention to the role of electronic literacies – computer, information, multimedia, and CMC (computer-mediated communication) literacy (Kern, 2006) – prevalent in our wired world. Kern notes that the introduction of multimedia elements into print text, the alternation of traditional discourse structures, and new formulations of authorship on the Internet “requires a complexified view of literacy that goes well beyond the skills of encoding and decoding texts” (p. 195). The use of email messages as input, pictures of websites to obtain information, and a contextualized introduction to concepts such as *account* and *register* would be a logical way to at least acknowledge the importance of technology in communication today.

Longman ESL Literacy

Nishio’s **Longman ESL Literacy** (3rd ed., 2006), another stand-alone literacy level ESL textbook, moves at a more accelerated pace than *Literacy Plus A* and *B*. After one unit of copying letters, students learn numbers and begin copying whole words and short sentences – exercises that are introduced much later in the *Literacy Plus* books. In Unit 2, they practice writing lowercase and capital letters, then fill in the missing letter in various words, and finally copy those words in order to complete sentences.

In its introduction, *Longman ESL Literacy* claims to provide “the fundamental literacy skills and basic communicative competence needed to participate in school, in the workplace, and in the community” (p. ix). The author states that “each page is a lesson” with “thorough integration of the basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing” as well as “cooperative learning” and “student-centered instruction” (p. ix). The communicative nature of the book appears in exercises that prompt students to talk and write about their lives and routines. A typical page has students listen, read, speak, then

write, the order of which suggests a comprehension-based approach to language teaching, as does the inclusion of Total physical response (TPR) activities.

The scope and sequence table in the front of the book introduces units on the alphabet, numbers, school, time, the calendar, money, the family, food, health, and work, and correlates each unit to CASAS, LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District), and Florida standards. Throughout the book, students engage in a considerable amount of pair work – including practicing conversations, and asking for and giving information. Helpful communication strategies are also presented: for example, when asking for an address, students learn to say “Please write it” (p. 33). On the pragmatic front, students learn how to give a firm but polite refusal when someone on the phone asks them for their credit card number: “No thanks, goodbye” (p. 110). Among other civics concepts, students learn how to write checks, ask about a business’s open hours, write a note requesting an excused absence, and call for emergency assistance.

Each unit ends with two or three pages of creatively designed review material. Instead of approximating a quiz, the reviews follow a “use what you have learned” format. For example, students play bingo with vocabulary or numbers (they copy the words or numerals into their bingo grids for extra writing practice), or they complete information-gathering “ask your classmates” activities.

To get a sense of the content and organization of the material, consider Unit 8, *Food*. Students listen and point, then listen and repeat as the names of fruits are introduced. They then practice a conversation between a waiter and a diner asking “What’s in the fruit salad?” Plural forms of nouns are practiced while students learn to talk and write about what foods and drinks they like and don’t like. Using this information, students fill out survey grids and complete fill-in-the-blank sentences with the likes and dislikes of their classmates. Practice talking about prices is recycled from Unit 6 (*Money*) and is expanded upon with exposure to subject-verb agreement (“How much are mushrooms?” “How much is a pineapple?”). Through TPR students act out how to wash, peel, slice and eat an apple and then write those sentences next to illustrations of each action. The chapter does not forget the literacy basics – students practice writing capital and lowercase L, then read a dialog, circling all the examples of lowercase L. Finally, they write the words that contain a lowercase L. Toward the end of the unit, students listen to a story about shopping and eating while numbering six pictures that correspond with the six narrative sentences. Students then turn to the back of the book and read the story, before they write it out. In the unit review, students go to a cafeteria, restaurant or other food venue and write down the prices of various menu items. They also match questions and answers (e.g., “What do you like to drink?” goes with “I like coffee.”) and fill in a chart with vocabulary words (types of fruits, vegetables, drinks, and food).

Evaluation

Even though *Longman ESL Literacy* lacks color, the pages are laid out in a clear and approachable style. The “action” on each page generally moves in brief sequences from top to bottom, simplifying the processing for students who may have a hard time

following a long line of text. Additionally, activity types are identified by visual icons (Write/Listen, Listen to the Conversation, etc.), which build predictability into and provide visual support for exercises in the book. A teacher's resource book with audio CD and a set of transparencies are extra materials, and from a companion website instructors can print additional worksheets. One concern with this text (as mentioned in the previous review) is that it does not give students exposure to other literacies, namely electronic literacy. The words *Internet*, *e-mail*, and *cell phone* do not appear anywhere in the text. Nevertheless, the book is quite appealing and would make a fine choice for a class with only pre-literacy level learners in it.

Taking Off: Beginning English Literacy Workbook
Ventures Basic Literacy Workbook

Teachers in community-based adult basic education programs face the challenge of classes with students of mixed abilities and open (or "rolling") enrollment. In these classes it is common to have students with good verbal skills and non-existent literacy skills seated next to students with no verbal or literacy skills, perhaps even without literacy skills in their native language. In such circumstances, differentiated instruction becomes indispensable. Tomlinson (2002) defines differentiated instruction as engaging students "through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity" (p. 24). Neither the *Literacy Plus* books nor *Longman ESL Literacy* deals with this issue in any systematic way, but two additional books that we will briefly mention put those goals into practice.

***Taking Off: Beginning English (2008)*, a four-skills book for low-beginners, comes with a *Workbook* and a *Literacy Workbook*. While the *Workbook* assumes letter-level literacy and quickly advances students to word-level literacy, the *Literacy Workbook* gives students a complete volume of “on ramp” practice at the letter and sound level. In fact, the first section of the workbook focuses strictly on letter and number practice, much like the material in *Literacy Plus A*. Then in Section 2, entitled “Phonics Practice”, students listen to, repeat, and write consonant and vowel sounds and letters in the context of simple words. Section 3 provides level-appropriate activities that correlate with the main text, filling in the first letter of related vocabulary words or circling words that are the same as a prompt, while students using the standard *Workbook* write words to fill in the blanks of short sentences.**

A different approach to the multilevel class challenge is taken in ***Ventures Basic*** (2008), the first book in the five-level *Ventures* series for adults ranging from Basic to High-Intermediate. A central feature of *Ventures* Levels 1-4 is the multilevel *AddVentures* worksheets for each level. These “tiered” activities are “controlled” at Tier 1, “additional practice” at Tier 2, and “practice that expands beyond the text” at Tier 3 (p. ix).

This same principle of differentiated instruction is followed in the ***Ventures Basic Literacy Workbook***, although only at two levels: a lower level defined as “pre-, non-, or semi-literate in their own languages”, and a higher level in which students are “literate in their first languages, but unfamiliar with the Roman alphabet used in English” (p. ix, *Ventures Basic*). For example, in Unit 4, Health, at the lower level students work with two words, “office” and “patient”, circling, reading, tracing, and/or copying letters, and then matching words to pictures. At the higher level, learners work at the word level with “office”, “patient”, and “doctor”, by reading, tracing, circling, and copying these items from the main text chapter.

The approach to multilevel classrooms promoted in both *Taking Off* and *Ventures Basic* is innovative and appealing; we would expect to see other series move toward differentiation of instruction in just this manner.

LifePrints Literacy Book and Literacy Workbook

Rather than stand-alone literacy books or “add-on” literacy workbooks to texts that start above the literacy level, two additional multilevel series start at the literacy level. We were made aware of the first of these series by the Minnesota Literacy Council, who uses

the four-level *LifePrints* program in its adult ESL classes. We came across *English-No Problem!* when checking out *LifePrints* on the New Readers Press website. Neither of these series has the visibility of other books which are marketed by large publishers, and we believe that ESL literacy teachers would benefit from knowing about these less-publicized teaching materials.

LifePrints Literacy and ***LifePrints Literacy Workbook*** (2002) are composed of six units on survival topics including *Welcome to English Class*, *Personal Information*, *In the Neighborhood*, *Going Shopping*, *I Am Sick*, and *I Want a Job*. The black-and-white book contains simple, realistic drawings and a large font for text, much of which is in capital letters. There are seven basic activity types: listen, read, trace, say, write, match, and circle, each notated with an icon as well as the word. Students follow a listen, say, trace, write order for working on the alphabet, and at the end of the first unit they are expected to write their own names. Subsequent units include practice with writing words, matching pictures to words, writing numbers, filling out a personal information card, matching prices to pictures of currency, writing the time on clock faces in numbers, and ultimately filling out a very basic job application form. The *Literacy Workbook* gives additional practice for all of these activities, with some time spent writing the missing letters for content vocabulary in the unit (e.g., Monica goes shopping on Tu _____ and Th _____; p. 16). There is also a practice and review section at the end of the *Workbook*.

English—No Problem! Literacy Book and Literacy Workbook

Our most notable find was the five-level series *English – No Problem!* In the introduction to the ***English – No Problem! Literacy Book*** (2004), the authors establish that it is “theme-based” and “performance-based” and that it develops critical thinking. The authors state that it is “appropriate for and respectful of adult learners” and that it uses “rich, authentic language.” Indeed, from the very beginning, the book tries to link language learning with everyday life. For example, as students learn letters and numbers, they also see photos of “Cecile” using them to function in the real world: she needs to know “B” in order to find her car in row B of a large parking lot, how to spell her name in order to pick up a prescription at the pharmacy, and how to recognize numbers so that she can read the license plate on her car – which is parked next to one of the same model and color. The conclusion students should draw is that numeracy and literacy skills are vital – and quickly transferable – to all aspects of life.

The book presents information and skills in eight units (two of which are “warm-up” units) of creative situations: *Cecile’s Day*; *Omar’s Day*; *Welcome!*; *Smile!*; *You’re Sick*; *Money, Money, Money!*; *No Milk*; and *Hurry Up!*. Every unit begins with a full-color photo of a scene to illustrate the upcoming theme. Underneath is the question “What do you see?” For example, in Unit 3: *You’re Sick*, we see a girl in the nurse’s office at school. Her mother has just entered the room. These illustrations are useful tools for students to generate language – either spoken or, if appropriate, written. Across the page is an abbreviated “picture dictionary” entry to introduce new vocabulary. In this example,

students learn *boy, girl, nurse, fever, head, headache, calendar, chair, clock, and thermometer*, and immediately practice writing the words.

Unit 2, "Smile!", introduces vocabulary for relatives, provided in the context of looking at family photos and having a photo ID card made. A simple but effective sequence of activities is also found in this chapter (and others) and is indicative of the book's integration of skills. Students make a "family address book" with names, addresses, and phone numbers of relatives. They then write names from their list on the board while other students ask questions ("Who are Ramon and Lila?" "They are my grandparents.").

The units also include information-processing activities that prompt students to analyze what is going on in the photos – either by answering true/false questions or circling the correct answer out of two choices. Looking at a phone conversation between the nurse and the mother, the students have to determine who is sick – the nurse, daughter, or mother.

Finally, the "Technology Extra" activities interspersed throughout the book include simple ideas such as typing class names and family address books into a computer, inputting a week's activities into an online calendar, and using a calculator. While not extensive, the inclusion of any technology for learners at this level is welcome.

The ***English – No Problem! Literacy Workbook*** provides students with extra practice at the letter and word level for the same themes and skills as the *Literacy Book*, with the beneficial addition of a page at the end of each unit where students can monitor their progress. A list of the vocabulary words for that unit allows students to check off whether they can listen to, speak, read, and/or write each of the items. Teachers, too, could use these handy grids to generate spelling tests, pronunciation quizzes and other assessments.

Evaluation

The student books in these two series provide no guidance for the teacher; for this support, a teacher's edition for each level would be necessary. However, both the *LifePrints* and the *English – No Problem!* websites are rich sources for the "extensive support for teachers to help learners reach their goals and leave each lesson with something they can use outside class" (back cover of *LifePrints*) and the correlations with CASAS, SCANS and other published standards. Audiotapes, CDs, and assessment books are other available materials. In fact, these websites contains a wealth of additional teaching materials (such as Teacher's Resource Files and Lesson Plan Builders) and links to a number of research-based papers that provide a theoretical justification for the approach used in the books themselves. This linkage of theory and practice is impressive, and the more mainstream publishers might consider following the lead of New Readers Press in this area.

SUMMARY

On the whole, we conclude that any of these textbooks could serve as core materials in an ESL literacy course. Whether the choice is a stand-alone literacy text, a literacy supplement to a higher level text, or a series starting at the literacy level, proper and constant recycling and review of old material along with the judicious introduction of new concepts would make any of them a viable option. As we have suggested, an awareness of different student abilities and needs is probably necessary to use these materials effectively. Furthermore, if these materials are representative, it is still left up to the ESL literacy instructor to decide if, and how, to integrate technology into literacy-level instruction. Likewise, if, and when, a particular group of ESL learners is ready to deal with the multiple literacies that underlie competent second language use is another informed decision the ESL literacy instructor will need to make; these materials, with the exception of *English – No Problem!*, offer little guidance in this area.

AUTHORS

Anne Lazaraton is an Associate Professor of ESL at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches courses in ESL Methods, Language Analysis, Language Assessment, Discourse Analysis, and Practicum.

Andrew Baker is a recent graduate of the master's program in ESL at the University of Minnesota. He teaches ESL classes in Minneapolis.

REFERENCES

Kern, R. (2006). Perspectives on technology in learning and teaching languages. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 183-210.

Tomlinson, C. (2002, September). Different learners, different lessons. *Instructor*, 112, 2, pp. 21, 24-26, 91.

Vinogradov, P. (2001). Successful instruction for literacy-level adults. *CARLA Working Paper 17*. Minneapolis: CARLA.

BOOKS REVIEWED

Bitterlin, G., Johnson, D., Price, D., Ramirez, S., & Savage, K.L. (2008). *Ventures basic student's book*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bitterlin, G., Johnson, D., Price, D., Ramirez, S., & Savage, K.L. (2008). *Ventures basic literacy workbook*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fesler, S.H. & Newman, C. M. (2008). *Taking off: Beginning English* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Fesler, S.H. & Newman, C. M. (2008). *Taking off: Beginning English literacy workbook* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Florez, M.C. (2002). *LifePrints: ESL for adults – Literacy*. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Florez, M.C. (2002). *LifePrints: ESL for adults – Literacy workbook*. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Minicz, E., & Taylor. M.L. (2004). *English—No problem!: Literacy book*. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Minicz, E., & Taylor. M.L. (2004). *English—No problem!: Literacy workbook*. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Nishio, Y.W. (2006). *Longman ESL literacy* (3rd ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

Saslow, J. (2003). *Literacy plus A: Language, life skills, civics*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

Saslow, J. (2003). *Literacy plus B: Language, life skills, civics*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

<i>Taking Off</i> (2 nd ed., 2008)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Color, index, listening scripts, vocabulary lists, learning log	Y
<i>Taking Off</i> <i>Literacy</i> <i>Workbook</i> (2 nd ed., 2008)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	<u>Workbook:</u> answer key, CD, listening scripts	
<i>Ventures Basic</i> (2008)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Color, grammar reference charts, listening scripts,	Y
<i>Ventures</i> <i>Literacy</i> <i>Workbook (2008)</i>	Y	Y	**	**	**	**	US map, self assessments, vocabulary lists	

* **BEST** = Basic English Skills Test (www.cal.org); **CASAS** = Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (www.casas.org); **EFF** = Equipped for Future (<http://eff.cls.utk.edu>); **Florida** = Florida Standardized Syllabi (www.fldoe.org/workforce/syllabi.asp); **LAUSD** = Los Angeles Unified School District Course Outline; **NRS** = National Reporting System (www.nrsweb.org); **SCANS** = Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS); **SPL** = Student Performance Levels (www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/slspls.html)

** Not yet published; based on website sample unit