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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LITERACY CURRICULUM FOR  
ADULT LIBERIAN REFUGEES

by

Kristen M. Kohler

A master's project submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Linguistics and English Language

Brigham Young University

August 2007

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a master's project submitted by

Kristen M. Kohler

This project has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the project of Kristen Kohler in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LITERACY CURRICULUM FOR ADULT LIBERIAN REFUGEES

Kristen M. Kohler

Department of Linguistics and English Language

Master of Arts

From 2003 to 2006, Tucson, Arizona became the new home of many Liberian refugees. Because of civil war in their homeland and ensuing years spent in refugee camps, these refugees had not had many opportunities for literacy development. Tucson had several literacy and ESL programs available; however, none of these programs was meeting the Liberians' particular needs. For my project, I designed and implemented a literacy curriculum for the Liberian refugees in Tucson.

In preparation for developing my curriculum, I not only took coursework but also thoroughly reviewed the literature on literacy learning and instruction for first language learners, second language learners, and adult learners. I then followed the curriculum development model described by Richards (2001): conducting a needs analysis and a situation analysis, developing goals and learning outcomes, planning the course scope and content, designing the syllabus, deciding the role and design of instructional materials, building in opportunities for evaluation, and considering larger factors that may affect the adoption of the curriculum. In addition to the curriculum development

process, I had to attend to the more practical concerns of finding students, finding volunteers, finding a classroom and finding materials.

I taught my literacy class from September 2006 to December 2006 at the Martha Cooper Branch of the Tucson Pima Public Library. I had 12 students whose literacy abilities varied dramatically, with the most advanced student reading at approximately a seventh grade level and the most beginning student working on letter names, sounds, and formation. I also had close to 20 volunteers who helped with transportation, childcare, and tutoring. We met twice a week for thirteen weeks for two hours each time. I used an interactive approach to teaching reading that incorporated both top-down and bottom-up approaches. I found that while a balanced instructional approach is certainly the most effective, the instruction needs to be modified to include more bottom-up work for the lowest level students.

Others interested in developing similar programs may benefit from and build on my experience. For this reason, I included in this report a description of the lessons I learned and the implications I see for other programs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would never have been possible without the help of many people. I would like to thank the refugee organizations in Tucson for answering my questions and helping to advertise the class. I would especially like to thank the International Rescue Committee in Tucson for their help. IRC staff answered countless questions and prepared a letter of support that I could send to my department in Provo. Janet Rabin also explained the resettlement process and the challenges facing the refugees in Tucson, and Tracey Wren spent a great deal of time helping me find and interview potential students. Tracey also helped me to coordinate the in-class childcare. Once classes started, Jenn Pierson volunteered as a reading tutor and kept the IRC up to date on developments. I am truly grateful to them for sharing their time, expertise, and experience.

I would also like to thank the library staff and administrators at the Martha Cooper Branch Library, especially Sharla Darby, the head librarian, and Matt Landon, the youth librarian. Sharla Darby and Matt Landon helped me to get approval to hold the class in one of the meeting rooms. They continued to provide support and understanding when the classes started, even when it was inconvenient (i.e. Playdough® in the new carpet from the childcare, noisy students interrupting the other patrons, etc.). I am grateful for their vision and for their efforts to keep the class going once my project was finished.

I am also grateful for the support of the Tucson Area Reading Council, especially to Dr. Bob Wortman who delivered my grant proposal to the committee. The Creative Classroom grant I received enabled me to buy supplies for the class without needing to



charge the students. The Tucson Area Reading Council was kind enough to allow me to apply for the grant outside of the normal application cycle and deadlines, and their promptness in answering my request allowed me to receive the money before classes started.

I would also like to acknowledge several individuals in Tucson who helped me during the planning stages of the class. Cherie Gray and Maime Spillaine, both of whom have experience working with refugees in Tucson, offered advice on finding a site for the class and answered my various questions. Sharon Hendersen, an elementary school teacher with many years of experience teaching beginning literacy, met with me and showed me materials and teaching strategies for use with beginning learners. Barbara Eiswerth, a member of several organizations that assist refugees, helped me to spread the word to the community and led me to some helpful materials.

This class would not have been possible without the help of many wonderful volunteers. I thank them for their time, patience, and enthusiasm. I would especially like to thank the Law Women's Association at the James E. Rogers College of Law, University of Arizona.

I would also like to thank the staff of the Linguistics and English Language department at Brigham Young University, especially Phyllis Daniel. They helped me to keep track of my progress, turn in the right papers at the right times, and finish my project while living in another state.

I would like to thank my teachers at Brigham Young University and at the University of Arizona for giving me such an excellent education. Their high standards in both their personal and academic lives were inspiring, and I am honored to have learned

from the best and the brightest. I would especially like to thank Maya Eagleton at the University of Arizona for her assistance during the needs analysis stage of my curriculum development.

I would also like to express sincere thanks to Dr. Patricia Anders, the head of the Language, Reading, and Culture department at the University of Arizona. Without her willingness to be an unofficial member of my project committee, I would never have been able to finish my degree long distance. Dr. Anders generously donated her time and considerable experience first to answer my many questions about adult literacy and then to help me find a grant and plan my class. I am truly grateful for her kindness and her support.

I am also grateful to my committee members at Brigham Young University, Dr. Lynn E. Henrichsen (chair), Dr. Dallin E. Oaks, and Dr. Dee I. Gardner. I am amazed at how well they know the field and the research. Their experience intimidated me at first, but their humility and willingness to help quickly reassured me. I am truly grateful for their feedback and ideas, which have shaped and informed the design, implementation, and write-up of my curriculum. I am also grateful that they were willing to make special accommodations for me to communicate and even take a class long-distance. It was not always convenient for them, and I am grateful that they were so supportive.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Henrichsen, who has spent almost as much time on this project as I have! He has helped me from the very beginning, when I was still trying to refine the idea for the project and figure out how to finish my degree long distance. He offered valuable advice and insight through countless phone calls and emails. He worked very hard to find ways for me to finish my degree from another state, even traveling to

Tucson to see my class first-hand. He provided constant guidance and encouragement. I am grateful for his kind, good humor and for his inspired mentoring.

I also would like to thank my students for their dedication and support. I am impressed by their enthusiasm for learning, even in the face of great obstacles and other responsibilities. I am a better person for knowing them, and I am grateful that they were willing to make the sacrifices and have the faith to come to class.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide an overview of the need for a literacy curriculum for Liberian refugees and the objectives for my project. It will describe the stakeholders—individuals, businesses, and groups—who were involved in this project in various capacities. Finally, it will present information on the language use, general characteristics, and history of the most important participants, the students. Chapter two will review the current reading research and explain the approach I chose for teaching literacy. Chapter three will explain the process I went through to find students, volunteers, a classroom, and materials. Chapter four will describe my curriculum development process and the students' pretest results. Chapter five will detail the implementation of the curriculum, including the daily lesson plans and the students' posttest results. Chapter six, the last chapter, will elaborate on the lessons that I learned from this experience and the implications that they have for other programs.

#### *Project Rationale and Purpose*

At the time that this project started in 2005, there were more than 6,000 refugees living in Tucson, Arizona (*Tucson*, 2007). A refugee, as defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is someone with “a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Moorehead, 2005, p.32). The refugees in Tucson in 2005 came from countries around the world, with a recent influx of arrivals from Somalia, Liberia, the Sudan, and Ethiopia.

These African refugees had a range of needs that the refugee organizations in Tucson tried to meet. In 2005, Tucson had six organizations established to resettle refugees, with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) being the largest in terms of manpower, funding, services offered, and a national and international presence. Most of the refugee organizations exhausted their limited resources on the refugees' most immediate needs: finding an apartment, getting food stamps, enrolling their children in school, acquiring dental and medical assistance, finding transportation and a job, and becoming familiar with the community. While the refugee organizations in Tucson wanted to do more to help the refugees, they simply did not have the funding or the manpower.

These organizations were only able to offer English classes occasionally, and when English classes were offered, they did not address the literacy challenges of the African refugees, who struggled with low literacy in English and illiteracy in their native languages. Yet, due to practical constraints, they were placed in the same classes as other refugees who were highly literate in both their native languages and English. Also, the instructors were generally volunteers who received little or no training and had no experience teaching learners who struggled with literacy. For these reasons, the English classes contained no explicit instruction in reading or writing.

Apart from the services provided by the refugee organizations, Tucson also had English classes and literacy tutoring offered by Literacy Volunteers of Tucson, a chapter of ProLiteracy America. While Literacy Volunteers of Tucson required a more rigorous training period from their volunteers, their program was not equipped to handle the flood of African refugees who needed literacy assistance. The English classes that Literacy



Volunteers of Tucson offered were attended almost exclusively by Spanish-speaking adults literate in their native language. Thus, it would have been very difficult for a volunteer instructor to reach both populations in the same class. Also, their literacy tutoring was one-on-one, and there was already an extensive waiting list.

When I started my project, Tucson had some excellent programs in place to help refugees, but there was no program in Tucson that was meeting the particular literacy needs of the recent arrivals from Africa. According to the IRC staff, there were many African refugees that had been in Tucson for two or three years that could not read or write. These refugees spoke English well enough to communicate and even to work, but their opportunities were severely limited by their illiteracy.

Given the needs of the African refugees and the limitations of existing programs, the purpose of my project was to develop, test, and make available a curriculum based on solid theory and practices that would meet the particular literacy needs of the African refugees in Tucson. Following the model described by Jack Richards (2001) in *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*, I developed a literacy curriculum and then tested it with a pilot group, modifying it throughout the semester to better meet the students' needs. My curriculum development process, review of current research and practices, lesson plans, and reflections are now available to others who want to develop similar programs.

### *The Stakeholders*

A project of this magnitude required the participation and assistance of people and organizations throughout the Tucson community. This section will offer an overview of

the stakeholders' involvement, and later chapters will discuss their assistance in more detail.

The refugee organizations were all involved in the planning stages, when I was advertising the class and recruiting students, and one organization, the International Rescue Committee, maintained involvement throughout the project. I also consulted with individuals in the community who had experience teaching literacy or working with refugees, as well as my committee members at Brigham Young University and my professors at the University of Arizona.

A few local businesses also got involved in the project. McDonalds donated coupons for free food and Walmart donated gift cards for their store. These were used as incentives for students to come to class regularly and to read at home. In addition to these donations, I learned about grants offered by the Tucson Area Reading Council, a local affiliate of the Arizona Reading Association and the International Reading Association. I applied for and received a \$200 Creative Classroom grant that enabled me to buy supplies for my class. (How and where I spent the money is described in more detail in Appendix A.)

Once the class started in September 2006, several other important participants emerged. The first was the staff and administrators at the Martha Cooper Branch Library, a branch of the Tucson-Pima Public Library. In addition to providing a classroom for us, they were instrumental in educating the students about the library services and activities. Equally important were the many volunteers from the community that provided transportation for the refugees to and from class and served as tutors or childcare

providers in class. Lastly and most importantly were the students who volunteered to participate in this project.

### *The Students*

From the beginning, I had a certain type of student in mind. I wanted students who possessed sufficient oral proficiency in English to understand my instructions and to ask questions, so that we could focus on reading and writing skills without spending much time on listening and speaking skills. I also wanted students who were fairly illiterate in both their native language and English. I knew it would be easier to teach a homogenous class, and I was most interested in teaching the pre-literacy and literacy skills usually taught in preschool and kindergarten in the United States.

After talking to the refugee organizations in Tucson, I found that the Liberian refugees best matched this profile. English is the official language of Liberia, and while the Liberians also spoke a variety of tribal languages, they were by far the most proficient African refugees in spoken English. There are estimates that only 20% of Liberians actually speak English (*Central*, 2007), and that this includes “a range of varieties that extend from the highly pidginized to a variety that shows many similarities to English as spoken elsewhere . . . [in] the world” (*Liberian*, 2007). Research has also shown that English is mostly spoken in and around Monrovia, the capital, with tribal languages dominating the outlying areas (Gordon, 2005). My students were not all from the same part of Liberia, and none of them had English as their first language; nevertheless, most of them spoke English proficiently before coming to my class.

The process of officially qualifying as a refugee and being chosen for resettlement is far more difficult than most of us imagine. The refugees who attended my class had

spent approximately ten years in refugee camps in Sierra Leone or the Ivory Coast (both of which border Liberia) before coming to the United States, and most of them had been in the United States for less than a year. (For an in-depth look at the problems facing refugees and asylum seekers around the world, see *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* by Caroline Moorehead (2005).)

From 2003 to 2006, just one of the refugee organizations in Tucson, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), resettled 63 Liberians. The other refugee organizations may have resettled a few Liberians, but the IRC had the most money and resettled far more refugees total, so the majority of the Liberians went through the IRC. Of the 63 resettled by the IRC, 12 attended my class at least once as students, with another 5 attending the childcare. This means that almost one third of the Liberians in Tucson participated in this project. Of the 12 students who attended the class at least once, 10 were adults and 2 were teenagers. Nine of the 10 adults were female, and 8 of the 9 adult females who attended my class were single moms. This was typical of the Liberian refugees as a whole.

### *A Brief History of Liberia*

The Liberians became refugees as a result of “a number of interrelated civil wars in West Africa” (The IRC, n.d.). 250,000 died in these wars and millions more were displaced across the region, “numbers [that] are still more staggering when juxtaposed with the tiny Liberian population of just over three million” (*The IRC*, n.d.). Originally founded by freed American and Caribbean slaves, Liberia, or “Land of the Free,” had relative peace until 1980 when William Tolbert was overthrown by Sergeant Samuel Doe after food price riots. This coup marked the end of a period of dominance by the

minority Americo-Liberians. Further conflicts and economic collapse preceded civil war when Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) militia overran much of the countryside, entering the capital in 1990 and executing Samuel Doe. Fighting continued to escalate until 1995 when a peace agreement was signed, leading to the election of Charles Taylor as president.

Peace was short-lived, though, and anti-government fighting broke out in the north in 1999. In 2003, surrounded by rebels and under pressure from the international community, Taylor stepped down and went into exile in Nigeria. A transitional government took over in grim circumstances: the country in economic ruin, overrun with weapons, and rife with unemployment and illiteracy. Late in 2005, the Liberians elected the world's first female black president, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, also known as the Iron Lady. The UN currently maintains some 15,000 soldiers in Liberia, making Liberia one of the organization's most expensive peacekeeping operations (*Country*, 2007).

### *Conclusion*

This chapter described the need for a literacy curriculum for Liberian refugees. It also introduced the stakeholders involved in the project, including a closer look at the students in the class. The following chapter will review the research on reading models, reading instruction, and special considerations for second language learners and adult learners.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The last chapter described the need for a literacy curriculum designed for Liberian refugees. This chapter will review research on reading theories and instruction for first language learners, second language learners, and adults in order to answer the following questions:

- What is the reading process?
- What are the advantages and limitations of the most prominent approaches to teaching reading?
- What is the most effective instructional approach for beginning readers?
- What additional factors do I need to consider if my students are second language learners?
- What additional factors do I need to consider if my students are adults?

This chapter will also describe and provide justification for the interactive approach to teaching reading that I implemented in my course. This approach included strategy instruction; shared reading and writing; phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction; and abundant opportunities to be read to, to read self-selected books, and to write in authentic contexts.

#### *Limitations of the Literature*

Distilling reading research into a set of commonly held theories and practices is complex and problematic. Nearly a century ago, Huey (1908) wrote that “to completely

analyze what we do when we read would almost be the acme of a psychologist's achievements, for it would be to describe very many of the most intricate workings of the human mind" (p.6). In addition to the complexity of reading itself, reading research is further plagued by the difficulty of comparing studies that are testing different variables. One International Reading Association pamphlet (1999) explains,

Our measures of what "works" are not defined consistently. What do we mean when we say a method works? In some cases a method works if children are able to read lists of words in isolation. In others "works" means that children can answer questions on a multiple-choice test. If there is anything we have learned from methods studies, it is that children learn what we teach them (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). If we teach them how to pronounce pseudo-words, they learn how to pronounce pseudo-words and sometimes lists of regular words. If we teach children to summarize, they learn how to give better summaries. Therefore, many methods have a right to claim they "work," but that does not necessarily mean that any of these methods are better than all or most other methods or that any one of them is the "right" method. For all these reasons beginning reading instruction has been controversial.

In spite of these difficulties, great efforts have been made in recent years in the United States to review reading research and come to a consensus on the best way to teach beginning reading.

### *Prominent Approaches to Teaching Reading*

In order to understand the results, however, it is necessary to understand the two general approaches to teaching reading that have fought for dominance in the last several

decades. While in reality most researchers and teachers believe in parts of both approaches, they are often presented in the research as two extremes. The first extreme is a bottom-up only, skills-based phonics approach; the second is a top-down only, whole language approach. Proponents of phonics believe that reading teachers should spend the majority of their time explicitly and systematically teaching phonics and increasing phonemic awareness. Grossen (1997) elaborated a set of steps for teaching reading which were then summarized by Sweet (1997) on the National Right to Read Foundation's Web page:

1. Teach phonemic awareness directly in kindergarten.
2. Teach each sound-spelling correspondence explicitly.
3. Teach frequent, highly regular sound-spelling relationships systematically.
4. Teach students directly how to sound out words.
5. Teach students sound-spelling relationships using connected, decodable texts.
6. Teach reading comprehension using interesting teacher-read stories.
7. Teach decoding and comprehension skills separately until reading becomes fluent.

This list demonstrates the extreme of the phonics approach, and as Weaver (2002) points out, a teacher following this list would never give children time to read texts independently for meaning, nor would any attention be paid to context or the reader's schema (p.35).

On the other hand, the top-down approach to reading asserts that context and schema play an important role in reading, and that reading, as Rosenblatt (1978) argued, is a "dynamic process, a transaction between the reader, the text, and the context" (Beers, 2003, p.45). Goodman (1967) described reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game"



and good readers as those with the most “skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time” (p.127, 132).

Proponents of the top-down approach to reading also hold to these basic tenets summarized by Weaver (2002):

- In isolation, most words do not have a single meaning, but rather a range of possible meanings.
- Words take on specific meanings as they transact with one another in sentence, text, social, and situational contexts.
- Meaning is not only in the text, nor will the meaning intended by the writer ever be perceived—or rather, constructed—exactly the same way by a reader.
- Readers make sense of texts by drawing upon their schemas—their entire lifetime of knowledge, experiences, feelings, and beliefs.
- Meaning emerges as readers transact with a text in a specific situational context.
- Thus, the process of reading is to a considerable degree whole to part, top to bottom, deep to surface, and inside out (from the reader to the text). (p.36)

While these tenets do not seem extreme by themselves, the most radical proponents of the top-down approach deemphasize the importance of phonics to the point where they believe children will pick it up “*in the course of learning to read and write*” and do not need to be taught it “as a prerequisite” (Goodman, p.51).

### *Reading Materials*

Bottom-up and top-down approaches also advocate very different reading materials. Skills-based phonics programs put great stock in decodable texts, which are carefully controlled so that the reader does not encounter “too much” new information—in

the way of letters, letter-sound correspondences, and/or words—at one time (Weaver, 2002, p.365). Decodable texts are also leveled in a way that is supposed to introduce beginning readers to phonics in a systematic fashion. Decodable texts are also supposed to be easier to read, although in a review of research on decodable texts, Allington and Woodside-Jiron (1998) found no well-constructed research that supported this. In fact, one common criticism of decodable texts is that “the syntax—or grammar, or flow of the language—in decodable texts is unnatural” (Weaver, 2002, p.365-366) and that this unnatural syntax makes the stories more difficult for children to read (Kucer, 1985; Rhodes, 1979). In addition to the research showing the ineffectiveness of decodable texts, there exists some question about the reliability of studies supporting decodable texts. One study that is often cited in support of decodable texts, undertaken by Juel and Roper/Schneider (1985), has been criticized for addressing more variables than just decodable texts, thereby making any claims about decodable texts invalid (Coles, 2000).

On the other hand, since top-down approaches focus on making sense of text, they rely on a variety of interesting reading materials with natural, authentic language and understandable stories. If the texts are controlled in any way, it is to use the context to make the story more readable. Goodman (1965), Nicholson and his colleagues (1988), and Stanovich (1991), studied how well children read single words in isolation versus words in stories. They consistently found that children read words in the context of a story much better than words in isolation. Research also shows that texts that are more predictable, in terms of the story and the language, are easier for children to both read and remember (Kucer, 1985; Simons & Amon, 1989).

While the popularity of decodable texts has declined, researchers from both approaches agree that certain features of decodable texts make reading easier and increase the reader's ability to recognize important words and to decode more quickly. Material developers at The Ohio State University (1996) have taken what they believed to be the best parts of decodable texts—the repetition of key words and sounds, the inclusion of fewer words per page and fewer pages per book, the picture support, and the patterned text—and made a series of leveled books for early readers that avoids the awkward syntax and extreme control of traditional decodable texts. This and similar adaptations offer attractive alternatives to those who otherwise disregard the merits of decodable texts.

Both reading approaches and their accompanying materials offer important pieces of the puzzle, but they are only pieces. The top-down approach to reading has enhanced our understanding of the reader as an active participant in the reading process and highlighted the importance of using background knowledge and context to make meaning from texts. It has also reminded us that readers need rich, interesting, motivating texts. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach, while somewhat less glamorous, teaches the letter-sound and decoding knowledge that students need to make sense of new words and to become fluent readers. Seeing the flaws in taking either approach to the extreme, many reading researchers in both first language and second language studies have turned to approaches that acknowledge that reading requires an interaction between top-down and bottom-up processes. Weber (1984) notes that these “interactive models, attempting to be more comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent, give emphasis to the interrelations

between the graphic display in the text, various levels of linguistic knowledge and processes, and various cognitive activities” (p.113).

### *An Interactive Approach*

Interactive models explain some phenomena that purely top-down models cannot account for. For example, Balota, Pollatsek, & Rayner (1985) found that good readers consistently “recognized lexical forms at a processing speed faster than the time required to activate context effects and conscious predicting” (Grabe, 1998, p.60). These findings agree with more recent studies by Nicholson (1991) and Stanovich (1991), who found that readers recognize most words immediately and automatically without using context. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) provide further insight:

The greatest facilitation of word recognition by meaningful context is observed with poor readers, not with good readers . . . What is really wrong with poor readers is that they recognize isolated words inaccurately and too slowly, and compensate for their lack in decoding skills with context-dependent guessing or hypothesis testing. (pp.23-24)

This is further supported by research showing that readers usually recode printed words into sound (McCutchen, Bell, France, & Perfetti, 1991; Tannenhaus, Flanigan, & Seidenberg, 1980), something that can only be done if readers are in fact looking at virtually all of the letters and words, which eye movement research shows they are (McConkie, Kerr, Reddix, & Zola, 1987; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989).

There is also abundant research showing that an interactive approach leads to better results in the classroom than a purely bottom-up approach. For example, Reutzel and Cooter (1991) compared the end-of-year achievement of 38 children in two suburban

first-grade classrooms with phonics-based reading instruction with 53 children in two suburban first-grade classrooms with interactive reading instruction. It is no surprise that children in the classrooms with more balanced literacy instruction achieved significantly better in total reading scores, the vocabulary subtest, and the comprehension subtest than the children in classrooms with traditional instruction.

In another study, Freppon (1991) found that first-graders in an interactive reading program not only had a better understanding of reading as constructing meaning but were almost twice as successful as first-graders in phonics-only classrooms at sounding out words. While these studies are not valid in solving the bottom-up vs. top-down debate, they are further proof that neither extreme holds all the answers and that instruction that pulls from both approaches—an interactive approach—is the most effective. This more balanced, practical approach is the one that I used for my project.

#### *Implications for Second Language Learners*

The benefits of an interactive approach hold special significance for second language learners, and especially for second language learners who have little or no reading ability in their first language. I found no studies focusing on refugees learning to read using an interactive approach, and very few L2 studies. While it is risky to make too many assumptions about L2 learning based on L1 studies, the L1 studies offer important insights into the reading process and the success of the interactive approach.

Studies from first language research show that children at risk for reading failure benefit most from interactive approaches to literacy. Sacks and Mergendoller (1997), who studied 132 kindergartners in 11 classrooms, found that children who scored the lowest on entering kindergarten improved the most in classrooms with balanced,

meaning-emphasis classrooms and the least in phonics-only classrooms. Milligan and Berg (1992) conducted a study of 82 first-grade children with a mix of top-down and bottom-up reading instruction and 83 first-grade children with only bottom-up reading instruction in a middle-income school district. While the groups as a whole did not show significant differences in end-of-year reading comprehension, the middle- and lower-achieving children with top-down and bottom-up reading instruction performed significantly better than the middle- and lower-achieving children with only bottom-up reading instruction. These findings are confirmed by a number of other studies that show that, even more than other students, lower-achieving students and students at risk for low achievement benefit from a balanced approach to literacy far more than they benefit from only bottom-up instruction (Anderson et al., 1991; Cantrell, 1999; Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Eldredge et al., 1996; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; Knapp et al., 1995).

First language research has cited many factors as the cause of reading difficulties, including phonological problems (Adams, 1990; Stanovich, 2000), socioeconomic status (Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), discourse styles (Purcell-Gates, 1995), and an underdeveloped oral vocabulary (Carver, 1994, 2000). Perhaps the most important factor when refugees are concerned is a lack of exposure to literacy materials and activities in the home, a lack that is especially pronounced for the refugees who have spent their lives fleeing from war and surviving for prolonged periods in refugee camps. Research shows that children who come from literate homes in the United States are involved in over 1,000 hours of reading and writing activities in the home before beginning kindergarten (Cunningham, 2005). Learners such as my refugees, who lack exposure to literacy activities and materials, need a curriculum that provides

exposure to meaningful, authentic literacy activities while still “holding in the bottom,” or teaching the letter-sound knowledge necessary for quick, accurate decoding (Eskey, 1998).

Second language learners also receive special benefits from being read to. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al, 1985) names teachers reading aloud to students “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (p.23). In addition to building vocabulary and background knowledge, reading aloud can be a time for teachers to model comprehension strategies and the thought processes a good reader uses, thereby increasing the learners’ metacognition and awareness of the reading process (Davey, 1983, Olshavsky, 1976-77). Holdaway (1979) developed a form of reading aloud called *shared reading* that is now very popular in U.S. classrooms. For shared reading, the teacher displays a text that is large enough for the entire class to see. The teacher reads the text to the students and then rereads it with the students joining in more on each subsequent reading. After several days, the students should be able to read the text independently. Since the texts for shared reading can be easily adapted to the students’ interests, or easily created by the students using the “language experience approach” (Allen, 1976), shared reading is also very effective with adult learners.

In addition to being read to, second language learners need vocabulary instruction, since vocabulary knowledge can significantly affect reading comprehension (Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, 1982; Blachowicz, 1987; Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000; McKeown et al., 1983, 1985). Trelease (2001) found that adults tend to use a basic vocabulary of about 5,000 words in conversation, with another 5,000 used less often.

“Beyond that ten thousand mark,” he says, “are the rare words, and these play a critical role in reading. The eventual strength of our vocabulary is determined not by the common ten thousand words but by how many *rare words* we understand” (p.17). One of the best ways to gain exposure to these rare words is to read or be read to. Hayes and Athens (1988) found that adults, when talking to other adults, will use about 17 rare words for every 1,000 words. Adults, when talking to a ten-year-old child, will use only about 11 rare words for every 1,000 words. However, a children’s book uses 30 rare words for every 1,000; an adult book uses 52 for every 1,000; a comic book uses about 53 words for every 1,000; and a scientific paper uses as many as 128 rare words per every 1,000.

While reading can help second language learners to improve their vocabulary, there are some problems with inferring a word’s meaning from context. For one, the context may give the reader a clue to the word’s meaning, but that usually is not sufficient for inferring specific meanings (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991; Nagy, 1988; Vacca, Vacca, & Grove, 2000) or for allowing students to use the word independently in other situations (Beers, 2003). Combining reading and implicit vocabulary learning with direct instruction further provides more opportunities for expanding vocabulary. When teaching vocabulary explicitly, research shows that vocabulary learning methods that encourage students to actively construct meaning (as opposed to merely copying them from a dictionary) help students learn and retain word meanings longer (Allen, 1999; Blachowicz, 1986; Hill, 1998).



In addition to learning new words, second language learners need to develop automaticity in their decoding, which Beers (2003) reminds us will allow them to focus on the meaning of the text. Blevins (2001) offers this insight:

Of the approximately 600,000-plus words in English, a relatively small number appear frequently in print. Only 13 words (a, and, for, he, is, in, it, of, that, the, to, was, you) account for over 25% of the words in print and 100 words account for approximately 50% . . . The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary contains 220 words (no nouns). Although this list was generated over 40 years ago, these words account for over 50% of the words found in textbooks today. (pp.49-50)

These numbers highlight how automatically recognizing just a few key words will remarkably improve a student's reading. Cunningham (2005) reminds us that many of the most frequent words are not pronounced or spelled in logical ways, making it even more necessary for readers to know them by sight.

Research also shows that word recognition improves as spelling knowledge improves (Adams, 1990; Bear, Invernizzi, and Templeton, 2000; Ehri, 1980, 1997; Ganske, 2000; Invernizzi, 1992). This is partly because a relatively small number of spelling patterns (37) account for a significant number of words (500) commonly used by young children (Wylie & Durrell, 1970). Research shows that readers decode new words using spelling patterns and analogy (Adams, 1990; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Moustafa, 1997). Since spelling develops in stages (Beers, 1980; Templeton, 1983, 2002), the literacy teacher can use a student's spelling to evaluate the student's understanding of letter-sound relationships and to plan instruction.

Instruction in comprehension strategies is also important for second language learners. Studies have consistently shown that strategy instruction can influence how students make meaning from text (Brown et al, 1996; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Pressley, 2000; Wilhelm, 2001). A number of studies have also shown that strategy instruction should be direct and explicit, especially for struggling readers (Beers, 2001; Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Duffy, 2002; Vygotsky, 1934, 1986). While guidelines for teaching comprehension strategies abound, I found *Strategies that Work* by Harvey and Goudvis (2000) and *Mosaic of Thought* by Keene and Zimmermann (1997) to be the two most comprehensive and useful texts.

Second language learners also need significant periods of class time for what Krashen (1993) calls “free voluntary reading,” when students read for pleasure. Also called *independent reading* or *sustained silent reading*, this is a time for children to improve fluency, solidify word and letter knowledge, increase their awareness of print concepts, practice comprehension strategies, increase their confidence and their concept of themselves as readers, and hopefully, to learn to love reading. Ample studies have shown that time for students to read is time well spent. Krashen reviewed 41 comparisons of sustained silent reading in school with traditional instructional programs. In 38 cases, those in sustained silent reading did as well or better than comparison groups on tests of reading comprehension. Programs that lasted for a year or longer showed the most positive results. Since many learners from low-income families have little access to reading materials, the opportunity to read in school is crucial (Weaver, 2002). It is also important that the students spend most of their time reading books that are at their independent reading level (Samuels, Shermer, & Reinking, 1992), where students

recognize 95 percent of the words in the text and comprehend 90 percent or more without any assistance from the instructor (Beers, 2003, p.205).

Finally, a literacy curriculum for second language learners must include opportunities for students to write. Cunningham (2005) observes, “Emergent literacy research has shown us that children are not ruined by being allowed to write before they can write” (p.13). In fact, research has shown that children learn many important concepts about print and develop the confidence that they can write when they are allowed to write at their level (Sulzby, Teale, & Kamberelis, 1989). Encouraging students to use “invented spelling,” or their best attempts according to their knowledge of letter sounds and spelling patterns, further increases students’ understanding of print concepts and letter-sound correspondence while at the same time fostering students’ independence as writers. In addition to writing independently, activities such as interactive writing (Pinnell & Fountas, 1998), also known as “sharing the pen” because of the shared input of the teacher and the student(s), help scaffold students who are reluctant to compose on their own.

#### *Research on Adult Learners*

A curriculum for adult learners especially needs authentic learning activities that are immediately applicable to the students’ lives outside the classroom. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) reported that the majority of the participants in adult education were participating for job-related reasons (i.e., either to get a job or to improve their current job). This was especially true for the economically disadvantaged and the poorly educated, who were far less likely to take classes for recreation or personal satisfaction. Studies have also shown that the two reasons most often cited for not attending adult

education classes are lack of time and lack of money. In a UNESCO study reported by Valentine (1997), forty-five percent of the respondents reported that lack of time was preventing them from participating in job-related education. For non-job-related education, the number jumped to sixty percent. Clearly, more people are willing to make time for job-related education than for non-job-related education, which has definite implications for my project.

### *Conclusion*

Allington (2001) states, “Probably the most pernicious [belief in education is] that we must “slow it down and make it simple” for children of poverty and others labeled “at risk.” I wanted a rich, accelerated program for my students that included both top-down and bottom-up approaches, including strategy instruction; shared reading and writing; phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction; and abundant opportunities to be read to, to read self-selected books, and to write in authentic contexts. I knew that students “most readily become literate if reading and writing skills and strategies are taught and learned while the children are engaging in the kinds of real life experiences that engage all of us outside school—that is, reading and writing to enjoy, learn, inquire, persuade” (Weaver, 2002, p.365). For the adults in my class who worked, this meant making the literacy curriculum applicable to their work life by showing them how the class would help them in their current employment or help them to get better employment. For my students who did not work outside the home, it meant showing them how the class would help them to interact more effectively in the larger culture and society.

This chapter has reviewed the research that formed the foundation of my literacy curriculum. This research answered the following questions:

- What is the reading process?
- What are the advantages and limitations of the most prominent approaches to teaching reading?
- What is the most effective instructional approach for beginning readers?
- What additional factors do I need to consider if my students are second language learners?
- What additional factors do I need to consider if my students are adults?

The next chapter will describe the steps I went through to organize the class—to find students, volunteers, a classroom, and materials.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ESTABLISHING THE CLASS INFRASTRUCTURE

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on reading models, reading instruction, and special considerations for second language learners and adult learners. This chapter will describe the obstacles I encountered and my eventual success establishing the class infrastructure—or in other words, finding students, volunteers, a classroom, and materials. This process was at least as difficult as developing the actual curriculum, and far more difficult than I anticipated. It took me approximately four months and required the help of individuals throughout Tucson.

#### *Finding Students*

The first thing I did to find students was contact all the refugee and literacy organizations in Tucson. I explained my vision for my class and the kind of students I was looking for, and I sent them fliers with information about the class that they could show their volunteers and post in their offices. All of the organizations were excited about the class and very willing to help advertise it, but most of them worked with clients who either already had great literacy skills, like the Meskhetian Turks, or did not have the oral proficiency skills, like the Somali Bantu. As previously mentioned, after discussions with staff at the International Rescue Committee, it was clear that Liberian refugees were most likely to fit my profile.

The organization with the most Liberian clients was the International Rescue Committee (IRC). I knew a few of their clients from my time volunteering as an ESL teacher for them, and they were able to put me in contact with some of my previous students. The IRC also found a dozen more Liberian refugees that were interested in my

class. I met with some of the refugees as part of my needs analysis, and IRC staff met with the others. All of the refugees we met with were very enthusiastic about the class, and several gave us names of relatives and friends to contact as well.

Around the time that I was looking for students, I found out about a few Liberian men who were trying to establish a sort of neighborhood organization for Liberian refugees. They planned on having periodic meetings where Liberians could socialize, network, and discuss problems. I contacted one of the men who was trying to organize these meetings and asked him to tell the group about my class and get me the names of anyone who was interested in it. He was pleased to help but almost impossible to get in touch with after that. At one point he told me he had five people who were interested in the class and promised to email me their contact information. After countless unreturned calls and emails to him, though, I eventually gave up hope of finding out who they were.

I also tried to find students through the Tucson Pima Public Library. The library put up fliers and put my class on their online schedule. I got several calls from members of the community wanting to know more about the class, but it did not ultimately give me any more students.

Once classes started, with students mostly found by the IRC, the class continued to grow through word of mouth. In fact, for the first three weeks of class, I had at least one new student come every class period. While not all of these new students continued to come consistently, word of mouth proved to be an excellent way to recruit more students. A few of the students found in this way proved to be the neediest and most dedicated students in the class.

### *Finding Volunteers*

I found volunteers in a surprising array of places. Some of my volunteers heard about the class from the fliers I sent to the refugee organizations and the library. One of the new IRC staff members also volunteered, so she could see the class first-hand, and another volunteer came from an advertisement I posted through the Volunteer Center of Southern Arizona.

Others came from two listservs that together reach several hundred people in Tucson. I heard about these listservs from Barbara Eiswerth, a member of the Noor Women's Association who has worked extensively with refugees in the Tucson area. One listserv was for members of the Noor Women's Association, an interfaith group of volunteers whose goal is to help refugees adjust to life in the United States (For more information, see <http://www.volunteersolutions.org/vctucson/org/20238911.html>). The other listserv went to community members who worked with refugees either through volunteer work or through their jobs in education, law enforcement, health care, economic assistance, or other capacities. Ms. Eiswerth sent emails to both listservs with my flier, my contact information, and information about the class and explained my needs for students, volunteers, and a place to hold the class. While I did not find any students this way, I did find a few volunteers. One of the volunteers that heard about the class through a listserv then posted fliers in her church, where another woman saw them and volunteered to help.

The majority of my volunteers, by far, came from two places: my church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Law Women's Association. I put an announcement in my church's bulletin and announced it in person. This yielded several



volunteers. I also contacted the board of the Law Women's Association at the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law. They announced it to their members, got an enthusiastic response, and provided several more volunteers. Once classes started, some of the volunteers brought their friends or relatives with them to help in the class.

Before long I had so many volunteers that I was able to schedule them on a rotating basis, so that volunteers could come to the class as often or as seldom as their schedules permitted. One reason I was able to get so many volunteers was that I accepted anyone who wanted to volunteer. I did not need a real commitment from new volunteers because my class would not suffer if a volunteer only came once. I had a few volunteers that came consistently, and many other volunteers that I could call when I needed extra help. A day or two before each class I would estimate how many students I expected to attend. I would then call as many additional volunteers as I thought I would need. While this was probably more work than having a set volunteer schedule, it gave me the flexibility to match my students' trends in attendance. And it gave my volunteers the flexibility to volunteer when their own schedules permitted.

The number and quality of my volunteers were fundamental to the class's eventual success. My students were so diverse in their abilities that I could never have met all of their needs alone. In addition to providing the one-on-one help each student needed, my volunteers played a vital role in keeping the class running from day to day. Most notably, they provided childcare during class and transportation to and from class. Without the transportation and the childcare, there would have been no students in class to tutor.

*Finding a Classroom*

Finding a place to hold my literacy class was much more difficult than I thought it would be. I planned originally to hold classes at Woods Library, a branch of the Tucson-Pima Public Library. The library was very supportive and would have let us use their meeting room for free, and I was told that Woods Library was very close to a large population of refugees. It turned out that the refugees close to that library were mostly Somali Bantus and did not have the oral proficiency in English that I needed. The refugees that fit my profile lived far enough from Woods Library that transportation would have been difficult.

I started looking for places closer to the intersection of Alvernon Way and Grant Road, which was where most of the Liberians lived. There was a group of Liberians in Nottingham Apartments, just north of this intersection, and their apartment complex had a clubhouse. It was just a bare room with tile, a few tables, and a kitchen. One woman was already holding English classes there once a week and most of my students would have been able to walk to it. I talked to the manager and he was happy to let us use the room for free during office hours. Unfortunately, he couldn't let us use the room at all after 5:00pm, and most of my refugees didn't get home from work until about 4:30pm.

Just a few miles south of Nottingham Apartments, off a major bus line, is a Tucson Parks and Recreation Center. They had a room that we could have used, but they would have charged us. I did not think the IRC would be willing to pay rent for us, and I certainly couldn't afford to, so that location was out of the question.

I also looked into other apartment complexes, churches, and elementary schools in the area—all with no luck. There were several families of refugees living in Mountain

Shadows Apartments, just across the street from Nottingham Apartments. Unfortunately, Mountain Shadows Apartments did not have a clubhouse. There were several Catholic churches close by as well. One of them even had a building with classrooms that the IRC had paid to use a few months before. I called the churches and left messages for their business managers but never heard back. I was fairly certain that my church would allow me to use their classrooms for free. The nearest building was about four miles to the east of where the refugees lived. This isn't far to drive, but I wanted to find something closer. I also checked into several elementary schools. The two closest to the Liberians were Davidson Elementary School and Wright Elementary School. I called them and left messages for their principals.

In the meantime, I found out about a new branch of the Tucson-Pima Public Library being built, the Martha Cooper Library. It was located on 1377 N. Catalina Avenue, less than a mile and a half east and south of where most of my students lived. The library was about two blocks from a major bus line that ran straight from Nottingham Apartments, and I calculated that it would only take my students about 15 minutes to ride the bus to class. The library had the added benefit of being a place where the refugees could check out books and use the computers. The library's website said it was currently open with limited services for a few hours during the day. I tried calling them to find out if their meeting rooms were available, but they did not have a working phone yet.

I decided to visit the library to see when they would be open with full services and full hours, thinking that I could start my class at one of the churches or elementary schools and then move it to the library when the library was completely finished. According to the library's website, this would not be until the end of September, and

knowing how construction projects go, I thought it would likely be October. This was the middle of August. To my surprise, when I got to the library I found out that their website was wrong; while they still did not have a phone or a copy machine, they were fully operational and open every day. They also had two available meeting rooms.

I met with the head librarian, Sharla Darby, and told her about the literacy class I was starting. She said that as a new library, they did not have many programs yet and they were really looking for ways to reach out to the community, especially to those members of the community that were not likely to visit the library on their own. Ms. Darby called in the Youth Librarian, Matt Landon, who was likewise very enthusiastic. They said they would be happy to schedule us in the large meeting room and to do whatever else they could to help. Ms. Darby offered to order a class set of books and to provide some activities for the children who would accompany their parents. After the meeting, I sent Ms. Darby my resume and a letter describing the class in more detail, so that she could show them to her superiors. They immediately approved everything, and I stopped my search for a classroom.

It took a lot of time and effort to find the right site for the class, but it was worth it. The location was perfect, and the environment was everything a literacy class could hope for. With all of the other obstacles that threatened to keep my students from class, a convenient location was crucial. Without it, my class would almost certainly have failed.

### *Finding Materials*

I needed four kinds of materials for this project: materials to test with, materials to teach with, materials for the students to read, and materials for the students to use in class, such as notebooks, pens, etc. As I will explain in more detail later, I decided on

two commercial materials to test the students: *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2006) and the *Qualitative Reading Inventory* (Leslie and Caldwell, 2005). Fortunately, I already owned both of these materials, so I did not need to spend any of the grant money to purchase them. For other interested teachers, they are available on amazon.com for approximately 20 and 30 dollars (used), respectively.

I also found a variety of materials to teach with. For every comprehension strategy, I tried to use at least one nonfictional text and one fictional text for modeling and practice. For the nonfiction texts I often used articles from msnbc.com, which I would rewrite slightly. I also used stories from *Very Easy True Stories* by Sandra Heyer, a book I first became familiar with while teaching at the English Language Center at BYU. I already owned this book, but it can be bought for about 10 dollars used.

I chose the fictional texts from books I had read as a child and from lists that I found in the appendices of several excellent books on reading. Most of the books I chose were recommended in *Strategies That Work* (2000), by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis. I checked this book out of the University of Arizona's library, but it is also available on amazon.com for about 30 dollars. Other books with excellent recommendations were *Literacy Links* by Laura Robb, *Phonics They Use* by Patricia M. Cunningham, and *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* by Kyleene Beers. I checked *Literacy Links* and *Phonics They Use* out of the same library, but they cost about 15 dollars each on amazon.com (if bought used). The Beers text I bought on amazon.com for about 25 dollars using the money I received in the grant.

I also used a variety of realia for in class activities. The students filled out library card applications during the first week of class, and read food ads and classifieds from

free local newspapers. They wrote thank-you cards, invitations, letters of advice, get well cards, and emails. They also wrote about pictures of Liberia that they found online, and I tried (with little success) to get them to keep journals. When possible, I used Language Experience Approach to have the students generate their own texts to read.

When it came to materials for our daily reading time, the students had a few options. Since all of them had library cards after the first week, they were able to check out books and bring them into the classroom for reading time. I helped them to find books appropriate for their level and periodically checked with them to see if they understood what they read. For students who had never read anything before, I had some very easy-to-read leveled readers, called *Keep Books*. *Keep Books* were developed through grants to address the need for inexpensive but appropriate books, and they were very effective for my low readers. I bought 72 books on ebay for about 30 dollars. For more information, see <http://www.keepbooks.org/home.htm>

In addition to library books or leveled readers, students could bring in something from home that they needed help reading. For example, one student named Bendu periodically brought in things that she needed to read for her job, and another student, Fatmata, once brought in a card that she had received in the mail. I also kept in class any materials that I had read out loud, so that the students could review them on their own or with a tutor. This was especially helpful in providing some scaffolding for students that would not otherwise have been able to understand those texts.

Finally, I had to find school supplies that the students and I could use in class. As I mentioned before, I applied for and obtained a Creative Classroom grant from the Tucson Area Reading Council. I used this grant to buy notebooks for the students, index

cards, writing utensils, paper for letter formation, and other supplies. (For a complete list, see Appendix A.) If I had needed more supplies, I could have written proposals to various companies to donate supplies or sell supplies at a reduced cost. Toys-R-Us and Wal-Mart both told me they would likely grant such a proposal, but with the grant money and library's resources, I was able to get everything I needed.

In addition to these materials, I discovered a wealth of adult literacy materials available online. Some were too expensive for my budget, and others I simply did not need; however, they are worth mentioning. Townsendpress.com has a variety of very inexpensive adult literacy materials, written for a 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, depending on the book. Most of their books are original, high interest nonfiction; others are original fiction or classics rewritten to be easier to read. National Geographic also has an abundance of resources. (For more information, see <http://www.ngschoolpub.org/c/@k1cGb.Z2mjubM/Pages/index.web>) While significantly more expensive, National Geographic has a line of books and magazines written from a pre-K to 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, all with excellent nonfiction content and beautiful, engaging pictures. Another great, free resource is *The Key: A Newspaper for New Readers*, a newspaper designed for adults who are either learning English as a Second Language or have not completed their high school educations. This online newspaper is a project of Milwaukee Area Technical College Office of Grants and Development and has been published monthly since 1988. (For more information, see <http://www.keynews.org/>)

Finally, there are some easy-to-read booklets about housing in the United States that are published and distributed for free by Mercy Housing, a national non-profit organization dedicated to “developing, operating, and financing quality, affordable,

service enriched housing” in an effort to strengthen communities. These booklets are written specifically for refugees and come in English and a few other languages common to refugees in the United States. They provide information on “how to operate appliances safely, how to maintain the apartment properly, and what is required of them as tenants,” and can be ordered for free from their website ([www.mercyhousing.org](http://www.mercyhousing.org)).

Several other websites offer both excellent adult literacy materials and an abundance of information on adult literacy. One of these is [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk), the website of the National Literacy Trust, an independent charity based in London that is dedicated to promoting literacy. The following websites have links to additional resources, such as information on teaching adult literacy, inexpensive books, and free downloadable books:

- <http://www.literacyconnections.com/AdultLiteracy.php>
- <http://www.literacyconnections.com/BooksOnBudget.html>
- <http://www.readinga-z.com/newfiles/preview.html>
- <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Resc/Educ/edu.html>

### *Conclusion*

In many ways, establishing the class infrastructure was as difficult as developing the curriculum. Finding students, volunteers, a classroom, and materials took a significant—and unexpected—amount of energy and time. I had to take into consideration factors such as the cost of the materials, the proximity of the classroom to the students’ homes, the hours the potential classrooms were available, the students’ work schedules, and the schedules of the volunteers. Ultimately, though, these steps were essential to the class’s success.



The next chapter will describe the curriculum development process I went through, a recursive process that started while I was establishing the class infrastructure and did not end until the class itself ended.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DESIGNING THE CURRICULUM

The last chapter described my efforts to find students, find volunteers, find a classroom, and find materials. This chapter will describe the curriculum development process I went through, which followed the model outlined by Jack Richards (2001) in *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. I first conducted a needs analysis to find out more about my students' prior literacy experience, literacy levels, goals and needs, interests, attitudes, and English language ability. I also conducted a situational analysis to determine what factors, such as transportation, cost, child care, and work schedules, may influence my students' attendance and participation. I then tried to create attainable goals and learning outcomes, select appropriate and interesting content, and design my syllabus. I also chose instructional materials and materials and methods for evaluation. I also did what Richards calls *providing for effective teaching*, and considered other teaching and learning factors that might influence how well the students and other stakeholders would receive the curriculum.

#### *The Needs Analysis*

When designing my needs analysis, I kept in mind this advice from Richards (2001): "Since any one source of information is likely to be incomplete or partial, a triangular approach (i.e., collecting information from two or more sources) is advisable" (p.59). I determined my purposes for doing a needs analysis, or what I hoped to learn, and then I decided on several procedures to collect the information. This section will summarize my overall plan for the needs analysis (see Table 1), and then go into more detail about each step.

Table 1

*Needs Analysis Steps***1. Research the existing literacy and ESL programs in Tucson**

What are the strengths and limitations of the existing literacy and ESL programs?  
Why are these programs not meeting the needs of the refugees?

**2. Interview the literacy and ESL programs in Tucson**

Do any of the organizations in Tucson already have established and successful ways of testing incoming students?

Do any of these organizations have accessible test results on my future students?

**3. Volunteer with the International Rescue Committee in Tucson**

What will my students be like? What activities will be most successful?

How can I make the connections I need within the refugee organizations and the community?

**4. Interview potential students**

What is their oral proficiency?

What do they need literacy for? What kinds of tasks do they need to perform?

What are they not able to do now that they need/want to be able to do?

What do they want to be able to read/write by the time they finish the course?

How do they compensate for being illiterate?

What access do they have to pens, paper, books, newspapers, magazines, etc?

What previous experience do they have trying to learn to read/write? What was their schooling like in their country? In the refugee camps? How successful was this schooling? If it was unsuccessful, why was it unsuccessful?

What are their attitudes/feelings/beliefs towards schooling? Towards learning to read? Towards the United States?

What do they think a good teacher is? A good lesson?

What is their personal background? (Country of origin, native language(s), how long in the US, family situation, other countries lived in, etc)

Do they need childcare?

Do they work? What days/times would they be available for a class?

Do they have a bus pass or a car?

How often would they like to have class each week? For how many hours?

Where do they live? (so I can find a central location to have the class)

**5. Determine topics of interest using the *ESL Needs Assessment Instrument* (Probst, 1999)**

What topics are they interested in? What topics will be most useful to them?

**6. Test students using *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2006)**

What literacy and preliteracy skills do they have?

*Step 1: Evaluating existing programs.* My needs analysis really started many months before this project was approved, when I was still trying to determine the need in Tucson for a literacy course for refugees. From about September 2005 to November 2005, I either met with or called every ESL or literacy program available to refugees in Tucson. As I mentioned previously, I found that there was no existing program that met the needs of refugees who were illiterate in their native language. Only a few of the refugee organizations in Tucson were currently offering ESL classes, and like the ESL classes offered by Literacy Volunteers of Tucson and Pima College Adult Education, those classes did not explicitly teach literacy. This was partly because the instructors were usually volunteers with very little training. It was also because the students in the ESL classes had such different needs. Even in classes where the only students were new refugees, many of the refugees were already literate in their native language. The ones who were not literate suffered.

Literacy Volunteers of Tucson was the only place in Tucson to offer literacy instruction separate from their ESL classes. The literacy instruction was done one-on-one with volunteer tutors. While this could have been helpful for a small number of refugees, Literacy Volunteers of Tucson does not have enough tutors to help everyone in Tucson that needs literacy help. I also thought that some concepts and skills are better learned in a classroom setting with other learners.

In addition to these problems, I learned from staff at the International Rescue Committee that many refugees did not attend the Pima College Adult Education classes because they were too far away and did not offer childcare. I also heard some refugees complain that the classes offered by the refugee organizations in Tucson were unreliable,

as they would run for a month or two only to be cancelled when a volunteer could no longer run the class.

*Step 2: Searching for information.* In addition to evaluating existing programs, I wanted to find out what information about the refugees was already available from other sources. I checked with Pima College Adult Education to see what kind of testing they did for students entering their English as a Second Language classes. I spoke with Masha Gromyko, the Assistant Program Manager, who told me that they give all new students the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics. BEST was developed in the 1980s and has two components, one to test oral proficiency and one to test literacy. As of September 30, 2006, the original BEST test has been replaced with BEST Plus, to test listening and speaking skills, and BEST Literacy, to test reading and writing skills. Ms. Gromyko informed me that Pima College Adult Education administers the oral proficiency test to all students, but only administers the literacy test to advanced students. She also said that she did not have any testing results from Liberian refugees, my target population. I decided her test result information would not be helpful to me, since I could determine the Liberians' oral proficiency skills through interviews and my previous conversations with them.

I also checked with the International Rescue Committee to see if they did any kind of testing when their clients arrived in Tucson. They explained that they interviewed their students to find out their childcare needs, job skills, etc., but they did not have anything that would be helpful to me.

*Step 3: Volunteering with the IRC.* After learning what I could from talking to Pima College Adult Education, Literacy Volunteers of Tucson, and all of the refugee

organizations in Tucson, I decided I needed to see a class of refugees in action. In all my experience teaching ESL classes, I had never taught refugees and I wanted to have some experience with them before designing and teaching my literacy class. So in November 2005, I decided to volunteer with the International Rescue Committee to teach an ESL class for their clients. I taught from the time the class started in January 2006 until I moved to Phoenix in May of that year. I had the opportunity to see first-hand the extreme discrepancy in the literacy levels of refugees recently arrived in the United States. About half of my students were Meskhetian Turks. They were very educated and highly literate in Russian and possibly other languages. The other half of my students was African refugees. Most of these refugees had only gone to school sporadically and had never learned to read or write in any language. It was immensely difficult for me to teach both groups together, and I have significantly more training in teaching ESL than the average volunteer. I decided that I would try to recruit the lowest level students for my literacy class. While I was not able to keep my literacy class as homogenous as I had hoped, it was certainly much more homogenous than the classes previously offered to refugees in Tucson.

This class also gave me the opportunity to try out some of the activities and theories that I was learning about in my classes at the University of Arizona. I was able to get some idea of what I wanted to include when I designed my curriculum. I learned, for example, that my African students were very adept at memorizing sight words and that they enjoyed the children's books that I read with them. I was also able to get some idea of what literacy levels I would be dealing with in my class. I was surprised to learn that most of my African refugees had immense trouble with letter formation. I was also

surprised that some of them could not even write their names. None of them knew all the names of the letters of the alphabet. Although I would end up having students in my literacy class who were more advanced, my experience with African refugees in this ESL class gave me a starting point from which I could begin to envision my curriculum.

*Step 4: Conducting interviews.* The first stage of the needs analysis, a series of interviews with potential students, was conducted in July 2006. Since I was in Phoenix, I decided that I would conduct only the first set of interviews, accompanied by Tracey Wren, a staff member at the International Rescue Committee. Tracey was eager to help and offered to interview the rest of the potential students on her own, so I did not have to drive down from Phoenix. She came with me for the first interviews so she could introduce me to the refugees I had not met before and observe how I conducted the interviews. I believe that her presence at the interviews was also vital in giving the refugees confidence in me and in my program. Without her, I would certainly have not had the same credibility.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine potential students' literacy backgrounds, general ability levels, needs, attitudes, and goals. I also used these interviews to conduct a situation analysis to find ways to make the class convenient and feasible for the students, as well as to circumvent potential problems, such as a lack of childcare or transportation. My plan was to use these interviews both to inform the curriculum and to help me find the best students for the class—ones that were either entirely or substantially illiterate with good oral proficiency in English. I imagined that Tracey and I would interview more students than I could feasibly take and that I would choose the ones who were the best match and invite them to participate in the class.

The first set of interviews went very well. I will describe a few of the representative interviews. Helena Howe, one of my students from the ESL class, was the first refugee we interviewed. She had been in the United States for two years and speaks very good English. She had spoken English since she was small, along with Grobo, her tribal language. Helena has five children still at home, and the youngest is four. She had daycare for the youngest one during the day, while her older children are in school, and at night her teenagers could watch the other children. With great sincerity she told me, “My heart is burning for school.” Helena never had a chance to go in Liberia; she was too poor. She did go to school for three months in a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, but then it closed. She did not learn very much, and she was always distracted with worry for her family. Helena also went to an ESL class offered by Pima College Adult Education, but she did not like the teacher. Her definition of a good teacher was one who works with you one-on-one, helps you when you don’t understand, and doesn’t erase the board too fast.

Helena told me she wanted to be able to read her mail, food labels, and street signs. She did not have any books in the house except for a picture dictionary given to her by her church. She told me she likes reading with a partner. She also said she loves school and wants the class to be four days a week for two hours each class. She said she can go anywhere for class because she rides the bus. Helena was currently working from 2pm-11pm, but she was looking for a day job. She wanted to work during the day and go to class in the evenings. Just to get some idea of her understanding of print, I handed her a book and asked her which page she would start reading on. She did not know where to start, but guessed it would be in the middle of the book. She did not notice she was



holding the book upside down. She was able to name some of the letters, but was unfamiliar with the concepts of “letters” and “words.”

Dorothy was our next interviewee. She had been in the United States for four months, after spending more than ten years in camps in the Ivory Coast and Ghana. She speaks five dialects in addition to English. Dorothy had gone to school in Liberia until she was fourteen, but she had eye problems that made it hard to learn. She told us that she could read some, and that she was getting glasses for the first time very soon. I was unable to get any idea of her reading level, though, since she did not have her glasses yet. She wanted to learn history and science and maybe get a job in the medical field. Dorothy did not have any printed materials in her home. She said she would need childcare for her two young children, and she wanted an evening class to meet two or three times a week for two hours each time. She was unemployed and looking for a job.

After Dorothy, Tracey and I interviewed two more refugees, Mattu and Baby, both of whom had expressed an interest in the class. I learned that both could already read very well, and I thought to myself that they probably were not good candidates for the class. They had another refugee visiting them, though, who happened to be perfect for the class. Fatmata could not read a thing and was very enthusiastic about learning. She told me then, and has told me many times since, that she wants to come to class every day. She also did not need childcare and did not work. After one more interview, I gave Tracey a list of the questions that I wanted her to ask and she promised to keep looking for more students to interview. Over the next few weeks, she sent me information from interviews with six or seven more refugees.

Although the refugees we met were happy to answer our questions, the interviews were only marginally helpful. They gave me a general idea of the literacy levels, attitudes, and situational needs of the interviewees, but each interview got progressively shorter until the interviews that Tracey conducted provided little more than phone numbers and work schedules. This was partly because we realized very soon that about half of the refugees were available during the day and the other half at night. We were reluctant to spend too much time collecting information on refugees who would never be able to come to the class, and I had not yet decided when the class would be.

In the months leading up to the class, I became more focused on finding enough students than on learning what the students would need from the class. I realized that it was going to be harder to find students than I thought, at least students that matched my profile of low literacy and high oral proficiency. For this reason, I eventually decided to admit any refugee with the requisite oral language, regardless of their literacy level. This decision proved to be crucial; if I had excluded any students, I would never have had enough students to run a class.

As an inexperienced interviewer, I also ran into problems with the refugees' answers, many of which were vague. I quickly realized that while all of the refugees I interviewed wanted to learn how to read, none of them had clear, realistic reasons for doing so. I was surprised by the number who wanted to read so they could become a nurse or perform some other highly specialized job. It was obvious that they had no real idea of the education and reading level required for such a job. The refugees also had a difficult time articulating what they needed literacy for, or what kinds of literacy tasks they were faced with in their daily lives. If I were to teach a class like this again, I would

include either more specific questions or some kind of instrument in my needs analysis to help me determine specifically what they want the literacy class to help them with.

I was also reluctant to base my curriculum on the answers of refugees whose schedules were still in flux and who therefore may not ever attend the class. About a third of those we interviewed were looking for a new job and therefore unsure if they would be working nights or morning by the time the class started. I realize now it would have been easier to do very brief interviews in July to determine the general needs of the students as far as the location of the class, transportation and childcare demands, and general literacy levels, and follow these brief interviews with more specific inquiries about their literacy needs and expectations once classes had started in September. Doing lengthier interviews or using some other instrument to determine literacy needs in September would have been helpful for two reasons: one, it would have given me the important information I missed in the first set of interviews, and two, it would have given me a chance to determine the needs of the students who heard about the class and joined after it had started. The needs analysis for this class was really a catch 22: I had to do some needs analysis before starting the class, but I was never sure who my students would be until classes had already started.

*Step 5: Determining topics of interest.* I decided to wait until the first day of class to administer the “ESL Needs Assessment Instrument” found in *English for Daily Life* (Probst, 1999, xii-xiii). Then, when I got to class and there were only four students, I decided it would be easier to just have a discussion and together come up with topics for them to vote on. I explained that while the purpose of the class was to learn to read and write better, it would help if we had something to read and write about that was

interesting to them. I suggested a few topics—family, health care, jobs—and asked them for their input. They added several possible topics—food, US History, African History, Biology, Geography, holidays and culture, and a few others. I told them we would not have time to study all of these topics in the short time we had and suggested we narrow it down to three or maybe four topics. I had them vote for their favorites and we narrowed it down to Family, Health, Jobs, and Food. I decided to combine Health and Food and spend the first part of the semester on that topic, then move to Jobs, and then to Family.

In retrospect, there were a few problems with this part of the needs analysis. First, I think if I had spent more time getting to know them and their needs, I could have presented more applicable topics for them to vote on. The topics we chose were very general and difficult to tie together. Next time I would choose a more specific topic for the course, like Literacy for Work, and pick topics that all tied into that. Another problem was that I did this crucial part of the needs analysis with only a third of the class. At that point, I was not sure who else was going to come to class. Several of the students started coming in the third or fourth week (or later), after hearing about the class from a friend. The topics that the four students chose on the first day may not have been interesting or helpful for the students that came after the first day, but I also certainly could not have waited until two months into the class to choose topics. It may have worked better if I had made the overall focus of the course narrower, chosen the first topic myself, and then let the students choose the other topics throughout the semester.

*Step 6: Testing the students.* In order to assess their literacy skills more exactly, I used *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2006), a series of tests

designed to assess reading readiness. These tests will be explained in more detail in the *Evaluation* section. The following table provides a summary of the tests' purposes:

Table 2

*Summary of the "Observation Survey" tests*

Test #1: Letter Identification	Student is asked the names and sounds of both capital and lower case letters
Test #2: Word Test	Student is asked to read a list of common sight words
Test #3: Writing Vocabulary	Student is asked to write any words he/she knows how to write from memory
Test #4: Dictation	Student is given a sentence to write as the tester dictates it
Test #5: Concepts About Print	Student is asked a series of questions as the tester reads them a specially-designed book
Test #6: Reading Level	Student reads leveled books until the tester finds the student's appropriate level

All students were tested as soon as possible after joining the class, and for the most part the results were extremely useful. They helped me to determine which books the students should read during our daily reading time. They also helped me to know what

the students needed to learn both as a class and in their individual tutoring sessions with volunteers. I will summarize the strengths and limitations of these tests, along with the students' results, in a later section.

*Summary of the needs analysis.* The needs analysis was a critical step in developing a usable, successful curriculum. Evaluating the existing programs and finding out if they had any helpful information took very little time and helped me to see pitfalls to avoid in my program. Also, while it required a lot of time and effort on my part initially, the volunteer work I did with the International Rescue Committee ultimately saved me time and made my life easier. I gained valuable experience teaching and established important connections. The people I met at the IRC later helped me in planning and teaching the class. They helped me to advertise the class and make other helpful connections in the community. Most importantly, I would never have found enough students without their help. IRC staff member Tracey Wren also saved me time and travel by independently conducting interviews with potential students. Another IRC staff member, Jenn Pierson, became a regular volunteer for the class. Without their insider help, I may literally have never gotten my foot in the door.

Conducting the interviews, determining topics of interest, and testing the students also provided valuable information during the first weeks of class. While each step of the needs analysis process had its flaws, together they gave me a fairly complete picture of my students' interests, needs, and abilities. Of course the needs analysis was not just a step that was completed within the first few weeks of class. It was ongoing and recursive, as I will discuss more in later sections. I continued monitoring the needs of my students throughout the semester with further interviews and testing. Observing my

students' progress and their attendance trends also helped me to know when and how to adjust the curriculum to better meet their needs.

### *The Situation Analysis*

In addition to the needs analysis, I conducted a situation analysis. My goal was to find ways to make the class convenient and feasible for the students, as well as to circumvent potential problems, such as a lack of childcare or transportation. I knew that even if I created an excellent curriculum, it would be unsuccessful if I did not prepare for the students' practical needs.

I used the needs analysis interviews and subsequent phone calls to find out my students' work schedules, childcare needs, and transportation situations. As I mentioned in the needs analysis, about half of the refugees I interviewed had to work during the day and half at night. I tried to find days that both sets of students had off, or a time when the day workers had just gotten home before the night workers had to leave. In the end, though, I resigned myself to the fact that I would only be able to accommodate one group.

I also found that many of my students would need childcare. Fortunately, this was fairly easy to arrange. I knew I had volunteers who were willing to provide childcare during the class. The only problem was where to hold it. The library had a policy that children under a certain age had to be in the same room as their parents. This left me no option other than to have volunteers watch the children in the back of our classroom. While this was often distracting for the parents, it was the best I could offer and at least it let them come to class. I noticed, though, that as the weeks went by, more and more parents miraculously managed to find their own childcare and still attend the class. If I

had not offered childcare, I could not have persuaded the students to come to the class the first time. Once they were invested in the class, though, most of them would have come even without the childcare.

The situation analysis also confirmed my suspicions that transportation and the location of the class were going to be important issues. Most of the refugees did not have cars. They were familiar with the buses and willing to ride a bus to class. Though none of them said as much, I knew that the closer the class was to where they lived, and the easier it was to get there, the more likely they would be to attend. In addition to helping the students with the bus schedule, I often arranged rides for them to and from class. This ensured that the transportation never became too much of a burden.

Conducting the situation analysis was very simple compared to conducting the needs analysis, and yet without the information it provided, my class would have been over before it started. Finding a good time for the class, and arranging childcare and transportation, were small prices to pay for its success.

### *Pretest Results*

In the first two weeks of class, I tested all of the students who had attended class. When other students started attending, I tested them as well. There were two teenagers who attended with relatives, and at the time, I did not consider testing them. Later, when I realized that they were participating and learning along with the adults, I wished that I had tested them. All students were tested using Clay's (2006) *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. As I have described before, these tests are designed for beginning readers. In addition, the more advanced readers were tested using Leslie and Caldwell's (2005) *Qualitative Reading Inventory*. In this section, I will first compare the



results of the six students in the class that received both pre and post tests: Evon, Baby, Yusufu, Bendu, Fatmata, and Eleanor. Then I will go into more detail about the results of each student. Finally, I will discuss what I learned from the experience.

*Class results.* The following table summarizes the class's test results from five of the six Observation Survey tests—all except the reading level test, which I will also describe in more detail later. The letter name score is out of 54 because it includes the letter names of all 26 capital letters, all 26 lower case letters, and the typewritten lower case “a” and “g.” The word test score shows how many words out of twenty high-frequency words they could read. The writing test score shows how many words they could write from memory in about ten minutes. After writing words they thought of, I prompted them to see if they could write other common words. The dictation test score is out of 37 because that is how many sounds (not letters) the dictation sentence had. Students receive one point for each sound they identify with the correct letter or letters. Both writing test scores are not as important as the words the students write and the understanding of writing they show as they write. I will describe these in more detail. Also, the specific concepts tested in the Concepts about Print test can be found in Appendix B.

There are results missing for several of the dictations and one of the writing vocabulary tests. This is because the students were clearly not ready for those tests. I knew that they would have very low scores and I did not want to frustrate them, especially since my students were so nervous about writing. I did not give Bendu the Concepts about Print test because I knew from watching and listening to her read that she was very advanced and had a clear understanding of print concepts.

Table 3

*Summary of Pretest Results*

Students	Observation Survey Tests						
	Letter Name	ID Sound	Word Test	Writing Prompted	Vocabulary Unprompted	Dictation	Concepts About Print
Fatmata	12/54	3/26	0/20	-----	1	-----	1/24
Yusufu	47/54	0/26	0/20	2	4	-----	15/24
Eleanor	54/54	6/26	5/20	4	8	-----	13/24
Evon	51/54	0/26	19/20	8	19	29/37	18/24
Baby	52/54	15/26	17/20	14	5	20/37	18/24
Bendu	52/54	1/26	19/20	15	12	35/37	-----

As this table shows, my students had a range of abilities, especially when it came to writing, demonstrating understanding about print, and reading words from a list. On the other hand, every one of them showed severe difficulty identifying the letter sounds. Several of the students could identify a word that started with each letter, like *apple* for *a*. When asked which sound in *apple* the letter *a* made, though, the students did not know. This told me a lot about the kind of instruction they had received, and it changed my plan for how to teach them letter sounds. I had intended to use a similar tactic as a memory aid, but I decided instead to teach the sounds for each letter without any words.

*Individual results.* The testing showed me that my lowest level students were Fatmata and Yusufu. They were also the only students who were older. I never asked their age, but they were probably in their 60s or 70s. They were also the only students who really struggled with understanding and speaking English. Both of them had vision problems that sometimes interfered with their reading, and Yusufu had a more serious health problem that periodically put him in the hospital. When he was able to come, though, he would often ride his bike to class, even though our class was at night. Yusufu started attending in the second week after hearing about the class from his niece, Baby. Fatmata was the sole caregiver for three of her grandchildren, one of whom, Massah, also attended the class.

When the class started in September, Fatmata could not read anything independently, even her name. She also had trouble writing her name correctly. She would say the correct letters aloud as she wrote, but she did not always write the letter she was saying. In the pretest, she wrote her name for me twice. On the second try, she wrote it correctly. Writing was especially difficult for Fatmata because she had a very hard time with letter formation. She got very excited in one of our first class periods and told her volunteer that the writing practice they were doing was the first time she had ever written anything. Fatmata spent some time every day tracing and writing letters and words. She was only able to write a few letters in a minute, but she was patient and very excited to learn.

In the pretest, Fatmata was able to identify nine capital letters and three lower case letters. She also knew a few sounds, but not enough to begin decoding. Fatmata also struggled with print concepts. In the Concepts About Print test, Fatmata could only

demonstrate understanding of one concept. In another test, when I asked Fatmata if she could read any words in a list, she identified some letters, but no words. It was unclear whether she did not know any of the words or if she did not understand that letters in groups make words. In addition to work on letter formation, letter names, and letter sounds, Fatmata and her tutors read simple, patterned children's books, Language Experience texts, and Reading Recovery level 1 books. Fatmata was very proud when she helped read "her first book," *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* These texts helped Fatmata with her vocabulary (of English words and of words she could recognize quickly), her understanding of print concepts, and her decoding of new words.

Yusufu was slightly ahead of Fatmata. He could read and write his first name, but not his last name or much beyond that. Yusufu knew most of the letter names, and he was even able to identify the lower case letters, which are difficult for most beginning learners. He did not, however, know any of the letter sounds. Like Fatmata, Yusufu was unable to read any of the words in the test list. His Concepts About Print test showed that he was somewhat familiar with print and books, and his writing showed good letter formation. Yusufu worked on Reading Recovery level 1 books, as well as simple, patterned children's books.

The third student, Eleanor, was a young single mom with one daughter, Juana, who often attended class with her. Eleanor was very shy and not very confident in her abilities. Whenever she was asked a question, or when she came to words she did not know, she always turned to her daughter, who supplied the answer. Eleanor came into the class knowing enough to read very simple texts—about a level 2 or 3 for the Reading Recovery levels. Eleanor could identify most of the letters' names but very few of the

letters' sounds, and she could only write her name, her daughter's name, and a few words we had studied in class that week. Eleanor liked to read children's books or *Very Easy True Stories* by Sandra Heyer, a collection of interesting true stories told in simplified language. In addition to teaching her more about literacy, I wanted to improve Eleanor's confidence and independence as a reader.

The fourth student, Evon, was slightly more advanced than Eleanor. Evon was able to read almost all of the words in the test list, so I tested her further using lists from the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*. She did not know most of the words on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade list, and she struggled a lot with the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade list. That put her independent decoding at about a 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. Reading words in context was much easier, though, and Evon was able to read a few grade levels above this. She started the semester reading children's chapter books, which were at about a second grade level. When a more difficult text interested her, though, she was able to struggle through the decoding and difficult vocabulary and understand what she was reading.

At the start of the class, Evon already knew the names of most of the letters, but she did not perform well on the test of letter sounds. She was one of the students who could say a word for each letter but had no idea what that meant. For example, she said *zebra* for *z*, but she did not know which sound in *zebra* the *z* made. Compared to the first three students, Evon's writing was quite advanced. She had a more extensive store of words she knew how to write, and she attempted with some success to guess the spelling of new words. This was apparent in her dictation, as was her understanding of print concepts. Evon was asked to write, "The bus is coming. It will stop here to let me get on." She wrote:

box is coming  
it is with sati  
Where  
Two  
let  
me  
get  
on

Evon knew that English writing went left to right with spaces between the words, but she started a new line for phrases or words. Evon also used capital letters randomly, and she did not use any punctuation.

Evon had a few advantages that helped her in the class. First, she had a boyfriend that often watched her two young children so she could attend class without distractions. Second, as her understanding of print concepts reflected, Evon was already able to read and write with some fluency and independence. And third, she was a quick learner. It did not take Evon long to learn the letter sounds and move to more difficult texts and more conventional writing.

The last two students, Baby and Bendu, were notably more advanced than the other students. They were both easily able to read a book that Townsend Press rates at a fifth grade reading level. I had Baby try a young adult novel, *Make Lemonade*. She really enjoyed the book and understood all but a few concepts. For example, one character, LaVaughn, works as a babysitter and saves her money so she can go to college one day. Baby did not understand this, since in her experience no one gets paid for babysitting; it is just something that you do for free for your friends or family. Baby read well enough to also read a few nonfiction books about African leaders and Liberia. These books were formatted like children's books, but they contained fairly difficult vocabulary. I also tested Baby using passages from the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*.

Although she stumbled over many words when reading aloud, Baby was able to understand and answer questions about a seventh grade passage. The passage was also a scientific passage. Since expository texts are generally less familiar and more difficult than narrative passages, it is likely that Baby could have read a more difficult narrative passage. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I did not give her a narrative passage to read.

Baby came into the class knowing more than half of the letter sounds, more than any of the other students. Since I had already found an appropriate text for her level, I did not do more tests on her ability to decode words in isolation. She obviously had no trouble with the test list. Her writing also had several strengths. The dictation test sentence was, “The bus is coming. It will stop here to let me get on.” Baby wrote:

the bus coming is we stop here to like me get no

Baby did not use punctuation or capital letters, but she knew how to spell most of the words. She also knew that the words needed spaces between them and that they should be written from left to right on the same line. Baby was the most independent learner and her pretest showed that she had a great head start. Like most of the others, though, Baby was a single mom, and having her 14 month old daughter in the same room was often a distraction.

My other advanced student, Bendu, was the only one of her family living in the United States. She had children, but they were not with her and she did not want to talk about what had happened. Bendu was very lonely and having a very hard time adjusting to life in the United States. She may not have come to class at all, but she had some booklets she had to read and pass tests on for work, and they were very difficult for her to

understand. Bendu worked as a caregiver for people with disabilities, and the booklets she had to read were filled with difficult vocabulary and concepts. I never got a chance to grade her text on a readability scale, but I estimated that it was about an eighth grade text. Bendu missed a lot of classes, but she always came to class for help right before she had a test at work.

Bendu did very well on all of the Observation Survey tests except for the one measuring letter sound knowledge. (I will discuss this phenomenon in the next section.) I should have tested her reading level using the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*, but I never did. This was partly because I already knew what she would be reading in her tutoring sessions, and partly because it was difficult to find another time to test her. Bendu also expressed an interest in learning how to spell better, so when she was in class, I incorporated spelling activities. Between spelling, her work booklets, and learning the letter sounds, Bendu had plenty to work on during class, so further testing seemed unnecessary.

*Conclusions.* It was very interesting to me to see how many tests it took to really understand my students' abilities and needs. This was further proof to me of how complex literacy is and how difficult it is to test. It especially surprised me that some of my students were able to read so much while knowing so little (or none) of the letters' sounds. These students may have had a large store of memorized words and likely used context to figure out the meaning of new words, but even this does not entirely account for the discrepancy. I think the students must have known more about letter sounds than the letter sound test showed, since they were obviously able to decode new words. They showed their ability to decode new words using their knowledge of letter sounds when



they read words from lists and words in books. This demonstrates not only the limitations of the letter sound test, but the advantages of using multiple tests.

On the other hand, if practical constraints forced a teacher to use only one test, I would recommend having the students read from a set of leveled readers. The advantages to this are that it would not take much time to test each student, the materials are fairly cheap and easy to obtain, and it would give the instructor a general idea of the students' decoding ability, understanding of print concepts, sight word vocabulary, and reading level.

If I could redo the testing, I would change three things. One, I would have used my volunteers. Most of the tests are very easy to administer. It would have taken very little time to train the volunteers, and it would have saved me a lot of time. Two, I would have tested them in class, not in their homes. I wanted to save class time for other things, but testing them in their homes was very inefficient. Not only did I waste time traveling, I had to reschedule several times for students who were not home for their scheduled appointment. Finally, with this time I would have saved, I would have done more testing with the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*. I used it on Evon and Baby, but because of practical constraints I did not use it with Bendu and Eleanor. Also, I only tested Evon's ability to decode words in a list, and Baby's ability to read an expository passage. The *Qualitative Reading Inventory* has the potential to test much more.

In spite of these limitations, the testing gave me enough information to develop goals for my students' learning. I knew my students' approximate reading levels, what they needed to work on in tutoring sessions, and what common problems we could address as a class. It was difficult to design activities that would benefit the entire class,

but there was some common ground. Most obvious after the pretests was the need for work on letter sounds. I also decided to have the class study sight words together. Since my advanced students wanted help with spelling and my beginning students needed more words that they could recognize quickly, I chose high-frequency words that were often spelled incorrectly. Finally, I decided that all of the students could benefit from work on comprehension strategies, and I chose strategies that students at any level could learn and practice. Teaching these components to the entire class, and using a mix of small group work and individual tutoring for the students' other needs, I attempted to address the range of abilities apparent in the pretests.

#### *Goals and Learning Outcomes*

My research, my classes, and my own experience teaching reading had given me a general idea of the goals that I wanted my students to reach by the end of our three months together. I also knew from my needs analysis what my students' literacy needs were. Using these, I created this list of goals for my students' achievement:

- Correctly identify letter names (capital and lower case) and letter sounds
- Improve their phonemic awareness
- Decode more accurately and quickly; improve fluency and automaticity
- Recognize some high-frequency and sight words; use those words as patterns to read and write new words
- Improve their letter formation (where necessary)
- Understand that texts make sense and it is the readers job to make meaning from text; improve their understanding of how print works
- Use reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension

- Understand the importance of literacy in their lives and the purposes for literacy
- Develop positive, confident attitudes towards reading and learning

I then looked for ways to organize these goals and break them down into more specific learning objectives. I had some experience helping children with literacy, but my only experience with adults and literacy had been in English as a Second Language classes. Until working with the refugees in Tucson, I had never taught adults who could not read in their first language. To help me get a better picture of how much I could expect my students to learn in just a few months, I searched for national standards and objectives for adult literacy. I found a wealth of resources for teaching adult literacy, but I could not find any standards or level descriptions for adult learners.

I turned instead to standards for children. I found the state reading and writing standards for Arizona elementary schools, and they were very helpful. The reading standards are divided into three parts: the reading process, comprehending literary text, and comprehending informational text. I used all three of these when making my own learning objectives. The writing standards are also divided into three parts: the writing process, writing elements, and writing applications. I developed objectives based on the writing process and writing applications, but I decided to exclude the objectives on writing elements, which focused on ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, fluency, and conventions. I thought these were too advanced for my students and I wanted to encourage them to write without *worrying* about writing.

I had to choose far fewer objectives than what the standards contained because the standards are written with very different students in mind. The typical elementary school

student is in school (in Arizona) from the beginning of August to the end of May, Monday through Friday, for several hours a day. On the other hand, my students would only be in class twice a week, for two hours a class, for twenty classes—if they came to every class. My students also had the further disadvantage of learning to read in English, which was not their native language. My students did not have time for homework, nor did they understand the idea of practicing at home. My students had jobs, children, and other responsibilities. Some of them had health and transportation problems. A few were elderly and some had vision or memory problems. The younger students often had their children in the room with them while they were trying to learn. The only literacy materials my students had were the few things I gave them and library materials. In short, my students would never be able to accomplish in a few months what a child could do in a school year.

Since my students were so diverse, it was impossible to develop a single set of objectives that would meet all of their needs. I decided to narrow down and modify the objectives in the state standards for each grade level. With these, I developed new lists of learning objectives. I used categories similar to the state standards, and I developed lists for several different levels. The following table (Table 4) is an example of the learning objectives for one category—the reading process—for the lowest level. Since the students at this level were not able to read texts independently, this level does not include objectives for fluency. However, the more advanced levels do. Also, since these objectives are for the lowest level students, they focus much more on bottom-up processes than on top-down processes.

Table 4

*Level One Objectives***The Reading Process****Print Concepts:***Demonstrate understanding of print concepts.*

- Recognize that print represents spoken language and conveys meaning
- Hold a book right side up and turn pages in the correct direction.
- Start at the top left of the printed page, track words from left to right, using return sweep, and move from the top to the bottom of the page.
- Identify different parts of a book (e.g., front cover, back cover, title page) and the information they provide.
- Distinguish between printed letters and words.
- Recognize that spoken words are represented in writing by specific sequences of letters.
- Demonstrate the one-to-one correlation between a spoken word and a printed word.

**Phonemic Awareness:***Identify and manipulate the sounds of speech.*

- Distinguish spoken rhyming words from non-rhyming words (e.g., run, sun versus run, man).
- Orally produce rhyming words in response to spoken words (e.g., What rhymes with hat?)
- Orally produce groups of words that begin with the same initial sound (alliteration).
- Blend spoken simple onsets and rimes to form real words.
- Blend spoken phonemes to form a single syllable word (e.g., /m/.../a/.../n/...makes man).
- Identify the initial and final sounds (not the letter) of a spoken word.

**Phonics:***Decode words, using knowledge of phonics, syllabication, and word parts.*

- Identify letters of the alphabet (upper and lower case).
- Say letter sounds represented by the single-lettered consonants and vowels.

**Comprehension Strategies:***Employ strategies to comprehend text.*

- Make predictions based on title, cover, illustrations, and text.
- Derive meaning from books that are highly predictable, use repetitive syntax, and have linguistic redundancy.

I used these lists of leveled objectives to guide my volunteers in their one-on-one tutoring of my students. This allowed them to adjust their instruction to the level of the student they were working with at the time. Since we rarely had the same students and volunteers each time, this was very helpful. The leveled objectives also gave me some idea of the progression I could expect from my students.

On the other hand, these objectives proved only marginally helpful when it came to selecting course content, designing the syllabus, and planning lessons. First, with my students at so many different levels, it was difficult to know where to focus. Some of the students needed work on letter formation and learning the alphabet; others could read children's books with some help; and still others could read young adult novels with little assistance. It was impossible to develop a set of objectives that could account for all of their needs. Instead, as I will explain in more detail in the next section, I had to settle for categories of objectives, areas I wanted to focus on during each class, and then adjust the lessons to fit the needs of the students who came to class.

I also discovered very quickly that I had far too many objectives to keep track of or teach in only twenty classes. I continued trying to incorporate vocabulary instruction and reading and writing informational texts, but we spent the majority of the class concentrating on the objectives for the parts of the reading process: print concepts, phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension strategies, and fluency. Even then, it took much longer than I expected for the students to progress, and each student only reached a few objectives in each category.

### *Course Planning and Syllabus Design*

Once I knew the areas that I wanted to concentrate on, with objectives outlined for each of those areas, I was prepared to plan the course material and organize it into a syllabus. Richards (2001) recommends creating descriptions of the entry and exit levels for the course which will then guide the selection of course content. Before the class started, I envisioned a class where the students were all at about the same level—unable to read or write anything much beyond their names. The Liberian refugees that I knew, the ones that I expected to come to class, were almost entirely illiterate. Instead, as word of the class spread and more students started coming, I found that I had students with a range of literacy abilities. I had to promptly revise my expectation of the entry level abilities of my students, adjusting the curriculum to accommodate a greater variety in levels.

I also quickly discovered that I needed to discard my expectations for the exit levels of the class. My inexperience had led me to grossly overestimate what we would be able to accomplish, and my students' sporadic attendance magnified the problem. I scaled back my expectations, spent much more time reviewing and reteaching, and let my students' progress determine the pace of the class. I decided that instead of trying to get my students to a certain level by the end of the course, I would let this class show me what I could expect to accomplish next time I taught this kind of course.

Selecting the course content was also a constant, dynamic process. Following the format of the many community ESL classes I had taught, I decided to organize the class around a few topics that interested the students. My reasoning was that if I could use these topics to teach listening, speaking, reading and writing in an ESL class, I should be

able to use similar topics to teach literacy in a second language. As I have described in a previous section, I talked with my students on the first day of class to determine what topics would interest them. They decided they wanted to read and write about food, health, jobs, and family.

I decided to spend three weeks on each topic. For each topic I planned functional literacy activities, such as filling out a job application, filling out a form from a doctor's office, or reading a food label. I planned to have my students read news articles or other informational texts on those topics, in addition to the narrative texts they would read for pleasure. In order to make the texts accessible to the most beginning readers, I planned to simplify the texts and, when necessary, have the volunteers read the texts to the students. I also took the comprehension strategies and phonics principles that I wanted to explicitly teach and divided them up amongst the topics. I planned to teach a new comprehension strategy every two or three weeks. I also expected the students to learn the letter names and sounds within two or three weeks and then move on to decoding increasingly complex words. I imagined that by the end of the course, all of the students would be decoding words with the silent e, blends, and multiple syllables. I also anticipated the students learning 5-10 new sight words each week, so that by the end of the course they would know between 75 and 100 new words.

I also had a very detailed plan for how to accomplish everything in our two-hour classes in a way that provided variety and a predictable schedule for my students, as the following table demonstrates:



Table 5

*Outline of Class Schedule*

<b>Scheduled class time</b>	<b>Learning Situation</b>	<b>Learning activity</b>
6:00 – 6:10	Whole class	Phonics instruction, letter formation practice
6:11 – 6:20	Whole class, small groups, or individually	Reread a familiar text (probably several times)
6:21 – 6:40	Whole class or small groups	Word/phonics study using the familiar text
6:41 – 7:05	Whole class, then small groups or individually (OR)	I teach and model a comprehension strategy and the students practice it
	Whole class, then small group/individ., then whole class	We discuss or read about a controversial, interesting topic and then the students respond to it in writing
7:06 – 7:20	Pairs or individually	Reading time: with me, with a buddy or a tutor, independently, or following along with a tape
7:21 – 7:45	Small groups or individually	Extra practice and exploration: letter formation, reading or looking at books, writing alone or with help, stations for more work on phonics, review games, reading conferences with me, special class projects (making books, etc)
7:46 – 8:00	Whole class	I read a chapter of an interesting, fun book to the class

Of course, after teaching for a few weeks, I threw all of these plans away. For one thing, it was clear that my detailed routine was too rigid. I could never start class on time because my students were always tardy, and that threw off the timing of all of the other activities. Also, I had imagined a class with eight or twelve students every day, and this turned out to be unrealistic. Some days I only had one or two students; and often the students who came needed very different instruction. Since I had a lot of volunteers that

I wanted to keep coming, I used them for a lot of individual tutoring. In the first month of class, my students also had a hard time transitioning between activities, so it was easier to have longer and fewer activities. Some activities were more interesting or valuable than others, so I adjusted the type of instruction as well.

After about a month of class, I decided to abandon my original syllabus design and some of the original content and start over. The following reflection, written after class one night, explains why:

Our first topic is food and nutrition, but with sporadic attendance and little real class time spent on the topic, the activities that focus on food always seem random. Also, we were supposed to finish this unit about two weeks ago, but we are still on it. We are also still on our first set of sight words, instead of our third or fourth, and our second comprehension strategy instead of our third. In other words, the curriculum is at a standstill and we can't move forward until the students start coming consistently. I wanted the activities and units to constantly build on the previous activities and units, but instead the classes are becoming disjointed and repetitive as I spend all my time reviewing. I think I need to redo the curriculum and abandon the original topics. Those topics sounded interesting to them at the time, but they are not motivating enough to get them to class.

In an effort to increase attendance and motivation, I started teaching the students how to use the computers to do research, to write emails, to write résumés, to compose in Microsoft Word, and to navigate websites. I gave up on the idea of topics. Instead, we read and wrote about whatever interested the students who were in class on that day.

This was often either Liberia or their jobs. I continued teaching comprehension strategies and phonics, and allowing plenty of opportunities for my students to read and write, but I resigned myself to a constantly evolving curriculum.

This constantly evolving curriculum proved to be more effective. Not only was my time spent more efficiently, student attendance, participation, and motivation increased. The students spent more time in activities that were appropriate for their literacy level. They also saw how the class activities could immediately help them in their lives and their jobs. They were happy and the volunteers were happy.

#### *The Role and Design of Instructional Materials*

Fortunately, the instructional materials that I chose were flexible and fit well in the changing curriculum. I relied much more on non-commercial materials than on commercially created materials, for several reasons. First, there are not many commercial literacy materials for adults. I found some appropriate, simplified reading materials, but nothing in the way of a commercial program or textbook. Something like that may exist, but it never came up in my online searches. Also, even if there had been a commercially published program or textbook, it is doubtful that I would have been able to afford it. Since the students were not paying any money for the class, all of the materials were bought with either the grant from the Tucson Area Reading Council or my own money.

This said, I did use some very helpful commercial materials. A few things helped with reading skills, like phonics flashcards and a wipe-off book for practicing letter formation, but the rest of the commercial materials that I purchased were reading materials for my students. My most beginning students read from a series of readers

called *Keep Books*, which are leveled according to Marie Clay's Reading Recovery levels. As I described earlier, these readers were developed by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) at The Ohio State University through grants, with the purpose of providing affordable, quality reading materials for emergent readers (pre-K through about first grade). *Keep Books* have predictable, patterned texts and simple illustrations, and their topics are appropriate for adults or children. *Keep Books* can be ordered at [www.keepbooks.org](http://www.keepbooks.org) or through ebay. I found my set of 72 books on ebay for about thirty dollars.

Some of my slightly more advanced readers enjoyed *Very Easy True Stories* by Sandra Heyer (1998). *Very Easy True Stories* and other similar books by Heyer contain true stories, told in simplified language, that appeal to adults. They can be bought fairly cheaply on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). My most advanced readers enjoyed some of the books published by Townsend Press, especially *Reading Changed My Life*. The Townsend Press books are written at about a fifth or sixth grade reading level, specifically for adults. They contain true, high-interest, motivational stories. The book my students loved, *Reading Changed My Life*, contains the true stories of three women who overcame great obstacles in their lives and learned to read when they were adults. These books only cost a dollar apiece and they can be ordered from [www.townsendpress.com](http://www.townsendpress.com).

I also found a pamphlet called *Welcome to Your New Home!*, published by Mercy Housing (2003). While the pamphlet did not fit into our curriculum, I distributed it to the students for their personal use. The pamphlets are written specifically for refugees who resettle in the United States. They provide valuable information on apartment life, with

topics like how to save money on utilities, how to take care of your apartment, etc. The pamphlets can be ordered for free from [www.mercyhousing.org](http://www.mercyhousing.org).

In addition to these materials, my students borrowed a variety of books from the library to read in class. This was a wonderful way to save money on materials while still providing materials that met the students' various needs and interests. If a student did not like a book or found that it was too difficult or easy, it was easy and free to simply find another book. Library books also worked well for our lessons on reading strategies.

Library and commercial materials comprised most of the reading material for the class, but most of the instruction was done with materials that were not published for instructional purposes. The students filled out a library card application; wrote get well, thank you, and holiday cards; wrote in journals (occasionally); and wrote letters and emails. They read news articles, food ads, and texts they wrote individually or as a class. When we started using the computer, they found pictures online and wrote about those. One student had material that she had to read for her job, so she worked on that with a tutor. Students interested in finding new jobs read the classifieds and online job listings and wrote résumés. I tried to keep the reading and writing materials as close to what they would need to read and write in their lives and their jobs as possible.

A few other texts are worth mentioning, since they provided a valuable resource for me in planning activities for struggling readers. I found ideas and adapted activities from *Phonics They Use*, by Cunningham (2005), *Struggling Readers: Assessment and Instruction in Grades K-6*, by Balajthy and Lipa-Wade (2003), and *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do*, by Beers (2003). All of these texts are easy to read, even for those unfamiliar with reading research, and they offer excellent practical suggestions.

The Beers book is the only one geared towards older children (middle and high school age), but they are all easily adapted for adults.

### *Evaluation*

Evaluation took two forms: evaluation of the student's progress and evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum. Evaluating the students' progress was by far the simpler of the two. I did formal testing of all of the students twice, once when the students first started attending and once at the end of the course. I had planned to test the students more often than this—once a week or so for the sight words and then once every three weeks at the end of each unit for everything else—but with the curriculum changing so much, the students not being in class to test, and new students arriving every week needing a pretest, it just wasn't feasible. Some students who came consistently received additional testing, but most students only received the tests twice.

I used two test instruments for my formal testing, Marie Clay's (2006) *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, and the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, by Leslie and Caldwell (2006). The Observation Survey, as I described earlier, is designed for emergent readers and consists of six tests. Altogether it tests the reader's knowledge of letter names and sounds, concepts about print, reading level, ability to read words in isolation, writing vocabulary, and dictation. The *Qualitative Reading Inventory-4* contains word lists, narrative passages, and expository passages designed to test reading comprehension for silent or oral reading and listening comprehension. Comprehension is tested as the student retells the story, answers explicit and implicit comprehension questions without looking at the story, and then as the student looks back through the text to find answers to the rest of the questions.

Students can also be tested using a think-aloud process to assess their thoughts during reading. The *Qualitative Reading Inventory-4* takes into account the student's background knowledge and can be used for a wide variety of reading levels—pre-primer through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

In addition to these more formal testing situations, I evaluated my students informally in the classroom. My observations and the observations of the volunteers helped us see where the students were struggling. We listened to the students while they wrote, worked on the computer, completed group activities, and read each day. While I never did a formal miscue analysis, I would listen to the student's oral reading and retelling of the story to assess whether the texts were at the appropriate level. I also learned a lot from looking at their writing and from watching them while they wrote. This gave me an idea of their letter formation skills, their understanding of print concepts, their writing vocabulary, their encoding and spelling skills, and their confidence. My observations and their more formal test results are included in the next chapter.

Evaluating the curriculum was a more extensive process, partly because there were so many stakeholders involved in this project. I talked with the librarian and the library staff on a regular basis and they were thrilled with the project. They were all very curious about the students and what they were learning. When the project was finished, I had to stop teaching the class for a time. The head librarian, Sharla Darby, was very excited about the class and worked very hard to keep it going after I left. One of my volunteers, Amanda, wanted to teach the class when I left, and Sharla got funding for Amanda to receive literacy training. Sharla also made sure that the literacy class would

have a classroom when needed, and she made an effort to stay abreast of classroom activities.

The volunteers were also very happy with the class. Even when attendance was down or there wasn't quite enough for the volunteers to do, they showed continued enthusiasm and support. The few volunteers who had to stop coming because of changes in their schedules expressed regret at no longer being a part of the class, and the other volunteers were very consistent with their help. Almost all of them wanted to continue volunteering when the class started again after a break for the holidays. One of the volunteers offered to tutor one of the students at his apartment, and another volunteer offered to take over for me after I had my baby. I think the volunteers all enjoyed the chance to get to know the refugees and to help them improve their lives.

Assessing the students' impressions of the class was the most difficult. Testing and observing the students gave me some idea of their progress, and their attendance patterns gave me some idea of how well the class was meeting their needs. I spent many hours on the phone trying to find out why students weren't in class and what I could do to get them to class and to help them learn. Sometimes it was as simple as arranging transportation; other times the student's work schedule had changed or a child was sick; other times I found there was something about the class content I could change to make it more applicable. I also periodically interviewed the students who were in class to see what they were enjoying and finding helpful and what changes could be made to improve the class. A few students made helpful suggestions while others gave the ever unhelpful answer that everything was perfect and nothing should be changed. This may be typical of their culture, although it is a response I have had from students around the world.



Knowing it may be easier for them to open up to someone else, I tried to have another graduate student trained in teaching ESL come to the class and talk to my students without me in the room, thinking they might be more comfortable, more talkative, and more honest. It fell through a few times because of schedule conflicts, but I wish I had kept trying or had one of the volunteers do it.

As both the curriculum designer and the teacher, I had to make an effort to remain objective and to reflect on the curriculum's effectiveness. On three occasions I had someone videotape the class. This allowed me to see my teaching from a more objective standpoint. It also allowed me to observe my students when I wasn't preoccupied with keeping order and teaching a lesson. I also kept a teaching log of my reflections on how each class went, how the students were progressing, and what changes could be made. This was probably the most valuable form of curriculum evaluation because it was the most critical and the most constant.

### *Providing for Effective Teaching*

Richards (2001) notes, "Quality teaching is achieved not only as a consequence of how well teachers teach but through creating contexts and work environments that can facilitate good teaching" (p.198). Richards describes institutional, teacher, teaching, and learning factors that can impact the success of a curriculum—such as the amount of teacher training and support an institution provides, the shared values of teachers within an institution, and the institution's management style. Most of these factors did not apply to my project since my curriculum was not part of a larger institution and is not an ongoing program. I did, however, have to make decisions about class size, volunteer training, and the learning process.

Following the advice of my committee chair, Dr. Henrichsen, I decided to keep the class small, between five and ten students. More students would have been harder to manage and would have meant a lot more time spent testing. Attendance declined after only the first two weeks of class, though, so I never had to worry about the class getting too large.

I considered offering a training session for my volunteers to give them a crash course in teaching literacy. I decided against it, though, when I saw that some volunteers only wanted to volunteer once in a while. Even the volunteers who came often did not have extra time for a volunteer session: many of them were law students at the University of Arizona. Fortunately, a formal training proved unnecessary. I was able to teach my volunteers a little at a time during the class and they were excellent tutors.

When describing factors that influence how well a course is received by the learners, Richards (2001) states, “It is important to ensure that the learners understand the goals of the course, the reason for the way it is organized and taught, and the approaches to learning they will be encouraged to take” (p.223). While I tried to account for some of this in my needs analysis, underestimating these learning factors was one of the weaknesses of my class. I tried during my interviews with students to discover their cultural views on the learning process and the roles of teachers and learners, but I had a hard time knowing what questions to ask. Ultimately, I found out very little in this area that was helpful to me and mistakenly assumed that things were not that different, or at least that the cultural differences would not significantly impact the curriculum. Looking back, I see that I should have given more of the “special orientation or training” that Richards suggests students may need in order to fulfill new learner roles (p.224).

*Summary*

This chapter described the curriculum development process I went through: conducting the needs analysis and the situation analysis, testing the students, planning goals and learning outcomes, planning the scope and sequence of material, designing the syllabus, making decisions about materials and assessment, and providing for effective teaching.

The next chapter, on the implementation of the curriculum, will show that curriculum development is an on-going process. It will also will provide my daily lesson plans along with reflection on how the curriculum is being received and the changes I made to make it more applicable to the students' needs. It will also report the students' posttest results and compare them to the students' pretest results for an analysis of what the students have learned.

## CHAPTER FIVE

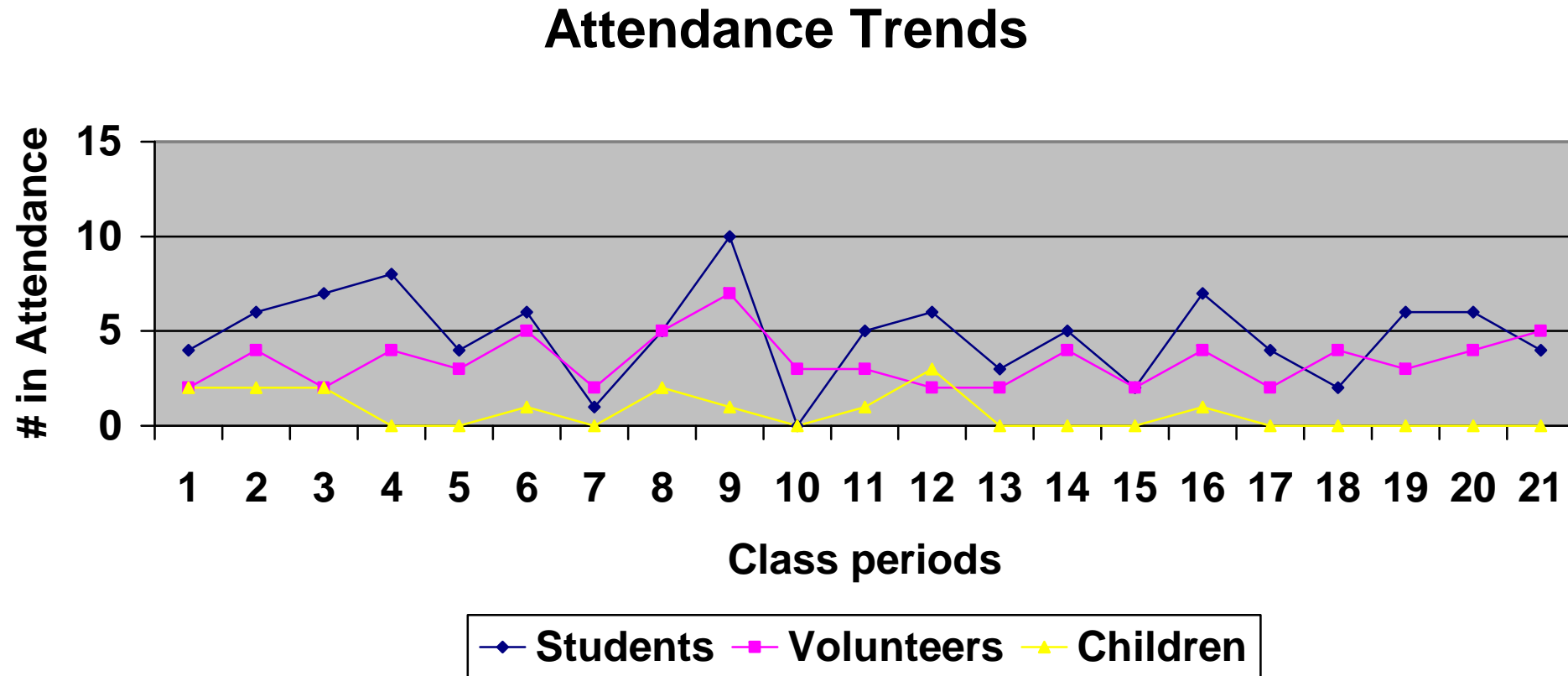
### IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM

Implementing the curriculum was a great lesson in the difference between paper and practice. The last chapter described the extensive curriculum development process, much of which took place in the time leading up to and including the first few weeks of class. This chapter will report the teaching, modification, and evaluation of this curriculum in a real classroom setting. First, I will provide an overview of the attendance patterns and the most effective teaching strategies. Then I will give the daily lesson plans with my reflections, showing how the curriculum changed to meet the students' needs.

#### *Attendance Trends and Teaching Strategies*

The factor most outside my control was the students' attendance. Figure 1 summarizes the attendance trends of the students, their children, and the volunteers. I had very little trouble getting enough volunteers to each class. In fact, I could have easily had many more volunteers, but I wanted the number of volunteers to closely match the number of students. The number of students was of course difficult to anticipate, but it generally worked out well. I also thought we would have more children in class. The students who came regularly had a total of four young children between them, ages 14 months, 2 years, 4 years, and 5 years. The other students, who only attended occasionally, also had several young children. Fortunately, the children were not often all there on the same day. Sometimes their mothers were able to arrange for friends to watch them, and of course sometimes their mothers were not there. This meant fewer distractions in the classroom, and more volunteers more for tutoring than for childcare.

Figure 1



The students' attendance climbed steadily for the first few weeks, and then quickly started to decline. From that point on, it was a battle. I tried calling the students the night before class to remind them to come the next day. Some students were not home, and others would tell me they were coming and then not come. I tried calling right before class, but it did not make much difference. I arranged rides as often as I could, even for those students who could easily ride the bus to class, but there were problems with this too. The students would sometimes request a ride and then not be home when I came to get them, or they wouldn't call for a ride until class had already started. They also did not pay any attention to the bus schedule. Instead of planning ahead, they would go to the bus stop when they felt ready to come to class and wait for the next bus. While the buses came fairly often, this was still a problem. I talked to people who had worked with these refugees before and they told me this was a cultural difference. They said that the Liberians have a very different understanding of time and promptness. I was still frustrated, though, because I know that these same students had jobs and that they were probably on time for those.

I tried teaching my students about my expectations for attendance and tardiness. I explained that they needed to call me in advance if they wanted a ride. I continued calling my students to remind them about class, to see if they needed a ride, or to find out why they had been absent. Eventually, I offered incentives for attendance, as I will describe more in the Teaching Log. And of course, I made dramatic changes to the curriculum. All of this helped, but attendance remained a concern throughout the semester.

Implementing the curriculum also involved changes in teaching strategies. Many strategies that looked great on paper did not work in practice. Our class activities had to fit the day's situation—the number of students, the number of volunteers, the students' reading levels, the noise level of the children, etc.—and every day was different than the last. One-on-one tutoring was ultimately the most effective way to teach. This was true even though my tutors had no previous experience teaching literacy. Modeling and practicing comprehension strategies as a class also went very well, as did our class work on letter names, letter sounds, phonemic awareness, and sight words. Any activity that we did on the computers was highly motivating and helpful, although these activities also took a lot of time. Getting my students to write was difficult but definitely worthwhile. Even more worthwhile was the time my students spent reading, either independently or with a tutor.

The following teaching log is a condensed version of my lesson plans and reflections for each day of class. The objectives in these lessons reflect what I decided right as class began, when I saw which students were in attendance. I had lesson plans with objectives prepared before coming to class, but they often had to be modified to match the needs of the students who were in class. Rather than include lesson plans and objectives that were never used, I have included only the final versions. Also, I decided that including detailed lesson plans for every class period would be unnecessary and too lengthy. For that reason, most of the lesson plans are very brief, but I have described a few lessons (9 and 12) in greater detail. I chose Lesson 9 because it is representative of the work we did letter sounds, sight words, reading strategies, and writing. I chose

Lesson 12 because it shows the switch we made mid-semester to learning about computers and the Internet, and using computers and the Internet for literacy activities.

### *Teaching Log*

## **Lesson 1**

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### **Objectives**

- Get to know each other, me, and the tutors
  - Give their input on what topics interest them
  - Learn about the books they will be making
- 

### **Materials**

- M&Ms for the get-to-know-you game (For each candy the students take they have to tell the group something about them.)
  - Disposable cameras
- 

### **Activities and Attendance**

*4 Students, 2 Children, 2 Volunteers*

(6:00) We introduced ourselves and played a get-to-know-you game. (6:30) The library manager, Sharla Darby, welcomed the students to the library and explained library cards. (6:45) I taught them the alphabet song and went over letter names with the entire class. I asked the class some questions to get a general idea of their knowledge of letter-sound correspondence and their phonemic awareness. (7:15) I also handed out disposable cameras so the students could take pictures at home. I explained my plan to develop the photos and have the students make books about themselves, and I showed them an example book that I had made about myself. (7:30) We discussed topics that interested the students, so I could design the syllabus. (7:50) I made appointments to do further tests at their apartments.

---

### **Reflection**

It was very interesting to see the refugees' first reaction to the library. Immediately they wanted to know about the books and movies they had seen in the other room. How much did they cost? How could they get some? I told them that they were free if you had a library card. Bendu especially could not believe that this was a free service. She thought a library card operated like a credit card, where it was only free for a few months. She grilled the library manager for about ten minutes, searching for any possible hidden fee before she believed that it was not a scam. Once the students understood the library system, they were very excited about it. The library manager was very excited, too, since she believes this class has given her a chance to reach a portion of the population that would never have come into the library otherwise. I did not make getting a library card mandatory, and I was pleased to see that everyone wanted to get a card. At this point, they are more excited about being able to check out movies than books, but I am confident that their



appreciation for books will grow, as will their ability to pick out books that interest them and are not too hard or easy. They also got some functional literacy practice in an authentic situation.

Bendu's first words were, "It's hard to live in America. It's like you're in a cave and the world is closing in." She talks often about the war. Adult literacy and basic education classes are often comprised of students who have experienced (or are experiencing) violence or trauma which can negatively impact their attendance and their performance in class. Since refugees have all dealt with violence in trauma in some forms, and have the additional task of adjusting to a new language and culture, it is important for the literacy teacher to have some resources and support for these kinds of situations. The best resource I have found for understanding the way violence impacts the literacy classroom and how teachers can deal with it is *Too Scared to Learn* by Jenny Horsman.

The class is far more diverse than I had anticipated and I didn't have as many students come as I had hoped. I also need more volunteers. It worked okay today since it was the first day and I had a lot to explain. The volunteers got to know the students and the students got to know them. Still, if I had had more volunteers I could have gotten a lot more done.

## Lesson 2

---

### Objectives

- Apply for and receive a library card
  - Learn how reading strategies can improve comprehension
  - Practice the first strategy, visualizing
- 

### Materials

- *Good Dog Carl* by Alexandra Day, or another text to model visualizing
  - *The View from the Cherry Tree* by Willo Davis Roberts
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*6 Students, 2 Children, 4 Volunteers*

(6:00) The students filled out library card applications with help from the volunteers. They then took their applications into the library, got cards, and browsed through the library. (6:45) They worked with the volunteers on various things (letter formation, finding appropriate texts, writing in their journals, getting tested, reading to a tutor). (7:25) As a class, we reviewed the alphabet song and I reminded them to take pictures for their books. (7:30) I introduced the idea of reading comprehension strategies and their importance. Then I introduced the first strategy, visualizing. I read a wordless picture book, *Good Dog Carl*, and talked about how the pictures we see on the page and the pictures we form in our minds help us to understand what's happening in the story. I explained that while visualizing is more difficult when the book doesn't have pictures, it is still important that we form a picture in our minds and "see" what is happening in the book. I then read the title and the first few pages of *The View from the Cherry Tree* and we discussed and then drew what we visualized.

---

## Reflection

The comprehension strategy lesson went really well, but I realized after class that there are easier strategies to start with, and that visualizing should probably be saved for later in the class. So I decided to switch to a new strategy for the next time.

A lot of volunteers showed up for this class, so I decided to take advantage of that and do more one-on-one work than originally planned. This helps me to meet the diverse needs of the students, and I want to be sure that the volunteers have something to do so they will keep coming. During the strategy lesson, my volunteers sit with the students and participate in the discussion. It works well because my students are less shy when there are a lot of comments being made.

I showed them my completed photo book at the end of class. They really liked the book. Many of them have not taken many pictures before, or else they were not able to bring many pictures with them to the United States. They are excited that they will be able to keep the pictures and the books. So far, though, only one person has actually taken any pictures.

## Lesson 3

---

### Objectives

- Find a text that is interesting and at the appropriate level
  - Practice a new strategy, stopping to think and ask questions during reading
  - Write in a journal
- 

### Materials

- *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting, or another text that provokes questions
  - Composition notebooks for journals
  - Texts that the students can read independently
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*7 Students, 2 Children, 2 Volunteers*

(6:00) Only one student was in the classroom, so I tested him. The others were in the library looking at movies or books. (6:20) The rest of the students came in, and I introduced a new comprehension strategy, stopping to think and ask questions. I modeled the strategy with *Fly Away Home*, a children's book by Eve Bunting. After a few pages, the students and volunteers joined in and practiced the strategy with me. (6:40) The volunteers and I found appropriate texts for the students, ones the students were interested in. The students then read silently or to a tutor. (7:10) After that, I tried having the students write in journals, with help from tutors. (7:40) We then discussed class behavior and set some rules.

---

## Reflection

This class was very frustrating. I did not set class rules on the first day because I did not think I would need to. But every class period the students have been answering their cell phones in class, talking when other people are talking, wandering in and out of the room in the middle of class, and in other ways being disruptive. At the end of class I talked with them about appropriate classroom behavior. They were very receptive and promised to turn their cell phones off before coming to class and to follow my other requests. Since then, they have been much more respectful in class, though there is still a problem with tardiness. Many of the students will go straight into the library and look at movies for twenty minutes before coming to class.

The journal writing time is not going well. They won't write anything because they say they don't know how to spell things correctly. I encourage them to make their best attempt and tell them that we will learn more about spelling later. I tell them it will help them with the letter sounds if they use their best guesses. Even with the help of tutors, they won't write. I realize now that I should have given a better introduction to journal writing, especially since they have probably never kept a journal. I should have explained the purpose and what I expected from them. I also should probably have them respond to specific prompts, or after prewriting or a class discussion. This would help them not spend so much time worrying what to write about. I plan to have them make personal spelling dictionaries and a class word wall that they can refer to while writing.

On the other hand, our reading times are going very well. The students do not show any resistance. They are excited for the opportunity and stay focused for twenty or thirty minutes at a time. It is difficult to find books that match their interests because they are not familiar with what books have to offer, but I've done my best and they switch books if one gets too boring, hard, or easy.

The comprehension strategy lessons are also going well, but I am going to try using a different kind of text next time. I think varying the length of and the type of the texts will help maintain their interest and show them the versatility of the strategies to help them to comprehend any kind of text.

## Lesson 4

---

### Objectives

- Review letter sounds
  - Begin learning some sight words
  - Learn how to do a word sort
  - Learn more about CVC and silent e words to improve reading automaticity and spelling
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- 3x5 cards with words for a word sort
- A handout (or flashcards) with a picture and a word that starts with the letter sounds they are learning
- Notebooks of some kind for spelling dictionaries

- The students' individual texts

### Activities and Attendance

*8 Students, 0 Children, 4 Volunteers*

(6:00) We started class with a review of the letter sounds. With help from volunteers, the students glued in to their notebooks some pictures and words for each letter that will help them remember the letter sounds. (6:35) We also worked on organizing and adding words to their spelling dictionaries. I introduced the concept of sight words and we started memorizing our first set. (7:00) I also showed the more advanced group how to do a word sort. They sorted words with a consonant-vowel-consonant pattern from words with a silent e at the end. They added the words and a description of the pattern to their spelling dictionaries. The less advanced students worked individually with tutors. (7:30) The students then read silently or to a volunteer.

### Reflection

This class was the best class so far, at least as far as classroom behavior. There were no children, which made an amazing difference. Not only was it quieter, all of my volunteers could work with the adults. The students were also much more respectful. They all agreed at the end of class that the quieter, more respectful atmosphere was better. I still need to find a way to get the students to class on time, though.

Getting them to label the pages in their spelling dictionaries took a lot longer than I thought it would. Between that and people coming late, I didn't have time to work on reading strategies or writing.

The Word Sort went very well for a first try. The students caught on quickly, and they were happy to be working on something that would help with their spelling. I had to show them a lot of examples for them to understand how the silent e affected the sounds in the words, but it was very good practice for them to hear how the vowel sounds changed. I plan to reinforce this rule with more activities next week.

SSR went very well again. Fatmata read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* with a tutor and she was very proud of herself. I keep forgetting to remind them to work on the comprehension strategies while they read, so I want to remember that for next week. Up to this point, though, not everyone was matched with an appropriate text. Now that everyone has something to read, they will all be able to practice the strategy we're working on.

## Lesson 5

### Objectives

- Review alphabet sounds and sight words
- Learn about invitations and create one in an authentic situation
- Review the comprehension strategy, stopping to think and ask questions
- Read independently or with a tutor

---

**Materials**

- A card or chart paper to make an invitation
- A short, interesting news article (simplified for their level)
- The students' individual texts

---

**Activities and Attendance**

*4 Students, 0 Children, 3 Volunteers*

(6:00) We started class with a review of the alphabet sounds. We also practiced discriminating between s/z, t/d, p/b, and f/v in isolation and at the beginnings of words. (6:10) I reminded them to take pictures for the books about them and checked their progress. (6:15) Then the students worked with tutors on letter formation, letter sounds, and finding new books while I tested new students. (6:50) We reviewed the sight words until they could all spell them without looking.

(7:00) We started our first unit, on food. I explained that we would have a guest speaker coming to talk to our class about nutrition and that we were going to make an invitation for the guest speaker. One of the volunteers led a discussion on what they wanted to learn from the nutritionist. They decided they wanted to learn how to feed their families, what foods to eat when they were sick, and what foods to eat to be healthy. They included this information on the invitation.

(7:30) Next we reviewed the comprehension strategy, stopping to think and ask questions. I read to them an article I found on msnbc.com about a drunken man who jumped into a panda bear's cage at the Beijing Zoo, got bitten, and bit the bear back in retaliation. We wrote our questions on chart paper. Also, when they had trouble understanding the article, we went back to visualizing and drew on the board what we imagined happening.

---

**Reflection**

I was pleased with how this lesson went. I had expected a lot more students to come, so that made me worried, but I feel like the students who came got a lot of attention and made some progress. This was especially important since three of the students who came (Helena H., Yusufu, and Fatmata) are the least literate in the class and need the most one-on-one help.

I was also pleased with how all of the activities went. I was surprised with how little of the msnbc.com article they understood, so I would choose an easier text if I were to teach that again. It worked fine for the comprehension strategy, on asking questions, but we could have gotten to higher-level questions if they had understood right away what was happening in the article.

---

**Lesson 6****Objectives**

- Review sight words and letter sounds

- Practice stopping to think and ask questions while reading
  - Prepare for the guest speaker's visit
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- A current, simplified news article
  - The students' individual texts
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*6 Students, 1 Child, 5 Volunteers*

(6:00) We started class with a review of sight words and letter sounds. (6:10) We then reviewed the comprehension strategy (stop to think and ask questions) with an activity called *Say Something*. This activity, developed by Harste, Shorte, and Burke (1988) and described in detail in Beers (2003, pp.105-110) book, involves the student stopping periodically during reading to say something about the text. My students did this activity one-on-one with a volunteer. (6:35) The students also practiced the strategy while they read, writing down or discussing questions with their tutor. New students worked with tutors to get library cards and to get tested. (7:15) After reading, the students shared their questions and comments with the class. They also shared what their book was about and whether or not they were enjoying it. (7:25) I reminded the students that a guest speaker was coming to talk about nutrition, and a volunteer led a discussion on what they already knew about nutrition and what questions they wanted to ask the guest speaker. I also reminded the students to take pictures for their books.

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### Reflection

*Say Something* went very well. We had enough volunteers to pair each student with a volunteer, which worked much better. I was impressed with the comments that I heard the students making. They had great questions and comments about the story, were very interested in what had happened, and seemed to understand it very well. They seemed to be especially excited since it was a news story from Mesa, Arizona, and they knew where that was. I think bringing Tucson news stories would work very well.

The discussion about nutrition and the brainstorming of questions for the guest speaker went okay. I had a volunteer do it and there wasn't much class participation. It is hard to know how much and when to use the volunteers I have, and how much control to give them over class activities. I have found that they do very well working one-on-one with the students, but I think when it comes to class discussions, I am better off leading them myself.

The photo book is not progressing at all, and that is disappointing. It would be a wonderful activity for them to make these books about themselves, and it would provide great reading material for the lower level students. I think the problem is that the students are very busy and the concept of homework is new to them. Also, it seems like doing things according to a schedule is not really part of their culture; they keep telling me they will take pictures, but it never actually happens. I hate to abandon something that would be such a great learning experience, especially after spending budget money on the cameras, but it doesn't look like the

students are going to do the work on their own. And I don't think it's worth my time to go to each of their apartments and help them take pictures. If I were to do this activity again, I would arrange some kind of class field trip or something to take pictures together. Then I would collect the cameras before the students went home and develop the pictures before the next class. I think giving the students this much control over the activity was premature.

## Lesson 7

---

### Objectives

- Review letter sounds and sight words
  - Practice a new reading strategy, making predictions
  - Read independently or with a tutor
  - (Beginning group) Write a text as a group and read it
  - (Advanced group) Continue practice with silent e words
- 

### Materials

- Chart paper and easel
  - *The Incredible Bone*, by William Steig, or another text for making predictions
  - The students' individual texts
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*1 Student, 0 Children, 2 Volunteers*

I had great activities planned to continue our work on letter sounds, sight words, and reading strategies. I had also planned for the more advanced group to continue their work with silent e words, and I was going to do a group writing activity with the less advanced students. However, only one student came (Bendu). (6:20) I set her up with a tutor to work on her reading comprehension and vocabulary. Bendu has a manual she needs to read and take tests on for her work as a caregiver, so she read that with her tutor and asked questions. The other tutor helped me make flashcards for the next class period. (7:20) Bendu's tutor also helped her to fill out a job application that Bendu brought. It had a short answer section that contained some difficult vocabulary.

---

### Reflection

While the first two weeks of class showed constant, steady growth, the last week has shown a significant drop in numbers. Since retention is a problem in all adult literacy or ESL classes of this kind, I have worked from the start to prevent attendance problems in my class. I have provided childcare and a location that is close to where they live. I even provide transportation when my students ask. The problem is that they often don't call until class has already started, or they will call and then not be there when you go to pick them up.

The attendance problems make planning lessons and recruiting volunteers difficult. Also, if we do not have enough students coming, the library may want to give the meeting room to a bigger group, which would mean finding a new place to meet. This would be very difficult, and a switch of location would almost certainly cause further attendance problems. Not only am I concerned for my project, I am concerned for the students. I feel that this is the best chance many of them will ever have to learn how to read. Who else is going to give them a free class, with childcare and transportation provided, that is close to where they live?

I am trying to decide how to keep them coming to class. I have thought about going around to some local businesses to see if they would provide small prizes (coupons for free ice cream, discounts on groceries, etc) that I could use as incentives. Dr. Anders originally suggested that I have them pay a small fee for the class which would be reimbursed if they had a certain level of attendance. I originally thought it was unnecessary, and now I think it is too late to ask them to pay. It may scare more of them away and it seems unfair after advertising a free class. I think it is unlikely that many of these students will stop coming altogether, but they do not seem to understand the value of *consistently* coming to class. I can talk to them and explain the consequences, but I am not sure that is enough. I wish I had made a bigger deal about attendance from the beginning, maybe instituting some kind of program then.

## Lesson 8

---

### Objectives

- Review letter sounds and sight words
  - Practice a new reading strategy, making predictions
  - Read independently or with a tutor
  - (Beginning group) Write a text as a group and read it
  - (Advanced group) Continue practice with silent e words
- 

### Materials

- 3x5 cards
  - Testing materials (Marie Clay's *Sand* or *Stones*, leveled readers)
  - *The Incredible Bone*, by William Steig, or another text for making predictions
  - Chart paper and an easel
  - The students' individual texts
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*5 Students, 2 Children, 5 Volunteers*

(6:00) Only one student (Evon) was in class at the scheduled start time. I had a volunteer review alphabet sounds with her using flashcards. (6:20) When other students arrived, I set them up with volunteers to do the same thing and I tested Evon. After that, I talked to the class about attendance and about Dr. Henrichsen coming next week to observe. (6:40) The students then read to volunteers and got pulled aside for more testing. (7:15) This took longer than expected, so I abandoned the original objectives and worked instead on sight words. I tested them on sight



words to see what they remembered, and then reviewed the words with them again. We also talked about how knowing the way to spell these words can help us to spell words with similar spelling patterns. This led to some work on phonemic awareness and rhyming.

---

## Reflection

This class was disappointing. I had a few more students, but still not nearly enough. I still have more volunteers than students, and I am starting to lose some volunteers because they see they are not needed. I am also tired of the tardiness. I can never start class until 6:20, and then it never goes as planned. I always plan to start with the whole class together, reviewing sight words or something similar, and then do individual work with a tutor later in class. Instead, since I have volunteers sitting there, I set them up with students as soon as a student trickles in. This makes it harder to pull the class back together afterwards. I talked to them about how important next Wednesday's class is, and how they need to come straight to class and not go into the library first, which they often do. I also told them that if they are not able to get here on time because of transportation, that I can arrange rides for them, especially for next Wednesday. They listened, but I don't think they really understand why it's so important. I am sure this is a cultural difference. Also, it is very difficult to talk about class policies when only four people are there.

I have thought of recruiting more students to get the numbers up, but that does not accomplish my real goal, which is to improve the literacy of the students. If a student only comes once every other week, they are not going to improve very much. I want the students that I currently have to come more consistently. The other problem with having students only come sporadically is that even if I have enough students for a class, I cannot stick to my curriculum. I end up reteaching a lot of things instead of moving forward because they either weren't there the first time (or two) that I taught it or they've been away from class so long that they've forgotten it. And the third problem is that every time a new student comes I have to test them and try to find out what they need help with. This can take a considerable amount of time. I would rather move forward with the students I have already tested.

## Lesson 9

The following lesson plan is given in more detail as an example. The lesson plan format is modified from *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (Brown, 2001, pp.149-161).

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### Goals and Objectives

#### *Goal*

- Students will improve their reading fluency by integrating a new reading strategy into their reading, and they will continue to improve their understanding of letter sounds, print concepts, and purposes for writing.

#### *Terminal Objectives*

- Students will learn to make and check predictions while reading.
- Students will review previously learned information and integrate the new strategy into their reading.
- Students will practice writing in a nonthreatening, authentic situation.

- Students will come to class on time.

#### *Enabling Objectives*

- Students will review sight words, alphabet sounds, and the previous reading strategy.
- Students will hear an example of an experienced reader making and checking predictions while reading.
- Students will practice making and checking predictions while reading both a new and a familiar text.
- Students will write questions to a nutritionist friend of mine (who was going to come speak to the class until I decided this would work better).
- Students will have time to go to the library to reward them for being on time.

#### **Materials**

- *Miss Nelson is Missing* by Harry Allard and James Marshall (or another text to practice predicting)
- A current, interesting, simplified news article with pictures
- The students' individual texts

#### **Activities and Attendance**

*10 Students, 1 Child, 7 Volunteers*

1. *Warm-up* (20 minutes): The students reviewed sight words and alphabet sounds with tutors. The tutors tested them and recorded it. (We continued this periodically over the next ten lessons.) I also introduced Dr. Henrichsen and his wife to the class and vice-versa. The students consented to being videotaped and signed a waiver.

2. *Introduction to New Reading Strategy* (25 minutes): We then reviewed the last comprehension strategy, stopping to think and ask questions, before I introduced a new comprehension strategy, predicting. I modeled this strategy with *Miss Nelson is Missing*. After a few pages of modeling the strategy, the students and volunteers added their comments and predictions, which we checked together as we read the story.

3. *Practice of New Reading Strategy* (25 minutes): The students practiced the strategy with a news article about a plane that had crashed into a high-rise apartment building in New York City earlier that day. First, I showed them the pictures from the article and they made predictions about what had happened. Then, with the help of the tutors, I had the students read part of the article that gave some details but didn't explain everything. They made more predictions. Then I let them read the rest and we checked to see which predictions were right.

4. *Integration of New Reading Strategy* (20 minutes): After that, the students read their individual texts to their tutors, keeping track of when they stop to think/ask questions or predict.

5. *Writing Time* (15 minutes): Then the students wrote questions to the nutritionist (who was going to come to our class as a guest speaker until I decided writing the questions to her would work better).

6. *Closing* (15 minutes): The students had time to go to the library.

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### **Evaluation**

1. The volunteers tested and recorded the students' knowledge of the letter sounds and the sight words.
  2. I listened to the students' comments and predictions as we read *Miss Nelson is Missing* and as I showed them the pictures from the news article. I also walked around and listened to the students as they discussed the news article with their tutors. I listened to make sure they were understanding what they read and that their predictions were logical.
  3. I listened to the students as they read aloud to their tutors. This gave me a general idea of whether or not the book was appropriate for them and what kind of progress they were making.
  4. I listened to the students and helped them as they wrote. I also read their writing afterwards. This showed me their confidence level, their writing vocabulary, their spelling, and their understanding of print concepts.
- 

### **Reflection**

This class went very well. I arranged for everyone to have a ride, even the students that normally ride the bus, and almost every student came and was on time. I also arranged to have a lot of tutors that day, which I sometimes hesitate to do because I don't know how many students will come. The activities also went very well. The strategy lesson took a little longer than I thought it would, but the students were very engaged the whole time. Their comments also showed that they were really understanding the story, which was especially important for those students who do not read well enough on their own to practice with extended texts. The news article I pulled from msnbc.com was also very effective, probably because it was about a plane crash that had happened earlier that day. The students wrote to the nutritionist without complaining to me about it, possibly because it was a real situation. I would really like to have my students writing every day, and to see them writing longer texts, so this was a start.

## **Lesson 10**

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### **Objectives**

- Not applicable
- 

### **Materials**

- None
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## Activities and Attendance

*0 Students, 0 Children, 3 Volunteers*

I had planned to review letter sounds, sight words, and reading strategies before moving on to some activities involving our food unit. Unfortunately, no students came.

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## Reflection

I almost cancelled class for this day because I wasn't feeling well. Ironically enough, I didn't because I was worried about what that would do to attendance. Now, of course, I wish I had. I spent hours preparing for the class, working on the curriculum, gathering materials, and calling more volunteers (since my regular volunteers had fallen through). I also drove the forty-five minutes to the library and set up for the class, and waited thirty minutes for someone to come. My volunteers also sacrifice to give their time. On this night in particular, it was even more inconvenient for my volunteers, since they were called at the last minute. And it is very embarrassing for me when no one shows up. Luckily, the volunteers were very understanding.

It's also very frustrating to have no one come after last Wednesday's class had such excellent attendance and participation. Fatmata actually called me and said she wanted to come to class but didn't have a ride, but once again I got the call about fifteen minutes before class started. Baby said she couldn't come because they had scheduled her to work early that night (starting at 7pm instead of 9pm). Eleanor said she wasn't feeling well. Aminata said she isn't coming back until Ramadan is over because the fasting makes her too tired to come. I know that Bendu is fasting for Ramadan as well, so that may explain her absence. I could not reach the others.

There are some activities also that I wanted to finish a long time ago. For example, the photo caption books that I wanted the class to make were supposed to be completed within the first two weeks of class. Instead, the students keep forgetting to take pictures and to bring the cameras back, so only a few students have had a chance to take pictures at all. If this activity ever is completed, it will be in December.

## Lesson 11

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### Objectives

- Write and read grocery lists
  - Read food ads
  - Read my practice text independently or with a tutor
  - Write a letter
- 

### Materials

- Food ads from a local grocery store
  - The students' individual texts
-

## Activities and Attendance

*5 Students, 1 Child, 3 Volunteers*

(6:10) We started with the tutors testing the students on the alphabet sounds and the sight words. The students who needed extra help reviewed with their tutors after the test. We then reviewed as a class. (6:40) Then, using food ads from a local grocery store, I had the students find pictures of foods that they like to eat. The tutors helped them to spell the words for those foods and to write those words in their spelling notebooks. The students then made grocery lists of things they usually buy at the grocery store. (7:05) Using some of the words the students had written, I showed the class how some of the words had two vowels next to each other. We discussed this spelling pattern and its pronunciation and did a few activities to practice reading and writing words with this pattern. (7:40) After this, we did a letter writing activity. I explained that my brother was going to live in a new country for a few years. Since they have all lived in several countries, I wanted them to give him advice about how to adjust to a new language, culture, food, etc. Since we were short on time, we discussed what they would write when we finished the activity next time.

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## Reflection

I was really pleased with how this class went. I had a few more students come and was able to call several more who say they will come next time. My students are also making significant progress on the alphabet sounds and the sight words. It is exciting for me and even more exciting for them. I expect that their progress in other areas (phonemic awareness, fluency, etc.) will now speed up a little.

## Lesson 12

This lesson is also given in more detail, following the same format as Lesson 9.

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## Goals and Objectives

### *Goals*

- Students will stay motivated and expand their literacy abilities by learning to use the computers and the Internet. Students will also have time to review and practice previously learned reading skills.

### *Terminal Objectives*

- Students will receive exposure to some of the opportunities that computers offer.
- Students will be introduced to how computers and the Internet work and what some of their basic functions are.
- Students will learn some basic computer and Internet skills.
- Students will work individually with tutors on reading.

### *Enabling Objectives*

- Read to a tutor.
- Review letter sounds and other problem areas with a tutor.

- Learn how to use a mouse to control the arrow.
- Learn how to log on to the library computers using their library cards.
- Learn how to double-click to open a program.
- Learn what the Internet is.
- See how Google can be used to search the Internet.
- See how to get to the library's website.
- See how the library's website can be used to renew books.
- See how the Internet can help you receive your GED.
- See how email works and, if time, register for a free account.

## Materials

- Computers with Internet access
- The students' library cards
- The students' individual texts

## Activities and Attendance

*6 Students, 3 Children, 2 Volunteers*

I had planned on having students start class with a review and then an introduction to new sight words. I wanted to review the spelling patterns and practice words with those patterns. I planned to spend some time reviewing and practicing the current comprehension strategy, predicting, and then give the students time to read independently. I wanted the students to write the letters to my brother that we had discussed at the end of the last class, and I wanted to try yet again to get them to make some progress on their books about themselves. This did not work, though, because I only had two students at the beginning of class. (The two teenagers were not participating much in the class at this point. I have included them in the numbers, but they mostly worked on their own on the computers.)

1. *Warm-up* (20 minutes): Fatmata, one of my lowest level students, worked with a tutor on letter sounds, letter formation, sight words, and reading a very simple book. Meanwhile I talked with Evon, one of the more advanced students, to find out how this class could better meet the students' needs. I found out that if she could read better, Evon would quit her cleaning job and get a job being a caregiver. She didn't know much about what she would need to read at the caregiver job. I asked her if she had ever looked online at caregiver jobs and she had no idea what I was talking about. She had never heard of the Internet and didn't know the computer could be used to look for jobs.

2. *Introduction to Computers* (15 minutes): I took Evon over to the library computers and explained to her a little bit about the computers and the Internet. She was very excited to learn more. I showed her how to search for jobs and we browsed through a few listings. One of the jobs required a high school diploma or GED. I explained the GED to her and showed her a sample test. (I know she is not ready for the GED yet, but she is young and motivated and one of the better readers, so I thought it was within her reach.)

3. *Reading Books* (20 minutes): Baby and Eleanor came a little bit late. I gave Baby, one of the better readers, a wonderful book I had just read called *Reading Changed My Life! Three True Stories*, written by Beth Johnson and published by The Townsend Library. I told her if she

finished the whole book and liked it, she could keep it. She was very engaged and really liked reading the true stories of real people. Eleanor and I worked on reading some easy, patterned texts. She did very well, showing a lot of improvement on sounding out new words now that she is mastering the sounds of the alphabet. She was very pleased with her progress. I also had her look through the books after reading them and write down words she wanted to learn in her notebook. In time, these will be her new sight words.

4. *Reading Authentic Materials* (15 minutes): The nutritionist friend of mine had responded to their questions, so I handed those out to the class and the students read them with help.

5. *Individualized Instruction* (50 minutes): Then, while Fatmata continued to work with a tutor and Evon continued her practice GED, I asked Baby and Eleanor if they wanted to learn more about the computers. They were very interested and wanted to do it right then. I taught them how to log in to the library's system, how to use the mouse to control the arrow, how to open the Internet, how to get to the library's website and renew books, and how to use Google.com to search for things. Then I showed them how email works. They were very excited and wanted email accounts right away, so we registered them for some free accounts.

### **Evaluation**

1. I listened to the students as they read and worked on other things with their tutors. I also spent time working with the students individually.
2. I talked to Evon to assess how well the class was meeting her needs and what she was interested in.
3. I talked to the students as I showed them the computers.

### **Reflection**

This class did not go at all as planned, but it still went very well. The students were more interested in reading the nutritionist's responses to their questions than I thought they would be. Originally a nutritionist was going to visit our class as part of our food unit, but I decided it would work better to write to her instead. The students received their answers several weeks after I first told them about the nutritionist. Also, writing to the nutritionist fit in with my original curriculum plan, but things have changed so much that it now seems like a very random activity. So when I handed them the answers the nutritionist had written, I was surprised at how interested they still were.

I have been thinking for some time that it would be worthwhile to teach computer literacy. Computer skills could help them to get better jobs, and incorporating something that interests them and could improve their jobs should improve attendance. Also, I would like to start having my students write daily, but I am still having trouble getting them to write on paper. I suspect that teaching them to email may increase their willingness to write. Writing on a computer also teaches concepts about print in a more tactile, concrete way. For example, I want all of the students to realize that words in a sentence are separated by spaces, and to use spaces in their writing. I can teach this on paper, but it is even more obvious when they learn to hit the space bar

in between all their words or learn that a Google search only works with spaces between the words.

It is very interesting to see how little they know about computers. I think this was the first time any of them had actually tried to use one. They had tremendous difficulty using the mouse to move the arrow and double clicking to open a program. They did not know how to backspace to correct errors, or what the enter key did. They were very unfamiliar with the keyboard, so it took them a long time to find the letters they wanted. In spite of their unfamiliarity with computers, and the frustration of trying to understand and work them for the first time, my students were very engaged and excited the entire time we worked on them. For the next several class periods, I plan to spend about forty-five minutes teaching them more about the computers and the Internet and using the computer for literacy activities. Then, when they learn enough to be comfortable with the basics, I will start using the computers less, possibly just for writing time once a week.

## Lesson 13

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### Objectives

- Write something
  - Learn computer skills
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- Computers with Internet access
  - The students' individual texts
  - The students' library cards
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*3 Students, 0 Children, 2 Volunteers*

(6:00) I only had one student, Evon, who was on time. I had a tutor work with her to find new sight words for her to learn. (6:15) With another tutor she reviewed words that have a silent e, old sight words, and letter sounds. (6:45) The tutors left, thinking they weren't needed, and then a few more students arrived. I took them over to the computers and showed them again how to use Google.com to search the Internet. A few students wanted to look for new jobs, so we found some job search engines and looked at a few job listings. The jobs asked for résumés. My students had never heard of résumés, so I showed them some sample résumés online and told them I'd help them make résumés on Wednesday. (7:30) After this, we went back to the classroom and reviewed.

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### Reflection

My main worry now is that I am spending too much class time teaching my students how to use the computers. I still think the computers can be a great tool to teach literacy, but it is very time-consuming teaching people who are still figuring out how to move the mouse and click, and I



worry about deviating too much from my original goals. There is no doubt that my students are very motivated to use the computers, especially since they think it will help them to get better jobs. Also, they will write emails but they still will not write on paper. The time we spend at the computers would not be such an issue if the students were coming early enough to participate in the other literacy activities I've planned. I may try having computer time at the beginning, but I am afraid they won't come back into the classroom. This says a lot about the students' needs and interests. I wish I had discovered it in my needs analysis, but sometimes the only way to learn your students' true needs is in the process of teaching them.

We're at a point now where the students know the individual letter sounds well enough that I can start introducing some blends and common phonograms. This will also lead easily into discussions on rhyming and more work with phonemic awareness and sounding out new words. It took a lot longer than I thought it would to get to this point, but it is exciting to see the improvement they're making. I can tell they are proud of it, too; they no longer groan when it's time to review the alphabet sounds. In fact, several of them sit up straighter and get very focused.

It is very difficult in this class to recycle the material and provide the reinforcement and review the students need when only a third of them are in class at any given time. I tried calling everybody before class to see if they needed rides and to make sure they were coming, but I only got in touch with a few of them.

## Lesson 14

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### Objectives

- Review everything that's been taught to this point
  - Write something; learn some different purposes for real writing
  - Work on the computers
  - Learn a common spelling pattern
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- Computers with Microsoft Word and Internet access
  - *Very Easy True Stories* by Sandra Heyer
  - Paper and markers for the cards and letters
  - The students' individual texts
  - The students' library cards
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*5 Students, 0 Children, 4 Volunteers*

(6:00) I started class by explaining a new reward system for attendance and for reading at home. With the help of the volunteers, the students then wrote in a get well card for one of the students and a thank-you card for the nutritionist. They also wrote letters of advice for my brother, who is in a new country for the first time.

(6:30) After that, everyone except Fatmata went to the computers. (Fatmata was not interested in computers and stayed in the classroom to work with a tutor.) With help from volunteers, a few of the students created resumes and a few others worked on email. After everyone had worked for a while, one of the tutors showed them how they could use Google Images to search for pictures of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

(7:40) Back in the classroom, we reviewed the comprehension strategy, predicting, using “Elevator Romance” from *Very Easy True Stories* by Sandra Heyer. (7:50) We also reviewed the alphabet sounds as a class and then did a few activities to increase phonemic awareness. I also showed them their first phonogram, -an. We talked about how it is a common spelling pattern and how it is pronounced. We then listed as many words as we could with -an at the end of them and practiced segmenting and blending the words.

## Reflection

I managed to get McDonalds and Walmart to provide some free incentives for our class (more on the results later). McDonalds gave us some coupons for free fries, hamburgers, breakfast sandwiches, etc, and Walmart has promised us a few ten dollar gift cards. I may still try to get things from other businesses too, but this is enough to do what I wanted. I am doing two incentive programs with my class for November. One is for attendance; the three students with the best attendance will get Walmart gift cards. The other is for reading at home. If they read at home for 20 minutes every day (or at least 25 days of the month), then at the end of November they will get a McDonalds coupon. I anticipate that they will not keep track of their reading, even though I stressed how important it is, but I am more interested in seeing them start practicing at home than in the exact numbers. The students seemed very excited about both incentives.

While we are still spending more time on the computers than I would like (because they are still learning and everything goes very slowly), this class went very well. I was shocked when all of the students showed up to class fifteen minutes early! They are learning to call ahead of time when they need rides. Also, while my students still do not write a lot, they do not show the resistance to it that they did initially. This may be because the activities are much more authentic now (as opposed to the journal entries to me I had them doing originally), or maybe they are just getting used to writing. I am hoping that with more of them starting to write emails, I can get them to start writing more than a sentence or two at a time.

The students who have been working on the computers are already showing a lot of improvement. They can log in, perform searches on Google, and navigate websites with much less help. This is encouraging because the faster they get, the less class time the computers will take. Or if we do spend a significant amount of time on the computers, the students can be involved in literacy activities. The students are still very excited by the computers, especially when they saw they could look up information and pictures about Liberia and Sierra Leone. As soon as they saw the pictures, some of which were very disturbing, they started talking about how they missed home and how much they wanted to visit. One picture, titled “Liberia: America’s Stepchild,” was of a very young girl (or maybe a boy?) wearing a helmet and pointing some kind of gun at the camera. When one of the students saw how shocked I was, she just laughed. Here’s a link to that picture: <http://www.der.org/films/images/liberia-americas-stepchild.jpg>

I got my first email from a student during this class (“thank you for teaching me”). The class also continues to show improvement in their mastery of and attitudes towards the letter sounds. When we review as a class, they are literally leaning forward in their chairs and completely focused on

me, they are concentrating so hard. Every student has shown significant improvement, and the class as a whole knows the sounds very well now.

## Lesson 15

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### Objectives

- Learn how to use the library's website to find and reserve books
  - Write something
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- A computer with Internet access
  - The students' individual texts
  - The students' library cards
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*2 Students, 0 Children, 2 Volunteers*

(6:20) I had planned some activities involving the whole class, but since there were only two people (Eleanor and Bendu) who came, I took them straight to the computers. I showed them how to use the Library Catalog to look for books. We searched for books on Liberia, and they were interested in several of them. We requested them to be sent to our branch and I'm excited for the rest of the class to see them. (6:35) Eleanor logged on and showed her tutor how she could find pictures of Liberia online. She and Bendu explained the history of each picture, and what we were seeing as far as building, river, and road names. They were so interested in the pictures that I had an idea for a writing assignment. I told them to find their two favorite pictures so we could print them out and then write about them. They finally picked two favorites, but we didn't have time to write about them, so I told them we would finish on Wednesday. We also spent some time on email.

---

### Reflection

It's been very interesting to me to see how the refugees feel towards Liberia and Sierra Leone. I thought that with all of the horror they had experienced there, they would have more negative feelings about it and be more reticent to talk and learn about it. In reality, though, it's been just the opposite. They are fascinated by anything having to do with their home. I realize now that I should have planned more literacy activities that had to do with their home countries. I think they would have been much more interested in making books about Liberia than in making books about themselves.

I have also been thinking about the need for authentic communication. Now that they know how to use email, I want to find people for them to email that they really want to communicate with. I've written them emails and they've written me back, but they don't have much to say to me that they don't already tell me in class. I need to find out if they have friends with email. It would be

perfect if they had friends or family back home with access to email, but I doubt they do. One of my volunteers thinks she can get some of her fellow law students to be email pen pals with my students. I think that would be wonderful but still not as authentic as getting my students to email their friends or family.

I am trying to figure out what will happen with this class next semester, when I have a new baby and my project is officially over. I would really like to keep teaching the class, but I am not sure if that will be possible. I know I can get enough volunteers to come to the class next semester, but I need someone that will be in charge of everything, someone to organize the classes and stay in touch with the library, the volunteers, and the students. One of my volunteers may be willing to take over for me. We are going to stop the class for the holidays and reevaluate when the volunteers know their school schedules next semester.

## Lesson 16

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### Objectives

- Learn about blends
  - Write about Liberia
  - Practice making and checking predictions
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff
  - *Welcome to your new home!* By Mercy Housing
  - Pictures of Liberia
  - The students' individual texts
  - The students' library cards
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*7 Students, 1 Child, 4 Volunteers*

(6:00) After reviewing, I introduced some blends (th, sh, ch) and the sounds they make. (6:15) I then used *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff to demonstrate how predicting and checking predictions works with words in sentences. (6:35) After this I handed out some free booklets distributed by Mercy Housing entitled *Welcome to your new home!* They are fairly simple books with various topics of interest to people living in apartments. They were written for adult refugees that settle in the United States. With the help of tutors, the students read these and other books for a while and worked on other things they needed help with. A few students then went with their tutors to the computers. (7:30) At the end of class I showed the students the pictures of Liberia that we had printed last time, along with several more that one of my volunteers had found and printed. We talked about the pictures and then each student picked one picture to write about.

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## Reflection

The funniest and most interesting part of class was the students' reaction to one of the pictures of Liberia. The picture is entitled "Rural festival dancers in Upper Lofa, Liberia" ([http://www.vgsbooks.com/images/photos/liberia\\_p04.jpg](http://www.vgsbooks.com/images/photos/liberia_p04.jpg)). Every one of the women started dancing when she saw the picture, even the elderly Fatmata! One of the students, Baby, told me that all the women in Liberia—young and old—gather together for a month every year. They live in tents and learn dances and no men are allowed anywhere near the place. The men are not even allowed to know what goes on there. Baby spoke about it like it was the most wonderful month of the year, and she told me how much she wants to take her daughter there when she gets older. My students had a name for this dance, which I've forgotten, but I hope when I get a video camera in there, they will do it again and tell me more about it on tape. I was also amazed because they were so willing to write! I did not hear one person worry about spelling, and no one sat there staring at their paper. I only wish I had allowed more time for the activity, but we can always do it again or expand on it later.

The prediction activity also went very well. The goal is to get the students to read more quickly and fluently by using their common sense and the context of the story and the sentence to predict words and check their predictions. I read about this activity in *Phonics They Use* by Patricia Cunningham (p.48-51). Cunningham (2005) asserts that this helps students learn to cross-check their prediction and what makes sense with what they know about letter sounds and what's printed on the page.

While my comprehension strategy lessons have been very successful as a group, I still need to find more ways for them to practice these strategies on their own so that it becomes a part of their independent reading. This is something I am going to build into the curriculum more when I redesign it.

## Lesson 17

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### Objectives

- Review alphabet sounds, sight words, and the new blends
  - Read the books on Liberia (or other appropriate texts)
  - Work on the computers
- 

### Materials

- Computers with Microsoft Word and Internet access
  - Books on Liberia
  - The students' individual texts
  - The students' library cards
-

## Activities and Attendance

*4 Students, 0 Children, 2 Volunteers*

(6:00) As a group, we reviewed the alphabet sounds, sight words, and new blends (th, sh, ch). Also we talked about two common spelling patterns (-at and -it) and wrote down as many words as we could think of that ended with those patterns. We worked on some blending of sounds and on rhyming. (6:25) Then I showed the students the books on Liberia. I let them browse through them and gave them time to read one of them or something else with a tutor. (6:55) After reading for a while, some students stayed in the classroom to work with tutors on letter formation, letter sounds, etc. Another volunteer and I took a few of the other students over to the computers. One of my students has figured out how to log on and open Internet Explorer. I helped her to find three jobs she was interested in and send her resume to the employers. One of the tutors helped a student find a news article on Liberia and they read it together. I started showing Yusufu how to do things online but he didn't seem very interested. I finally asked, "What do you want to learn on the computer?" He surprised me by saying he really wanted to write his name on the computer. I showed him how to open Microsoft Word and how he could type in there. He was incredibly excited. I showed him how to make capital letters and how to make spaces between words. He then typed his first independent sentence ever: "Yusufu my Sheriff." We read it together; he was thrilled! I then asked him what he was trying to say, and he said, "My name is Yusufu Sheriff." I typed that for him and had him type it underneath.

## Reflection

This class reminded me how rewarding teaching reading can be. I was so excited to see Yusufu back in class after a long illness, and he was so excited to be there. I love to watch him and Fatmata when they work with their tutors. Not only are they reading at a much lower level than most of their classmates, they are both older and both have more trouble speaking and understanding English than the others. Unlike the others, though, they never get frustrated. They never get embarrassed. They celebrate every success and show an amazing enthusiasm and endurance. Fatmata and Yusufu are also very motivated to learn to read. If they could, they would come to class every day. On Monday, Yusufu's car was broken, so he rode his bike. I don't know how far away he lives, but I was very impressed.

I was disappointed when I saw the books I had reserved about Liberia. The students really wanted to read them, but they were really hard and only a few of them had pictures. I need to find some others. I should also look for books on Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast, and for articles from *National Geographic*, newspapers, or encyclopedias. Last week I found a Liberian newspaper online, in English. I emailed one of my students about it, and then forgot to tell the others. At any rate, my students are definitely very interested and motivated by history and current events from their homes.

I have been looking into getting volunteers to tutor my students at home, especially during the break between classes ending in December and starting in February. Amanda said she would ask the Law Women's Association, but she doubts there will be many with enough time to give to do that; plus, most of the students go home for the holidays. The Volunteer Center of Southern Arizona may be able to help, or possibly Literacy Volunteers of Tucson. I am still looking into both of those.

## Lesson 18

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### Objectives

- Write holiday cards
  - (Juana) Find something to read for fun
  - (Eleanor) Read and write without her daughter there
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- *If You Give a Moose a Muffin* by Laura Numeroff
  - *Very Easy True Stories* by Sandra Heyer
  - A Junie B. Jones book by Barbara Park and Denise Bunkus
  - Blank holiday cards
  - The students' individual texts
  - The students' library cards
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*2 Students, 0 Children, 4 Volunteers*

(6:00) I only had two students come to this class, a mom and her eleven-year-old daughter (Eleanor and Juana). We reviewed the usual things, and as always, Juana kept giving her mom the answers, so one of the tutors took her into the library to pick out a book to read. (6:35) For the rest of the class, Juana read a Junie B. Jones book with two of the tutors. They took turns reading a chapter out loud, and finished the entire book in class. Once Juana left, Eleanor worked with a tutor on rhyming, spelling patterns, and predicting with *If You Give a Moose a Muffin* by Laura Numeroff. They also worked on listening for the sounds in words and spelling them according to what they heard. (7:00) After this, Eleanor read from *Very Easy True Stories* to her tutor. (7:15) Eleanor wrote Juana a holiday card and her tutor showed her how to address it. (7:25) Eleanor and her tutor went to the computers to write emails. (7:40) Juana's tutors helped her write a holiday card for her mom, which she did with great reluctance. She first wrote it in cursive so her mom wouldn't be able to read it, so we made her rewrite it in print. Juana made me deliver the card to her mom because she was embarrassed. (7:55) I gave Eleanor and Juana a few of the McDonalds coupons for their great attendance during November.

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### Reflection

The best thing that I have to report is that this class is going to continue next semester. The library wants it to continue, and one of my best tutors has agreed to take over for me. I haven't talked to all of the current tutors yet, but several of them have shown interest in continuing to volunteer next semester. This is wonderful news for our students and I am excited to see the progress they will make as they continue to get help.

Even though we only had two students come to this class, it felt like a great success. For one thing, it was the first time that Juana has ever sat still or even stayed in the classroom long enough for a tutor to work with her for more than twenty minutes at a time. Because the only other student was her mom, she felt a lot more comfortable and didn't look for excuses to leave every few minutes. We also had more than enough volunteers, so she got a lot of personal attention. Although Juana is in sixth grade, I am sure this was the first time she ever finished an entire chapter book. She claimed that she didn't like it, but she was clearly enjoying it. I am hopeful that Juana will read more on her own, for fun.

Eleanor made great progress as well. It was wonderful to be able to tutor her without her daughter supplying her with all the answers. Her confidence has grown a lot now that she has mastered most of the letter sounds, and she takes everything very seriously.

It is still hard to have only two students come to class, especially when the class is at night. The individual attention is really helpful for them, but it is also exhausting for them. I am trying to think of something other than the computer that can be used when they get exhausted.

## Lesson 19

---

### Objectives

- Get tested
  - Write about themselves for a class book
  - Give input on the class' strengths and limitations
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- Rewards donated by businesses
  - Blank paper for the class book
  - Testing materials for Marie Clay's *Observation Survey*
  - *Qualitative Reading Inventory*
  - The students' individual texts
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*6 Students, 0 Children, 3 Volunteers*

(6:00) I handed out the rewards for attendance and reading at home. I also had an informal discussion with them about the class: what they liked, didn't like, or would change. (6:25) I had them write about themselves for a class book, with the help of the volunteers. (6:50) After writing, the tutors and I tested the students.

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### Reflection

The incentives did not seem to make much of a difference. The students were excited when I handed the coupons out, but the numbers for attendance in November were about the same as



those for attendance in October. I'm still glad I did it, but I think if the prizes had been bigger or if I had started them earlier it would have worked better.

I think I need to find another way for my students to evaluate the class. They were very complimentary about everything, which was nice but not very helpful. The only useful comments I got were from Bendu, who said that she would prefer to have certain days designated as computer days, where we spent the entire time in the computer room, and certain days designated as classroom days, where the entire time is spent in the classroom. I asked if this was because she liked one more than the other, and she said no, she just wanted them separated.

I learned some very interesting things from their writing. For example, I learned that in Africa Yusufu used to drive 18 wheelers and operate forklifts, and that he really wants to do those things in the United States. The International Rescue Committee told Yusufu that he can't do either of those until he can read, but one of my tutors is looking into that more. The IRC tends to put all of their clients into jobs in cleaning or food service, but I think we can find some other options that are more interesting to them and more in line with what they were doing before they came to the United States.

It was much more efficient to test the students in class with the help of my volunteers. I would definitely do it this way in the future, especially since most of the tests are very simple to administer. It took about five minutes to train my volunteers. I have not finished going through all of the test results yet, but so far I am pleased with the improvement their tests show in the few months they've been in class. They would have improved much more if their attendance had been more consistent, but it is reassuring to see that even their sporadic efforts have born fruit.

## Lesson 20

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### Objectives

- Participate in making a class videotape
  - Write holiday cards
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- Video camera, etc.
  - Blank holiday cards
  - The students' individual texts
- 

### Activities and Activities

*6 Students, 0 Children, 4 Volunteers*

(6:00) I videotaped my class again (with their permission), asking questions about where they had lived before the United States, how long they had been in the United States, what languages they spoke, what it was like in Liberia, etc. (6:45) The students then wrote holiday cards to people of their choosing, with the help of the tutors. While they were working on their holiday cards, I went around and talked to them to find out what they would be interested in reading over the break. I recommended books to them and told them where they could find them (if they didn't

already have them). (7:20) After they finished their cards, the students read to tutors or worked on other things with a tutor.

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### Reflection

The students really loved making holiday cards for people. The students were not familiar with the practice of sending and receiving holiday cards, but they were enthusiastic about the idea.

I am really excited that I was able to videotape my students again. This time my main focus was on capturing their stories on tape. I want to be able to remember what they looked like, how they talked, and what their lives were like. They were a little nervous about the video camera, but they were very cooperative. I wish I had written some questions down beforehand, though, because it was hard to remember everything I wanted to ask once the camera started rolling. We are going to videotape them next time teaching us tribal dances. It should be fun.

I realized this week that I should build more opportunities for rereading into the curriculum. Rereading has been recognized in the literature for some time as a powerful strategy for improving comprehension and fluency. I've noticed that it also gives the students a sense of success and increased confidence. It was brought to my attention this week as Eleanor and Baby both requested copies of stories they had read the week before so they could reread them both in class and at home. Fatmata and Yusufu and other students reading very short books often reread them with their tutors, but until Eleanor and Baby showed such enthusiasm for it, I hadn't consciously incorporated rereading with the more proficient readers. That is something I will definitely change as I revise the curriculum.

## Lesson 21

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### Objectives

- Celebrate the last day of classes; have fun in a more informal setting
  - Have individual conferences with the teacher to track progress
  - Read independently or with a tutor
- 

### Materials

- *Qualitative Reading Inventory* and Marie Clay's *Observation Survey* testing materials
  - CD player
- 

### Activities and Attendance

*4 Students, 0 Children, 5 Volunteers*

(6:00) First I handed out holiday cards I had written for each of them, and the volunteers helped them read them. (6:15) Then we started the party. We turned on African music, danced, and ate food. (7:00) After that, while the other students worked on reading with a tutor, I met with each

student individually. I showed them their test results from September and from November and we talked about how much they've improved. I made sure everyone had something to read over the break. (7:45) I also showed a few of the tutors how they could use the *Qualitative Reading Inventory* to test the more advanced students, so they can use it next semester.

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### **Reflection**

The best thing about this class was that I got to videotape it again. I didn't interview them like I had planned, but I'm glad that I will have more to remember them by. I'm glad I got them on tape dancing, and teaching me how to dance, since it shows some of their culture and their personalities when they are relaxed. The actual dancing was not at all what I or the tutors had envisioned. We thought they were going to teach us a specific tribal dance; they thought we needed to be taught *how* to dance generally. It was awkward for some of the tutors, who did not feel comfortable just dancing to music. But the refugees (and I) loved it! Even Eleanor, who is so shy that she is always ducking her head and covering her eyes, was dancing without an ounce of self-consciousness. It was an incredible transformation. I had a wonderful time and they had fun dancing even when they were dancing with a room full of awkward Americans staring at them. And I know they got a kick out of seeing someone so pregnant (me) try so hard to dance!

I am very surprised and pleased with the progress the students have made over the past few months. I was discouraged in late October and early November because of the students' sporadic attendance, and I was worried that they wouldn't show any progress at all. Somehow, though, our imperfect efforts have been rewarded with great success. I am very excited that this class will be continuing, and I am confident they will continue to improve.

### *Posttest Results*

The first set of testing took place at the end of September and the second set of testing took place at the end of November. This section will summarize the test results and highlight the significant changes for each student. It will also describe attendance trends that may have impacted the test results. The following table shows the pre and post Observation Survey test results for the six students who received both. I did not administer the writing vocabulary test to the more advanced students because it would take a very long time; it is intended students with a small writing vocabulary. The Dictation test was still too difficult for Yusufu and Fatmata, and Eleanor only wrote two words before getting too frustrated to continue. Also, the results for Bendu's Concepts About Print test are missing because she was not feeling well and left early.

Table 6

*Comparison of Pre and Post Test Results*

Students	Observation Survey Tests							
	Letter	ID	Word Test	Writing	Vocabulary	Dictation	Concepts About Print	Attendance
	Name	Sound		Prompted	Unprompted			
Fatmata								
Pre	12/54	3/26	0/20	----	1	----	1/24	60%
Post	23/54	17/26	1/20	1	----	----	5/24	
Yusufu								
Pre	47/54	0/26	0/20	2	4	----	15/24	38%
Post	47/54	15/26	4/20	3	8	----	14/24	
Eleanor								
Pre	54/54	6/26	5/20	4	8	----	13/24	90%
Post	51/54	19/26	6/20	----	19	4/37	19/24	
Evon								
Pre	51/54	0/26	19/20	8	19	29/37	18/24	62%
Post	53/54	24/26	18/20	----	23	21/37	21/24	
Baby								
Pre	52/54	15/26	17/20	14	5	20/37	18/24	50%
Post	54/54	26/26	20/20	----	10	33/37	17/24	
Bendu								
Pre	52/54	1/26	19/20	15	12	35/37	----	60%
Post	54/54	22/26	20/20	----	7	37/37	24/24	

The first student, Fatmata, came into the class with the lowest literacy level. Like Yusufu, Fatmata was very enthusiastic about learning and often told me she wished we had class every day. Ironically, she only attended about 60% of the classes that we did have. Fatmata was the only student to come into the class knowing almost none of the letter names. After two months, she learned close to half of them. Fatmata also went from knowing only three letter sounds to knowing about two thirds of them. It is interesting that Fatmata knows more letter sounds than letter names. I think this shows what we have spent more time on in class, since most of her classmates already knew the letter names. I also noticed in the posttest that Fatmata seems to have some dyslexia or vision problems. Most of her letter confusions are letters that are very visually similar, such as n/u, p/q, etc. By the end of the class, Fatmata could only write one word from memory, but it was an important word: her name. At the beginning of the class she could spell her name verbally, but she did not know what the letters she was saying looked like. Fatmata was the only student who really struggled with letter formation. Every time she came to class she patiently traced letters until she could write them independently. By the end of the class she showed great improvement.

The second student, Yusufu, was only able to attend 8 of the 21 lessons because of serious health problems. This was especially unfortunate because he was very enthusiastic about the class, very excited when he made progress, and very committed. He also started the class knowing almost nothing about literacy. By the end of the class, and with some help, Yusufu could read a Reading Recovery Level 1 book, which is the equivalent of reading readiness in most Basal readers. Kindergarteners are supposed to be able to read at about Level 12 by the end of the year.

Fortunately, his attendance did not stop him from making some important progress. Yusufu went from not knowing any letter sounds to knowing more than half. He went from not being able to read any of the words in the test list to being able to read four. This may not seem like much progress, but during the pretest he did not even understand that letters next to each other made words that could be read.

In the pretest, Yusufu could not spell his last name. By the posttest he was able to spell not only his last name, but several other words he had memorized. Also, although he did not spell them all correctly, his posttest contains several words whose spelling he guessed. These words show his increased awareness of letter sounds—for example, *mon* (mom), *dab* (dad), and *lik* (like).

The third student, Eleanor, was extremely shy and hated being tested. She got very nervous, and this may have impacted her results. Eleanor had by far the best attendance, attending almost 90% of the classes. She was one of the intermediate readers, more advanced than Fatmata and Yusufu but far below Baby and Bendu. Her reading level was about a Level 2 or 3 in the Reading Recovery books. She could independently read simple children's books without help, but they were difficult for her. Eleanor started the class knowing all of the letter names but only six of the letter sounds. Between her posttest and some smaller tests we did along the way, Eleanor showed that she learned all but six of the letter sounds. Although the sight words we learned in class were not part of the Observation Survey tests, I learned from one of the tutoring sessions that Eleanor had mastered all of the sight words.

Eleanor also made progress in her writing. In the pretest, the only words she could write from memory were her name, her daughter's name, and a few words that we

had just gone over in class. In the posttest, she was able to write more than twice as many words. The words she wrote in the posttest were not words we had studied in class, and they were more difficult to spell than the words she wrote in her pretest. Even more importantly, Eleanor showed more confidence and independence as the weeks went by. In the beginning, Eleanor's daughter, Juana, was always whispering the answers to her. I started assigning separate volunteers to Eleanor and Juana, and this forced Eleanor to really grow as a reader. Eleanor was uncomfortable with the new situation at first, but when she saw the progress she was making, she was very excited. In fact, Eleanor attended only haphazardly until she started to see how much she had improved in learning the letter sounds. At that point, she never missed another class.

The fourth student, Evon, attended about 62% of the time. At the start of the class, Evon already knew the names of most of the letters, but she did not know any of the sounds. She was one of the students who could say a word for each letter but had no idea what that meant. For example, she said *zebra* for *z*, but she did not know which sound in *zebra* the *z* made. After two months, she knew almost all of them, and it showed in her writing as well. Her score in the second dictation test was slightly lower than her first test, but the words were a little more difficult—fewer sight words and more words that had to be sounded out.

Evon's writing showed other great changes as well. I noted in her pretest that she had an incomplete understanding of print concepts. She wrote left to right with spaces between the words, but she would start a new line for each word. She did not seem to understand that sentences are written on the same line. Evon also used capital letters randomly—not conventionally and not just at the start of a new line, which is a stage that

many beginning learners go through. She did not use any punctuation. Unlike many of the students, though, Evon would attempt to write words even if she did not know how they were spelled, and this was a great learning tool for her.

Table 7 shows the progress that Evon made in her writing by comparing her first and second dictation tests.

Table 7

*A Comparison of Evon's Dictation Tests*

Test Sentence	Evon's Writing
Pretest	Pretest
The bus is coming. It will stop here to let me get on.	box is coming it is with sati Where Two let me get on
Posttest	Posttest
The boy is riding his bike. He can go very fast on it.	the boy is w ried is bet he cun go ve f

In Evon's second dictation test, she showed that she understood that words in a sentence belong next to each other. Although she still did not use any punctuation, she modified her use of capital letters. She still did not use them conventionally, but the change shows that her understanding has developed during the class. Evon still wrote new words if she did not know how to spell them, but she seemed more self-conscious



during the second test, even giving up before the dictation was over. She said she knew she had not gotten it all right and she did not want me to see it. This is also common for beginning writers: as they learn more, they become more aware of their mistakes and less willing to share their writing.

Since Evon did so well on the word list test, I had a tutor test her using some more difficult lists from the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*. Evon did not know most of the words on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade list, and she struggled a lot with the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade list. That put her independent decoding at about a 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. Reading words in context was much easier, though, and Evon was able to read a few grade levels above this. She started the semester reading children's chapter books, which were at about a second grade level. Towards the end of the semester, though, Evon read part of *This Our Dark Country: The American Settlers of Liberia* by Catherine Reef. I thought this book would be too hard for her, but her improvement and her extreme interest in the book helped her to push through the difficult vocabulary. She periodically summarized what she was reading for me, and it was clear that she understood it well.

The fifth student, Baby, was one of two very advanced students. She was able to read and explain books intended for young adults. Her favorite book, *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, was an especially difficult young adult book because it was written in stanzas like poetry and contained some difficult concepts. Even though she was more advanced and attended only about half the classes, she improved in almost every area—most notably in her knowledge of letter sounds and her writing. Her dictations are very similar in terms of the understanding of print that they demonstrate. In the first dictation, though, Baby knew most of the words from memory. In the second

dictation, she had to guess the spelling of several words by sounding them out. As Table 8 shows, her second dictation shows her improved understanding of letter sounds.

Table 8

*A Comparison of Baby's Dictation Tests*

Test Sentence	Baby's Writing
Pretest	Pretest
The bus is coming. It will stop here to let me get on.	the bus coming is we stop here to like me get no
Posttest	Posttest
The boy is riding his bike. He can go very fast on it.	the boy rideing is bake her can go every fast on it

The last student to receive both pre and post tests was Bendu. Bendu attended about sixty percent of our classes. Like Baby, Bendu was quite advanced compared to the other students. She could independently read texts that were written for young adults, and with help she could read the more difficult manuals that she was required to read for her work. Like the others, Bendu showed considerable improvement in her knowledge of letter sounds. Her writing is also interesting. In the pretest, she wrote very simple words, such as *car*, *baby*, *cat*, and *fun*. In the posttest, she wrote fewer words overall, but her words were much more difficult: *forgiveness*, *ungreatfulness*, *reading*, and *agreenment* (agreement). I believe this change came from the time Bendu spent reading texts with difficult vocabulary.

It was amazing to me to see how my students could improve in such a short time, with so few classes. On average, my students only attended about 24 hours of classes, or fewer if I count how many times they were late to class. The quickest and most universal improvements were in their knowledge of the letter sounds. This has important implications for other programs. Not only is it important for their success in reading, teaching the letter sounds does not take much class time and it produces quick results (even for my slower-learning students). It is also easy to measure, and therefore easy to show your students their progress. It may be the key to keep students from getting discouraged or too busy for class.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter described the implementation of the curriculum. It included information on attendance trends and the most effective teaching strategies, as well as the daily log of lesson plans and reflections on the evolving curriculum. Finally, it reported the students' posttest results and drew conclusions about their progress. The next chapter will summarize the lessons that I learned from this project, including recommendations for others interested in starting similar programs.

## CHAPTER SIX

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SIMILAR PROGRAMS

As the previous chapters have shown, my project did not yield a complete, prepackaged curriculum that other teachers could use, per my original goal. However, the challenges, frustrations, and victories that I experienced parallel those of many other curriculum designers, administrators, and instructors, especially in community programs for adult learners. The solutions I found to common problems, and the problems I found that had no solutions, all help to better inform those working to create effective learning experiences. I believe this makes my project more valuable than it would have been if I had smoothly sailed to my original goal. This chapter will first describe the lessons I learned through my experience developing and implementing my curriculum. It will then describe implications for other programs. Finally, it will offer my concluding thoughts on the project as a whole.

#### *Lessons Learned from the Experience*

Designing and implementing a literacy course for refugees in Tucson was a remarkable experience. One of the first things I learned was that a project like this takes the support of many different people. I could never have organized the class without the help of the refugee organizations in Tucson, my professors and committee members, the library administrators and staff, and other interested members of the community. (For a more complete list of the wonderful people involved in this project, please see the Acknowledgements section.) I also learned that there is money available to support this kind of project, and I am grateful for the Tucson Area Reading Council, without whose help I would not have been able to buy materials for the class. I found that local

businesses were also willing to offer discounts, gift cards, and coupons. Without much work at all, I was able to find a wealth of individuals and organizations excited to support literacy and reach out to the refugee community.

This was also very true of my volunteers. I was surprised by the number and the variety of individuals who volunteered their time and talents to help with the class. It was much easier to find volunteers than I expected, and I discovered that it was impossible to have too many volunteers. Working alongside fellow friends and students was an important part of the students' learning experience, but their most effective learning took place in their individual tutoring sessions. I liked to have one volunteer for each student, plus volunteers to help with childcare. On nights when we had more volunteers than students, the volunteers helped by creating flashcards, making photocopies, or preparing testing materials. While it took some effort to keep everyone productively occupied, it was important to make the volunteers feel needed. It was surprising and wonderful to see how intrinsically rewarding the volunteering was for them. With minimal training and no extrinsic rewards, my volunteers kept coming even after frustrating nights when attendance was low. My volunteers also went beyond the call of duty by offering to give students rides, to tutor students at home, and to teach the class when I needed to work with a student one-on-one.

This experience also taught me that location is everything. For these students, offering a class so close to where they lived was even more important than offering childcare. Not only was the class close, it was right on a major bus route, so transportation was easy. Most of my students also lived very close to other students, so they were able to come together. The library was also the best possible place to hold the

class. It was wonderful to have free texts on a variety of topics and at a variety of levels just across the hall from our class. I also loved having easy access to computers and the help of the library staff. The classroom itself was much nicer than the other places I had looked at, and it was set up with a built-in white board, tables, and chairs. It was also great for my students, who had never heard of libraries, to learn how to use one. It is possible to teach students about the library from another location, but just visiting a library would not have made my students feel comfortable using one.

If I were to teach this class again, I would find some way to get the students more invested from the beginning. I think requiring the students to pay a small fee for the class would have helped. This money could be returned to them at the end of the class if they maintained a certain level of attendance, or it could be used to buy materials. If it were used to buy books, those books could then be given to the students at the end of the course. It may even be worthwhile to have the students involved in a fundraiser to raise the money for the class. I know the students' lives are busy and filled with other responsibilities, but I think if they have to sacrifice and show a commitment to the class from the very beginning, they will be more grateful and take the class more seriously.

I would also spend my grant money differently if I had the chance. I never used many of the classroom supplies that I bought and others I only used once or twice. In retrospect, I would have spent more money on reading materials and less on supplies. A detailed list of the supplies I did not use, the supplies that I did use, and supplies I wish I had bought is in Appendix C.

I would make very different curricular decisions if I were to teach this class again. For starters, I would significantly narrow the scope of the class. I started planning the

curriculum with an unrealistic idea of how much I would be able to accomplish with my students in such a short amount of time. Experience showed me that I needed to cover less information and cover it more thoroughly. After a few weeks, I decided to dramatically reduce both the number of topics we would cover during the semester and the number of topics we would cover each day in class. I cut down the number of objectives I expected my students to reach during the semester. I also scaled back my expectations of how much progress I expected my students to make. Doing this gave me more class time for the most important goals, and my students really started to make progress. In teaching literacy to adult refugees, less was truly more.

I would also choose very different content if I were to teach again. Before working with these refugees, I tutored a few children in reading. These children could decode very well, but they had trouble understanding what they read. I taught them to use comprehension strategies like predicting, asking questions, and visualizing, and within a few weeks their reading improved dramatically. Because of this, and because of the popularity of reading strategies in current literature and commercial materials, I thought reading strategies would work miracles for my students. But for the most part, my students were not even ready for reading strategies. If I were to teach again, I would spend much less time on reading strategies. I would also choose simpler strategies, at least for my most beginning readers. The strategies I chose were not too hard for the beginning students, but they were not as helpful as simpler strategies. I would have the most beginning students start with something like looking at the pictures.

I would also spend much more time on decoding. My most beginning students were unable to decode even very simple words, and my more advanced students decoded

new words so slowly that they had trouble understanding texts. If I were to teach them again, I would spend as much time as their attention spans allowed working on decoding. This does not mean that I would spend the entire time on drills. There are ways to make phonics interesting and contextualized. *Phonics They Use* by Patricia Cunningham (2005), *When Kids Can't Read* by Kyleene Beers (2003), and *Words, Words, Words* by Janet Allen (1999) have excellent suggestions for interesting, interactive phonics activities. While phonics may not be as much fun to teach as reading strategies, it is a necessary foundation for all other reading skills. It is important to remember that what is fun for the teacher may not be what is most essential and most fun for the students.

With this in mind, I would spend more time on the things that interest my students. The things that interest them may not necessarily be the things that they need the most, but their interests can usually be worked in to other class activities. At the very least it keeps them coming to class. My students surprised me during the semester with their interest in computers and in Liberia. Adjusting the curriculum to fit their interests made the class more motivating and therefore more successful.

Most importantly, if I were to teach this class again, I would make it more than a literacy class for personal enrichment, or a literacy class meant to help them in a vague, undefined way. I would make the class immediately applicable to their jobs and to their lives, and I would make sure that they saw how it was going to help them. To this end, I would have my students spend more time reading nonfiction passages. I did a mix of fiction and nonfiction, but my students were much more motivated by the nonfiction texts. They thought that understanding nonfiction texts was more likely to help them to get better jobs. It would also help the students who want to get their GED. I would use



the *Qualitative Reading Inventory*, which has leveled nonfiction passages followed by comprehension questions. This would be a convenient way to find texts and to track their progress.

Finally, I learned that creating a useable curriculum requires flexibility and experience. I would get excited about activities and methods that I found in books, only to find that they did not work in my class. In spite of this, my students were still learning—even the ones that only came occasionally. I had to remind myself that if all the students did in class was read for a few minutes, they would still be learning something. The only way to stay sane and to meet the students' needs was to stay flexible and adjust the curriculum as needed. While it is always important to adjust the curriculum and lesson plans throughout the semester, a curriculum really needs to be taught repeatedly, in similar circumstances, before it is fine-tuned. While it was not possible in this situation, it is best if the same teacher can teach the class several times before training another teacher. This way, the teacher can modify the curriculum without having to start from the beginning.

Even though the lessons and the curriculum were often revised, my general approach to teaching reading remained constant. I found that a balanced approach to teaching reading was most successful. My approach, based on the interactive approaches described in the literature, involved teaching and practicing both bottom-up and top-down reading processes. I found that “holding in the bottom” (Eskey, 1998, pp.96-97), or learning the phonics skills necessary for simple decoding, was especially crucial for my lowest level students. It proved to be much more important than any top-down processes, and these students spent the majority of their class time working on letter sounds and on

decoding simple texts. My more advanced students spent a similar amount of class time decoding longer, more complex words. I had imagined a more equal need for top-down and bottom-up practice, but my experience showed me that struggling readers need a solid foundation in phonics before they can read well enough to need anything else.

#### *Additional Considerations*

In addition to the many lessons about the organization of a new program and the development of a new curriculum, this project occasionally gave me startling insights into the world of the illiterate and the world of a refugee. My students fled Liberia to escape a violent civil war. They lived in refugee camps in the Ivory Coast or Sierra Leone for ten or fifteen years before resettling in the United States. Several of them had small children who lived their entire lives in refugee camps, never even seeing their home country. One of my students, Bendu, explained that they would try to have school when she was growing up, but then the soldiers would come and the people in her community would scatter and hide until the soldiers left. When the soldiers left, they would restart the school, only to flee to the brush a few months later. Another student, Helena, told me that she went to reading classes in the refugee camp, but she could not concentrate because she was always worried about her family. She said that she could not learn to read until she knew they were safe.

My students had never heard of a library. They were fascinated by the room full of books, computers, magazines, and DVDs. They could not believe that library cards were actually free, telling me adamantly that there must be some kind of catch or trick, just like there is with credit cards. My students had never heard of computers. They could not move a mouse or double-click. They had never heard of the Internet, or email,

or websites. My students were literally cut off from a world of information, and not just because they struggled with reading.

My students had seen violence in an up-close, constant way that made it seem common. Some of them struggled very visibly with the effects of this violence and the ensuing loss of their homeland. Tucson was full of immigrants—many of them illegal—people who had crossed vast deserts and risked their lives just to reach a land with more opportunity. Not my students. My students did not want to live the American dream. They dreamed of returning home. With all the horror that home had held for them, they had a love and an appreciation for Liberia that surprised me.

This project showed me that teaching refugees is truly a different experience than teaching students who are visiting or who have immigrated to the United States, especially if the refugees have lived through the violence, poverty, and displacement that is common in so many areas of the world. It showed me that teaching literacy to refugees requires a fresh look at the world and at literacy. I recommend that others planning on working with refugees find out as much as they can about the refugees' home country, culture, history, language, and experiences.

### *Conclusion*

I taught a very specific audience, students with high oral proficiency and low literacy, and yet the successes and obstacles that I encountered mirror those of adult literacy and ESL programs everywhere. My project has immediate applicability to courses for other Liberian refugees, and can easily be generalized to courses for other African refugees and immigrant groups who likewise have some oral proficiency and low literacy. The practical lessons that I learned about finding students, volunteers, a

classroom, and materials could apply to ESL and adult programs throughout the United States, regardless of the oral proficiency or literacy level of the students, or even the content for the class. Likewise, the lessons I learned about conducting a needs analysis, planning learning outcomes, and the other steps of the curriculum development process could apply to a wide variety of programs. I hope that despite the differences between my project and other programs, the similarities will be great enough that my experiences may serve as a resource for other curriculum developers and teachers.

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## APPENDIX A

## THE USE OF THE CREATIVE CLASSROOM GRANT

Table A1

## Materials and Costs

From <i>Office Max</i>	From <i>Teacher-Parent Connection</i>	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• File folders- 24 for 4.49</li> <li>• Index Cards- 500 for 2.99 (3x5), 100 for 2.79 (5x8)</li> <li>• Easel- 19.99</li> <li>• Flip chart paper- 30 sheets for 14.99</li> <li>• Whiteboard markers- 12 for 12.99</li> <li>• Whiteboard cleaner- 1 for 3.99</li> <li>• Whiteboard erasers- 1 for 2.99</li> <li>• Paper with lines for letter formation- 1 pad, 40 sheets each, 3.69</li> <li>• Stapler- 9.99</li> <li>• Staples- 1 box for 2.69</li> <li>• Scissors- 3 for 2.19 each</li> <li>• Permanent Markers- 12 for 9.99</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sticky tape with capital and lower case letters to serve as a reference- 6.50</li> <li>• <i>Let's Print Letters</i>: write-on, wipe away board with capital and lower case letters to trace- 4.29</li> <li>• Spelling Magnet Sets: 144 magnets with capital and lowercase letters- 8.99</li> <li>• Colored popsicle sticks for sight words- 4.99</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do</i> (Kylene Beers, 2003)- 22.00, amazon.com</li> <li>• Disposable cameras- 15.00, WalMart</li> <li>• <i>Keep Books</i>- 30.00, ebay</li> </ul>



## APPENDIX B

### THE CONCEPTS ABOUT PRINT TEST

The following is a list of the concepts tested in the *Concepts About Print* test, which is one of six tests in Marie Clay's (2006) *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy*

*Achievement:*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Identifies the front of the book              | 16. Knows the meaning of a period  |
| 2. Knows that print contains the message         | 17. Knows the meaning of a comma   |
| 3. Knows where to start reading                  | 18. Knows the meaning of quotation marks                                 |
| 4. Knows which direction to read                 | 19. Can locate the capital and lower case letters (Tt and Bb) on a page. |
| 5. Knows to return sweep to the left             | 20. Distinguishes between saw/was and no/on                              |
| 6. Shows word by word matching                   | 21. Understands the concept of letters; shows one letter, two letters    |
| 7. Understands first and last concept            | 22. Knows the concept of words; shows one word, two words                |
| 8. Identifies the bottom of the picture          |  |
| 9. Knows the print is upside down                |  |
| 10. Knows the line order is altered              |  |
| 11. Knows the left page is read before the right | 23. Can show the first and last letter of a word                         |
| 12. Notices the change in word order             | 24. Can point out a capital letter                                       |
| 13. Notices the change in letter order           |  |
| 14. Notices the change in letter order           |  |
| 15. Knows the meaning of a question mark         |  |

## APPENDIX C

## HELPFUL INFORMATION ABOUT BUYING SUPPLIES

Table C1

A Breakdown of the Creative Classroom Grant

Supplies I Used	Supplies I Did Not Use	Supplies I Wish I Had Bought
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Index Cards- 500 for 2.99 (3x5), 100 for 2.79 (5x8)</li> <li>• Paper with lines for letter formation- 1 pad, 40 sheets each, 3.69</li> <li>• Permanent Markers- 12 for 9.99</li> <li>• Sticky tape with capital and lower case letters to serve as a reference- 6.50</li> <li>• <i>Let's Print Letters</i>: write-on, wipe away board with capital and lower case letters to trace- 4.29</li> <li>• Spelling Magnet Sets: 144 magnets with capital and lowercase letters- 8.99</li> <li>• <i>When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do</i> (Kylene Beers, 2003)- 22.00, amazon.com</li> <li>• <i>Keep Books</i>- 30.00, ebay</li> <li>• Colored popsicle sticks for sight words- 4.99</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• File folders- 24 for 4.49</li> <li>• Easel- 19.99 and flip chart paper- 30 sheets for 14.99 <i>These would be great if the class were more homogenous.</i></li> <li>• Whiteboard markers- 12 for 12.99, whiteboard cleaner- 1 for 3.99, and Whiteboard erasers- 1 for 2.99 <i>I used the whiteboard a lot, but I could have used one marker and one eraser.</i></li> <li>• Stapler- 9.99</li> <li>• Staples- 1 box for 2.69</li> <li>• Scissors- 3 for 2.19 each</li> <li>• Disposable cameras- 15.00, WalMart <i>I still think these could be great for Language Experience Approach activities, but only if the teacher has more control over the activity.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A duplicate set of <i>Keep Books</i> so the students could keep and practice at home what they had read in class.</li> <li>• Money for photocopies. I would copy the leveled selections from the <i>Qualitative Reading Inventory</i> and track my students' progress.</li> <li>• Money to buy each student a book (other than the <i>Keep Books</i>) that they could keep and read at home.</li> <li>• More money to be spent as things came up during the semester. I spent it all before classes even started.</li> <li>• More simplified, nonfiction texts that the students could read in class. Maybe National Geographic.</li> <li>• Sets of books for group work.</li> </ul>