

# Children's literature for oral language activities

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Many beginner English as a Foreign Language students (FLs) and their teachers find the use of authentic children's literature problematic because it is written for the native English context. When books are selected based on readability formulas alone, they will be overwhelming for beginner FLs. However, when literature is appropriately selected for the Foreign Language classroom it is an easy to use and wonderfully enjoyable resource. The following paper reports on the parameters of appropriate literature selection for use in oral activities with beginner FLs.

**P**roviding appropriate children's literature for beginner English as a Foreign Language students (FLs) is difficult. Many beginners are overwhelmed with the amount and complexity of the English found in children's books written for native English contexts (Tabors, 1997; Wood & Salvetti, 2001). Few book lists are available that address the needs of beginner English language learners and fewer address the needs of young learners (Smallwood, 2002). Although recent research has provided us with different criteria for selecting reading materials for FLs as compared to English speakers, not enough work has been done to systematically identify criteria for selection of appropriate books for use with beginner FLs (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Greenfield, 2004). Given the paucity of resources addressing issues of importance to the context of teaching beginner FLs, teachers often use readability formulas and leveled texts developed for English speakers in matching texts to FLs (Fry, 2002; Greenfield, 2004).

One problem in developing systematic book selection criteria for beginner FLs stems from the extraordinary diversity of this population. Despite this diversity, these students have characteristics in common which distinguish them from native English speakers. Beginning FLs are unfamiliar with the code

itself and are unable to decipher extended discourse (Lado, 1988). They have a comparatively similar size of active and passive vocabulary, unlike native English speakers whose passive knowledge is much larger than their active vocabularies (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998). They understand books matched to their speaking ability. The language in many children's books is unfamiliar (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). This overwhelming amount of English is simply listened to for overall features rather than decipherable chunks (Tabors, 1997).

Teachers deal with the mismatch between the English of children's books and the abilities of beginner FLs in several ways. Teachers use specialized language, adjusted in amount, familiarity, complexity, and deliberateness. They complement it with extralinguistic supports such as gestures and props. They conduct guided practice until students are able to practice independently.

Teachers approach this mediation task using children's books in two ways. One approach is for the teacher to develop supplemental instructional activities for mediation. For example, a teacher may record an audio tape at a slower reading rate or write a repetitive chant to teach the essential vocabulary in the book. Developing supplemental activities requires time and know-how on the part of the teacher (Allen, 1994; Cox, 2005; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2002). Another approach is for the teacher to find children's literature which is already within the comprehension level of the student. The difficulty in using this approach is finding comprehensible literature with simple language, appropriate topics, and styles that are conducive to the strategies for Teaching English to Speakers

of Other Languages (TESOL).

The analysis presented here is the result of systematically addressing the need for specialized book selection criteria for beginner FLs. Criteria used for the TESOL context are numerous and varied. Some refer to features of English, some to cultural aspects, and others to the parameters of strategies in TESOL. The focus of the analysis here is limited to beginner books which are compatible with five orally-focused language teaching strategies—Total Physical Response (TPR), Reenactment, Reader's Theater, Chanting, and Recitation.

### Description

The path to developing a list of systematically selected appropriate books for beginner FLs was a multistage process. The initial list of criteria comes from a range of studies from both the fields of reading and second language teaching (Allen, 1994; Tabors, 1997; Smallwood, 2002). Tabors (1997) considers "content, vocabulary, length, and special features, including cultural sensitivity" (p. 120) and the interests, culture, and understanding of the children.

Once a comprehensive list of criteria was developed, the next step involved systematically grouping them into a few manageable overarching categories. The categories are language (amount and complexity), topic (familiarity and complexity) and style (compatibility with different instructional considerations and strategies) (Lado, 2004). After this, features within categories were distinguished according to trends in difficulty. The easiest books for beginner FLs are those which fit a formula for having the

lowest trend in difficulty across several features. However, few books were found which conformed in every way to a neatly developed formula. When books had different trends in difficulty for different features, then we weighed the importance of some features over others. In addition other instructionally relevant criteria were considered such as, the type of program, the age of the students, and whether it is a foreign or second language TESOL environment (Lado, 2005). Books that are easy in one TESOL context may be difficult in another. It is also important to consider that authentic pieces of literature reflect standards of creativity of the author or illustrator and not standards of written English. The majority of children's books also reflect assumptions about the most likely readers—books written in the simplest English often have toddler topics, books written with beginning reader words often have topics of interest to kindergarteners, and so on (Lado & Daly, 2004).

Despite the complexity and difficulty inherent in combining features, books were categorized by trends in difficulty as a starting point and pilot testing was begun with students in different stages of beginner language proficiency. As a result of information gathered in these informal pilot tests, the following four stages or trends of difficulty were found to be useful:

- Stage 1—books without words or those that had minimal text. These were used with students in a silent or listening period of language proficiency;
- Stage 2—books which would have enough text to be decipherable and usable in the earliest stage of emergent speech;

- Stage 3—books with patterns that can be used by students who have begun to speak;
- Stage 4—books for those who are productive beginners.

Finally, some poem books and song books defy easy categorization into stages.

After classifying books into these four stages, further culling was conducted based on analysis of other suitability factors such as, determining a book's compatibility with orally-focused strategies and usability in different types of classrooms.

## Results

The differences when using books selected given TESOL criteria as compared to those selected for English speakers were immediate and significant. Student oral participation increased. The amount of lapse time between the introduction of a book and the use of this book for independent practice was significantly shorter. Teachers were struck by the decrease in amount of time they needed to prepare materials since the books were ready to use *as is*. The pilot tests revealed the importance of considering student interests. Some books appealed to students despite having some difficult linguistic features. These results speak to the need for writing annotated bibliographies of children's literature with information relevant to beginner TESOL contexts.

Table 1 illustrates the consideration of a combination of issues involved in book selection for beginner FLs using

**Table 1. Sample strategies, text features, and children's books**

TESOL Strategies	Salient Text Features	Books and Their Trend in Difficulty
TPR	Active verbs and repetition of actions. Transparent illustrations of actions.	<i>Clifford makes a friend</i> (Bridwell, 2000). <i>From head to toe</i> (Carle, 1999). <i>Is that Josie?</i> (Narahashi, 1994). <i>Mama cat has three kittens</i> (Fleming, 1998).
Reenactment	Actionable plots and scenes.	<i>A happy day</i> (Krauss, 1949). <i>Just like you and me</i> (Miller, 2001). <i>What's cookin'?</i> (Coffelt, 2003). <i>When elephant walks</i> (Kaska, 2004).
Reader's Theater	Speaking parts for the characters.	<i>A cat and a dog</i> (Masurel & Kolar, 2001). <i>The carrot seed</i> (Kraus, 1988). <i>Squirrel is hungry</i> (Kitamura, 1996). <i>Curious kittens</i> (Volkman, 2001).
Chanting	Exact repetition of phrases or repetitious patterns.	<i>Where are you going? To see my friend</i> (Carle & Iwamura, 2003). <i>Dear Daisy, get well soon</i> (Smith, 2000). <i>Hats, hats, hats</i> (Morris, 1993) <i>One gorilla</i> (Morozumi, 1993).
Recitation	Familiar, easy to recall concepts. Poetry with simple, transparent language.	<i>Baseball 1 2 3</i> (2001). <i>Ten seeds</i> (Brown, 2001). <i>Who said red?</i> (Serfozo & Narahashi, 1992). <i>Who are you?</i> (Blackstone & Harter, 1996).

the following five TESOL strategies: TPR, Reenactment, Reader's Theater, Chanting, and Recitation. The first column of Table 1 is a list of these TESOL strategies. The second column contains information regarding the requirements of the strategy. The third column contains a list of the sample books discussed in this paper.

### TPR

Let's begin a more detailed description of matching books to TESOL strategies with Total Physical Response (TPR). Books which can be used *as is* with TPR are those with action words and a close match of the text to illustrations. When using a children's book as a starting point for TPR, the teacher selects verbs from the text, conducts the action and has students imitate these actions. In three of the following illustrative books there is one character who performs actions which another character later repeats. This makes them easy to use with the TPR strategy.

*Clifford makes a friend* (Bridwell, 1998) has a total of about 20 different words in simple repeated sentence patterns accumulating to about 70 total words of running text. The actions involve the following: running, jumping, licking, laughing, making faces, and doing a cartwheel on the grass. FLs in the earliest stages can easily learn these through TPR. *From head to toe* (Carle, 1999) is a book that has similar uses despite containing double the number of running words and number of different words. It is larger in actual size than the *Clifford* book and also comes in a big book sized version, making it easier to use in a classroom with many students. The actions in this book involve zoo animals each saying what they do (kick my legs, stomp my

feet, turn my head, raise my shoulders, thump my chest, wave my arms...) followed by the question *Can you do it?* and a boy answering, *I can do it*. Another example of a book with a similar amount of language is *Mama cat has three kittens* (Fleming, 1998). Three cats *pounce, nap, wash paws, stretch, yawn, dig sand, chase leaves, sharpen claws*, etc. while the fourth one *naps*. Once the three nap, the fourth cat goes into action. It is told as a narrative and is not only compatible with TPR but also the Reenactment strategy. One final example of a book that is compatible with TPR is *Is that Josie?* (Narahashi, 1994). It has about 80 different words occurring in a patterned sentence structure because the narrator inquires 11 times about Josie. *Is that Josie hiding? Is that Josie running? peaking, eating, making waves*, and so on. The illustrations provide critical information about the meaning.

### Reenactment

Unlike in TPR where action words are isolated, in Reenactment students perform actions based on the text which does not necessarily use action words. The teacher reads the book while the students dramatize the scene. Like TPR, Reenactment requires language comprehension but not production. *The Happy day* (Krauss, 1949) is a classic book. This story is told in repetitive scenes with patterned sentences. The story begins with each of five large groups of different animals asleep. Then each *wakes, sniffs, runs, stops, laughs, and dances*. The text closely matches the illustrations. Both the story and the large size of the book contribute to it being easy to use in large classes. A book with slightly more difficult vocabulary that can also be

implemented with a large class is *Just like you and me* (Miller, 2001). It consists of a series of one page descriptions of animals each followed by the repetition of the phrase *just like you and me*. The following examples from the text serve to illustrate: *sociable like a penguin, graceful as a dancing crane, and swift as a cheetah*. The story *When elephant walks* (Kaska, 2004) is similarly easy to use with Reenactment. When elephant walks, he frightens the bear, who in turn scares another animal, who in turn scares another, and so on until we return to the elephant who is scared of a mouse. In *What's cookin'?* (Coffelt, 2003) different students can play the parts of different characters. Interestingly this book is usable with several topics and teaching strategies. It is about cooking, counting, and cooperation. There are action verbs for TPR and repetitions for Chanting.

### Reader's theater

Reader's Theater requires dialogue. *The Carrot Seed* (Kraus, 1988) is a classic book with easy dialogue. Each family member in the story says only one sentence. For example, the father says, *I'm afraid it won't come up* and then the mother says, *It won't come up*. The book titled *A Cat and a dog* (Masurel & Kolar, 2001) is longer and demands more speech from its two characters. It is an allegory about tolerance and friendship. A large class of students can be divided in half with each side of the class speaking the parts of either the cat or the dog. Another book that is easy to use in this way is *From head to toe* mentioned earlier. Students on one side of the class become the zoo animals while students in the other half become the boy. *Squirrel is*

*hungry* (Kitamura, 1996) is an example of a book that is part of a series. Kitamura produced these small board books with similar characteristics. All are short, repetitive stories with a central character and about 25 different words. Each of these books can be reenacted in a small group. Short simple patterned sentences tell the story of a squirrel who finds a walnut and tries to hide it in several places only to find these are already occupied by another animal. But in addition, this book has some text that can be used as the simplest of dialogues. Different students can easily learn to ask, *Here?* and answer, *No*.

One of the interesting aspects of using children's books is that some of these texts, particularly those written for toddlers, contain more features of oral language than the average narrative story. Oral style text imitates speech and is often considered ungrammatical and spare. Yet, in the context of beginning TESOL, authentic examples of spoken English are a desirable feature. An example of a book with this oral style text is *Curious kittens* (Volkman, 2001). The text is exclusively the speech of three kittens without a narrator or dialogue markers. Instead the reader gleans information about which character is speaking in context. By attending to the photographs one becomes aware of who is speaking. The text totals some 100 running words of speech by the kittens. A fourth character, critical to the story, is a silent fish.

### Chanting

Like Reader's Theater, the Chanting strategy requires students to speak (Lado, 1988). In a FL context, this requirement results in an important distinction, a difference

in the trend of difficulty of books with patterned phrases and books with exact repetition of phrases (Lado, 2004). The easiest books for Chanting with beginner FLs have exact repetition. The next easiest books are those with one simple repetitive sentence pattern. Within native English speaker contexts, the distinction between patterns and exact repetition is often considered irrelevant to the usability of a book. However, within the FL context there is a stark difference between the usability of a book with exact repetition as compared with a patterned book. Simply put, some patterned texts which are predictable for native English speakers may be unpredictable for second language learners. One example of this is the ease with which native English speakers predict the words in a rhyming poem or song, even in cases in which the text uses complex sentences and infrequent words in order to create the rhyme. Native speakers bring to this task both active and passive knowledge and skills which beginner TESOL students lack. For beginner FLs the task of predicting rhymes can be impossibly difficult.

A book for use with Chanting is the bilingual book titled *Where are you going? To see my friend!* (Carle & Iwamura, 2003). FLs familiar with the Japanese song find it easy. Its use of highly repetitive phrases gives FLs opportunities for practice. *Dear Daisy get well soon* (Smith, 2000) has similar characteristics although it is shorter in length with fewer repetitions and contains complex sentences. Nevertheless, the complex sentences are not a problem for beginners. They are made easy because the plot structure follows a pattern of numbers and days of the week that are an aide to recall. Also the complex sentences are comprised of exact



repetitions and are split onto different pages, increasing the likelihood of students learning in chunks, and creating a close match of text to illustrations. *Hats, hats, hats* (Morris, 1993) exemplifies books which are basically photographs from around the world. The text consists of simple two word phrases such as, *sun hats, fun hats, work hats, play hats*. *One Gorilla* (Morozumi, 2000) illustrates a predictable topic combined with repetition of cumulative phrases. It is a counting poem that introduces students to the names of ten animals beginning each page with a number (one, two, three...) and ending each page with the phrase *and one gorilla*.

This book provides an example worth noting because it illustrates a dilemma in using authentic language, the positive and problematic aspects of weighing considerations of language amount and language complexity. One of the animals in this book is a bird which is referred to by its Australian name. I and other American teachers did not know how to pronounce this long word. When a book contains a number of difficult terms or syntax it influences the trend in difficulty. However, in this case, it is only one complex word and provides FLs with a language learning opportunity. This salient word gives us an opportunity to model for our students. I used my difficulty with the word to teach them ways of I overcome reticence in saying an unknown word aloud, and taught them to guess from context, and use the unusual as an aide to memory.

### Recitation

*One gorilla* is an example of a book with text compatible not only with a whole class Chanting strategy but also with

the Recitation strategy. A number of children's books consist of rhymed or unrhymed children's poems that can be easily memorized and performed by individual students. When a book consists of one poem, each phrase is often presented on its own illustrated page. *Baseball 1 2 3* (2001) is a counting poem. This book is small in size and cannot be used with a large class. But it is uniquely suited to all age groups because it is illustrated with photographs. The book can be mastered within one listening and speaking lesson. Another equally easy counting book is *Ten Seeds* (Brown, 2001). Each page consists of a single two-word phrase of which one of the words is a number. For example, *One pigeon, Ten seeds, One mouse, Nine seeds, One slug, Eight seeds* and so on. The book *Who are you?* by Blackstone and Harter (1996) is small in size and short enough to be easily memorized. It has the added benefit of working well as Reader's Theater. Although this book has a total of 75 running words, it has only 16 different words since every other sentence is *Who are you?* which is answered by a simple, patterned, rhyming sentence, for example, *I am a cat* and *I am a bat*. Once the students learn the book they can transfer the question to other contexts. Another book which illustrates this same feature at a higher trend in difficulty is *Who said red?* (Serfozo & Narahashi, 1992). It has a repeated question pattern which asks about colored objects. The question can be used as a guessing game with classroom objects. The following excerpts of the text clarify this: *Who said red?* asks a girl of her brother. *You don't mean green? Look, here is green . . . a big frog green, a leaf, a tree, a green bean green.... The yellow is rich as butter, lemonade and daisy yellow, Did you say red? Yes, I said red!*

As a summary, I provide in the Appendix an annotated bibliography of 20 sample books described in this paper. It is meant as a sample of a simple annotated bibliography which addresses some features relevant to selecting books for beginner FLs. The list, unlike the previous narrative descriptions, illustrates the importance of having a quick reference for teachers.

### Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to illustrate the distinction between criteria used to select children's books for teaching FLs and criteria used to select books for native English speakers. Relevant criteria for selecting books to teach oral English to beginner FLs concentrates around features of comprehensible language, topics, and styles. Teachers need books with styles that match requirements of TESOL strategies. Sample children's books were described to illustrate the linguistic requirements of TPR, Reenactment, Reader's Theater, Chanting, and Recitation. The idea was to find books meeting the requirements of each strategy in order to use a book with a minimum of adaptations.

There are many questions yet to be answered since this subject covers specialized studies in several different fields such as, beginning reading, teaching English as a second language, teaching in the FL context, and applied linguistics. Various scholars have published the information FL teachers want in scattered journals which a teacher cannot access without the commitment of time. A teacher who lacks the time or inclination to produce adapted materials will also not have time to find comprehensible and usable books. Further study is needed to produce easy access to relatively

simple formulas and comprehensive TESOL annotated bibliographies of books for different levels.

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### Appendix: Children's book list

The following is an annotated list of beginner children's books for beginner TESOL. The books are listed alphabetically by title, then author and date, publisher, trend in difficulty stage, anecdotes and finally references to a compatible TESOL strategy.

- Baseball 1 2 3* (2001) Dorling Kindersely. Stage one. A small counting book illustrated with photographs. Recitation.
- The Carrot seed* (Kraus, R., 1988) Harper Collins. Stage two. Characters are people. Reader's Theater.
- A cat and a dog* (Masarel, C., & Kolar, B., 2001) Cheshire Studio Books. Stage three. Characters are animals. Reader's Theater.
- Clifford makes a friend* (Bridwell, N., 2000) Scholastic. Stage one. About a boy and his dog. TPR.
- Curious kittens* (Volkman, R., 2001) Random House Children's Books. Stage three. A small book about cats illustrated with photographs. Reader's Theater.

- JALT 2005 SHIZUOKA — Sharing Our Stories**
- Dear Daisy, get well soon* (Smith, M., 2000) Crown Publishers. Stage three. Characters are children and stuffed animals. Includes numbers, days of the week and a sample get well wish. Chanting.
- From head to toe* (Carle, E., 1999) Harper Trophy. Stage two. Repetitive dialogue between zoo animals and a boy. TPR, Chanting, Reader's Theater.
- A Happy day* (Krauss, R., 1949) Scholastic. Stage two. Repetitive story about animals. Reenactment.
- Hats, hats, hats* (Morris, A., 1993) Harper Trophy. Stage two. One of a series of books by this author with international photographs. Chanting. Recitation.
- Is that Josie?* (Narahashi, K., 1994) Margaret K. McElderry Books. Stage three. About a young child. TPR.
- Just like you and me* (Miller, D., 2001) Dial Books. Stage four. Each animal behavior is compared to one that is just like you and me. Reenactment. Chanting.
- Mama cat has three kittens* (Fleming, D., 1998) Henry Holt and Company. Stage three. The characters are cats. Reenactment. TPR.
- One gorilla* (Morozumi, A., 1993) Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. Stage two. A cumulative counting poem about Australian animals. Chanting. Recitation.
- Squirrel is hungry* (Kitamura, S., 1996) Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Stage two. A small board book about wild animals. Reenactment. Reader's Theater.
- Ten seeds* (Brown, R., 2001) Alfred Knopf. Stage one. Counting book about a garden planted by children. Recitation.
- What's cookin'?* (Coffelt, N., 2003) Chronicle Books. Stage four. Cumulative counting story about baking a cake. Reenactment.
- When the elephant walks* (Kasza, K., 2004) J.P. Putnam and Sons. Stage two. Cumulative silly story about animals. Reenactment.
- Where are you going? To see my friend*, (Carle, E., & Iwamura, K., 2003) Orchard Books. A highly repetitive song presented bilingually about animals. Chanting. Sing.
- Who are you?* (Blackstone, S., & Harter, D., 1996) Barefoot Books. Stage one. Highly repetitive question and answer poem. Chanting. Reader's Theater. Recitation.
- Who said red?* (Serfozo, M., & Narahashi, K., 1992) Aladdin Books. Stage three. A child searches for a red kite. Characters are children. Reader's Theater.