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# Preface

**W**riting this book reminded me of my first piano lessons. I was a true beginner. My teacher, Mr. Bader, began with simple tunes requiring only the use of my right hand. Gradually, and thankfully, he incorporated the left hand and an ever-expanding repertoire of notes. I use a similar graduated approach when teaching English to beginner *English language learners* (ELLs). I begin with simple picture books that optimize language learning. As ELLs progress, I incorporate books that require increased amounts of English communicative competency. This graduated approach improves the pace of their English development.

Picture books convey meaning through visual media just as much as through text (Benedict & Carlisle, 1992; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). Their visuals are more than just the illustrations accompanying text. They have a variety of graphic elements, such as special fonts, graphic organizers, and illustrated glossaries.

Picture books also convey meaning socially. This is sometimes the result of spontaneous sharing when a book is read aloud. It is often the result of purposely embedded interactive elements, such as flaps for readers to lift or questions for them to answer. Visual images and verbal text are static; the pictures and text do not change. In comparison, socially mediated meaning is fluid, because it reflects the participants and situation. Authors and illustrators creatively exploit distinct elements in all three media (Galda, Cullihan, & Sipe, 2010; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Sipe, 2008). Taken as a whole, picture books are a multidimensional medium that is a rich resource for a broad range of instructional situations.

It is true that many picture books assume a young audience of native speakers of English. It is easy to find books for this audience and less so for other types of students. However, it is also true that there are a good number of picture books that appeal to readers of all ages, levels of artistic sophistication, background languages, and ranges of reading abilities (Anstey, 2002; Hall, 2007; Lott, 2001; Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005). There are simply lots of books covering an array of subjects and styles, making it possible to

accommodate each student across K–12 curriculum areas. Teachers in search of the right book for a particular class need only consult one of the many resources available, such as the annotated book lists with information about reading levels or curriculum connections.

The types of books used with ELLs have features compatible with the students' linguistic abilities. Picture books with the following qualities are particularly well suited to second language instruction: universal themes, easy-to-access sparse text, clarifying illustrations, and formats associated with language-learning activities. For example, a repetitive format lends itself to oral fluency practice. Book lists for ELLs categorize picture books using standard descriptions of *English language proficiency* (ELP). These standards divide the ELP continuum into broadly defined levels for the purpose of placing ELLs into a program. This way the needs of ELLs in different levels are accommodated with appropriately differentiated instructional content, teaching strategies, and materials.

However, within the beginner level there is a wide range of abilities. The earliest beginner can access English only when provided with a maximum of scaffolds to meaning. Typically, language teachers help these students by using a maximum of pictures, gestures, and objects. With later beginners, they use fewer scaffolds. Picture books listed as being at a beginner level range in the amount of scaffolds they contain. Thus, a book found on a list may be just right for the later-stage beginner and yet overwhelm the earliest-stage student. Even among the earliest beginners, the need for books with embedded scaffolds differs, because they come to the task with a wide range of characteristics, such as their first language, age, and educational background.

We need lists of books that help identify a book's usefulness for teaching different types of beginner ELLs. Few picture book lists contain this type of detail about a book's linguistic and nonlinguistic scaffolds. Few provide specific information about the topic, text, illustrations, and formats for matching books to particular types of beginning ELLs. One of the reasons for this lack of detail is probably that situational variables are complex and difficult to codify.

Picture books are experienced and read in many ways. Teachers adapt their reading to the situation and students, and in doing so significantly reduce a book's difficulty. For example, a wordless picture book in one situation is a barrier to learning English, because there is no written text for ELLs to use as a model. In another situation, an English-speaking teacher finds this same book ideal, because it requires students only to use the oral language they know, rather than being challenged by language beyond their ability. In this example, the utility of the same book is low in one situation and high in the other. Even though these types of

situational variables are complex and flexible, they are worth including on book lists for beginner ELLs.

We can start the process by selecting picture books based on the principles of *communicative language teaching* (CLT). These are grounded in second language learning and acquisition research.<sup>1</sup> We use these to select materials that reflect the teaching of communicative competence in English (Canale, 1983; Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006). Communicative competency requires ELLs to develop linguistic, discourse, strategic, and socio-cultural abilities. It applies to our goal of developing the ELLs' ability to know what, when, where, and how to use language. CLT principles apply to beginning instruction in a picture book context. They are a springboard for developing English ability in other contexts.

I refer to picture books that are compatible with teaching ELL beginners as books with *tellability*.<sup>2</sup> This term helps focus attention on our goal of teaching ELLs *communicative competency*, a broader ability than just reading or linguistic skills. There are enormous benefits to using books with tellability. Finding these books requires categorizing beginner books into narrower ranges of ELP within the broadly defined beginner level. It also requires weaving together several criteria. I find books with tellability by applying a few steps.

Basically, I look for books that favor language development through scaffolds, themes, language difficulty, and format. As you read this book, you will recognize standard criteria for selecting books, such as using concrete topics and repetitive language. However, you will also come across some criteria that will be new to you, such as using book features compatible with specific CLT strategies.

## CRITERIA FOR PICTURE BOOK SELECTION

Beginner ELLs are overwhelmed with the large amounts of unfamiliar language, themes, and formats contained in many picture books. The written text is "too dense a linguistic package for language learning purposes" (Rost, 2006, p. 51). Even a book with few words can be confusing to an ELL, because these words are sophisticated and abstract and are presented in complex syntactic structures. The book should contain scaffolds promoting English development (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 2009). I use the following four overarching categories to find picture books with tellability:

1. **Communicative Language Teaching:** My book selection is grounded in the basic principles governing the teaching of a second language (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Ellis, 2008; Lado, 1988; Long, 1990a; Nation, 2001).

Nation sums up these four strands of a balanced CLT program as meaningful comprehensible input, expressive output, language-focused learning, and fluency.

2. **Topic:** I select books thematically. Themes accelerate language-learning by providing repetition of words and structures and build background knowledge to ease ELLs into participation (Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Rost, 2006). The themes shown below are popular ones in picture books with sparse text. For each theme, there are at least a dozen sparse-text books that are appropriate for school-aged ELLs. These themes are:

- **Animals.** There are so many picture books about animals that it is possible to create subthemes, such as butterflies, farm animals, tiny animals, and pets. An overwhelming majority of books about pets are about cats and dogs. The tiny animal subtheme includes bugs, insects, spiders, worms, and any small animals, as most picture books do not use scientific classifications.
- **Concepts.** There are many picture books about basic concepts taught to beginner ELLs, such as the names of letters, items of clothing, and colors.
- **Crafts and art.**
- **Food.**
- **Fiction and language arts.**
- **Friendship.** I include in this theme animal allegories about cooperation, tolerance, and friendships.
- **Humor.**
- **Mathematics.** An overwhelming number of picture books are about the subtheme of counting and numbers. Other subthemes include measurement and shapes.
- **Music.** This theme includes folklore and songs.
- **People.** This theme includes books about celebrations in the United States and around the world. A good number of the people-themed books are about families and are annotated as such.
- **Science.** This theme includes books about nature, plants, and space.
- **Social studies.** This theme includes geography, biography, autobiography, and culture.
- **Time.** Included in this theme are books about the weather, seasons, days of the week, and months.
- **Transportation.** This theme includes books dealing with vehicles and travel.

3. **Language Difficulty:** I select books within the beginner ELP level. Most of these books can be further categorized into four stages of beginner

difficulty. However, some types of picture books are not easy to place into one of these four stages. When it is impractical to categorize a book into one of the four stages, I label it according to its format. These format categories are *poem*, *song*, *multistage*, *wordless*, and *picture dictionary*.

**4. Communicative Language Teaching Strategies:** I list books by their compatibility with a CLT strategy. For example, a book that features active verbs is easy to use with total physical response (TPR). The CLT strategies I selected represent a balance of comprehension, expression, language-focused learning, and fluency and are compatible with features commonly found in sparse-text picture books. The 12 CLT strategies are as follows:

- Chanting and singing. Books for expressive language development and fluency practice, such as texts with a singsong repetitive style and texts that are short enough to be reread. Books for singing require lyrics and musical scores or audio recordings.
- Compare and contrast. Books with parallel information, versions in different languages, or comparable features for graphing the text.
- Graphics. Books with graphic items like maps, matrixes, diagrams, and other graphic presentations of concepts for language-focused text graphing.
- Guessing games. Concept books with question-and-answer formats or information gaps for inquiring, identifying, describing, and analyzing ideas.
- Language experience approach (LEA). Project-based books for teaching the language of project directives, procedures, recipes, and crafts.
- Model-based writing. Books containing literary devices or templates for guiding written expression, such as books written as a diary or letter.
- Reader's theater. Books with text to read aloud for improving fluency, such as oral-style text, first person accounts, and dialogue.
- Realia. Stories for teaching comprehension that contain salient objects or embedded textures. *Realia* is the CLT term for objects, artifacts, and models.
- Recitation. Books that each contain a single poem that students can recite to improve oral fluency and interpretation.
- Retelling. Books with transparently written or illustrated sequential stories for teaching expression, paraphrasing, and summarizing.
- TPR and reenactment. Books with action verbs for teaching comprehension for TPR, and books with actionable scenes for reenactment.
- Visualizing. Books teaching vocabulary with illustrations, such as semantically organized picture dictionaries, and concept books.

The organization of this book corresponds with these four criteria: CLT principles, topic, language difficulty, and CLT strategies as described above.

## CONTENT

Chapter 1 introduces the first step in selecting books with tellability, that is, books that are compatible with the basic principles of a balanced CLT program. Picture books must have features compatible with oral and written comprehension, as well as expression, language-focused learning, and fluency. As with all the chapters, the book examples in this chapter revolve around a theme. The theme for the book examples in this chapter is butterflies.

Chapter 2 considers the interplay of content and language in selecting books that will be a bridge between beginner ELP and academic English. Basically, books with the right topics for beginners are about concrete concepts and themes, which are useful for vocabulary as well as other aspects of language learning. In addition, they must be interesting to school-aged ELLs. The books cited in this chapter are content oriented and include animals and topics related to science, social studies, mathematics, and language arts.

Chapter 3 addresses beginner language difficulty. Beginner ELLs' perception of their ability to successfully express themselves in English changes when books match their ELP. Therefore, it is important for their success to divide the broad level of beginner ELP into stages along the beginner ELP level continuum. The four stages described in this chapter were determined by examining the interplay between the amount of language in the book and its complexity. The first stage includes the easiest books. They are short and have simple language, while books for the fourth stage are longer and more complex. In between are books with different interplays of amount and complexity. The theme of the sample books in Chapter 3 is plants.

Chapter 4 describes informal assessments used to find the right books for each ELL stage of beginning. Within the context of teaching with a picture book, the assessments address questions about the ELL's English oral and written abilities. The information collected with these assessments allows the teacher to select the right book for ELLs. Continuous assessment during book-based teaching is essential, because beginners differ widely in the pace at which they develop oral and written skills. Chapter 4 book examples are about transportation.

Chapter 5 describes the last essential step in the process of finding books with *tellability*, matching books to CLT strategies. The twelve CLT strategies mentioned earlier in the preface are each linked to a type of book

format. The strategies covered have a balance of skills and address communicative competencies. The theme of books cited is tiny animals.

The appendix includes three units with four lesson plans each and a book list for every lesson plan. These book lists are associated with the units' themes: cats, food, and people. Each lesson presents an anchor book, the focus CLT strategy, and other CLT strategies to focus on comprehension, expression, language-focused learning, and fluency. The first unit on cats includes the strategies TPR, retelling, guessing games, and reader's theater. The second on food includes realia, LEA, compare and contrast, and chanting and singing. The third is about people and uses visualizing, model-based writing, graphics, and recitation.

Annotated book lists in the appendix and at the end of each chapter address eight themes and the 12 CLT strategies. Additional books on other topics are listed on the book's web page at <http://www.corwin.com/picturebooks4ells>. I hope these lists reduce the time you spend searching for the right books for your ELL students.

Finally, although analyzing the particular features of picture books helps with lesson planning, remember that by dissecting the content, graphics, and nuances in the pages of a book, no one ever gathered in the beauty of experiencing it with another person.

## NOTES

1. I prefer using the phrase *communicative language teaching* (CLT) to others, such as *teaching English to speakers of other languages* (TESOL), because of my focus on teaching communicative competency.

2. My use of *tellability* also derives from storytelling and narrative analysis, where it refers to features that make a story worth telling independent from its text. It considers the narrator's ability to raise the interest of, interact with, and adapt to a given audience (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005; Labov, 1972). My tellability focus is on the use of multiple genre picture books as prompts for teacher instructional interactions with beginning ELLs.