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## Learner Generated Materials Every Day

by Janet Isserlis

This article briefly describes a process of working with adult ESOL literacy learners in order to generate reading and writing material which is meaningful to them. I view the production and use of learner generated material as a first and critical step in the process through which adults become independent users of print. I draw on my experience working with learners in the Literacy/ESOL Program at the International Institute of Rhode Island. Almost every ESOL literacy class is a multileveled gathering of adults of different backgrounds, with varying degrees of prior exposure to and experience in schools. In order to assess learners' abilities initially--and later in an on-going fashion--I rely on writing they generate and subsequently read. The basic process consists of: eliciting information for a story from one or more learners; encoding that information on a blackboard or newsprint pad; having learners read that story immediately after it has been written. This process accounts for a good half of a two-hour classroom period. The following day, the story is given to the learners--this time in typed form, with the addition of a modified cloze exercise immediately following the story as well as sentences pertaining to the story that are either true or false (yes/no/maybe). Alternatively, open-ended questions asking learners to relate their own experience to the topic at hand might appear after the typed story, followed by several blank lines on which the learners write their responses. Regardless of the extension activity following the typed story, interacting with the typed story and its follow-up pieces generally occupies the first half of most classes. The second half is often spent in generating a new story.

### Generating Learners' Stories

This process of generating and reading learners' stories is not the only activity that occurs in the classes, but is one which occurs with great regularity and is favored by learners, I think, for the following reasons:

*The great predictability of reading something which is familiar in content and contains words read previously is reassuring to learners for whom the reading process is still challenging on the sentence (and sometimes the word) level.*

*The cloze exercise allows those learners who may not be able to read per se the opportunity to complete a task, as well as to gain extra practice with high frequency words.*

*The sentences following the story contain both familiar and new words, and therefore help learners work towards bridging the gaps between socially constructed, shared reading and writing and that new information which they each encounter individually as they read the worksheet.*

*More advanced learners generally arrive at the yes/no/maybe sentences while their less advanced classmates are still working on the cloze exercise. These learners struggle with new words, ask each other, ask me for assistance, and generally find something to challenge themselves while the others are still working on more basic tasks.*

When everyone has completed the cloze work, we all read the yes/no/maybe sentences together and talk about why we said yes or no to a particular sentence. For example, following a story about a single man living with his brother, a yes/no sentence might be "Tony lives with his sister." Learners may have some context through which to decipher sister (they know there's a brother involved); they also need to remember and understand what the story said. Additionally, because every class is a multilevel class, learners are encouraged to help each other whenever an appropriate opportunity arises. We talk about what "help" might mean. Telling someone to circle yes or circle no may not be helpful; discussing why an answer is circled might be considered more helpful and useful in the long run.

## An Ongoing Question

Although whole language practitioners eschew comprehension questions, I find that this process of working with quasi-higher order thinking is an important part of helping learners connect what they know (the story they helped create) with the print they read the following day, and further to connect that information (the story) to some scrutiny (Is he living with his sister? Did we ask him if he had a sister?). One of the many ongoing questions in my own mind is how well we can help learners find the strategies they need to become independent users of print. I find that at the beginning level, this regular use of learner generated material is one critical step facilitating that process.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Today is \_\_\_\_\_. Yesterday was \_\_\_\_\_.

Tomorrow will be \_\_\_\_\_.

.....  
 Yesterday, Tony came to visit our class.

We wrote about Tony. We talked to Tony.

Teresa wrote about Tony on the blackboard.

.....  
 His name is Tony.

He lives in Warren. He is single.

He lives in Warren with his family.

He has 1 brother.

He works at a department store.

He came to watch our class.

.....  
 His \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_.

He \_\_\_\_\_ in Warren. He is \_\_\_\_\_.

He lives in \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_ family.

He has 1 \_\_\_\_\_.

He works at a \_\_\_\_\_ store.

He \_\_\_\_\_ to our \_\_\_\_\_.

.....

Tony is a man.	yes	no
Tony lives in Providence.	yes	no
Tony lives with his wife.	yes	no
Tony is married.	yes	no
Tony is single	yes	no
Tony has a brother.	yes	no
Tony has a sister.	yes	no
Tony works at a department store.	yes	no
Tony works at Jordan Marsh.	yes	no