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AUTHOR Lems, Kristin
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ABSTRACT

The Whole Language (WL) approach is sweeping across classrooms in the United States, bringing with it motivating and innovative ways to teach language arts skills to primary school children. With its emphasis on individual discovery, language as a social activity, and diverse "literacy events," the approach employs many techniques that are used in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms every day without being called "whole language" activities, while also introducing some less familiar activities of value. In this paper, an explanation is given of the basic principles and practices of the WL approach. It also explores some possible applications of whole language practices to ESL and EFL classrooms, and shares a sampling of some whole language activities that have been successfully transplanted to the ESL classroom. Topics covered include the natural approach, integration of language arts, decoding strategies, immersion in literacy events, reading materials, classroom activities, individual learning styles, collaborative learning, student role, teacher role, assessment and adult education. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/CK)

Whole Language and the ESL/EFL Classroom

by Kristin Lems

The Whole Language approach is sweeping across classrooms in the United States, bringing with it motivating and innovative ways to teach language arts skills to primary school children. With its emphasis on individual discovery, language as a social activity, and diverse "literacy events," it employs many techniques that are used in ESL and EFL classrooms every day without being calling "whole language" activities, while also introducing some less familiar activities of value. In this article, I will explain the basic principles and practices of the Whole Language (WL) approach, explore some possible applications of whole language practices to ESL and EFL classrooms, and then share a sampling of some whole language activities that have been successfully transplanted to the ESL classroom.

WL: L1 Version of the Natural Approach

Whole Language became organized as an approach in the 1980's, mainly under the leadership of Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, in response to the "skill-based" basal readers and phonics courses that were being used to teach reading and writing in many primary schools. It was based on new insights about reading and constructing meaning that had emerged in recent years (Goodman, 1986). In the United States at this time, WL is most likely to be found in the early primary school classroom, to "cross the threshold" into reading and writing for the first time.

In many ways, WL in the field of first language instruction

mirrors "the Natural Approach" (Krashen and Terrell) in second language instruction. The two approaches grew up in parallel, in the fields of education and linguistics, respectively, and share the belief that the communication of meaning is the necessary point of departure for any successful language activity. Both approaches stress that language is a social activity and is best learned ("acquired" in Krashen's terminology) when the motivation is generated by the student's interest in the topic or the task, not imposed by a teacher. The teacher's job is to create a climate where this natural motivation may flourish, and gently guide the progress of the learners, while offering encouragement and appropriate models of language use (Goodman, Goodman, and Bridges 1991). Further, WL posits that literacy arises when oral skills already present in the native speaker are extended into the print medium in an integrated way.

Here are some basic principles of WL, with examples given of how they are used in first language (L1) primary school classrooms:

1. **The language arts (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking) are integrated and should not be taught or experienced in isolation. Language is experienced and learned in its whole form.**

Instead of dividing class time into "spelling," "vocabulary," or "understanding details" of a reading, for example, class time is spent on projects in which students are using all the components in free alternation, without pulling them out of context, except for brief moments of explanation by the teacher. This might involve the teacher reading books aloud, students

reading their stories aloud to others, or thinking through an idea together.

2. Language is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

Instead of introducing an isolated item out of context and then showing its application in a variety of contexts, WL deploys decoding strategies right away to tackle content areas. For example, children might start a unit on volcanoes early in the first grade, drawing pictures and writing simple sentences about volcanoes, so that language is being learned unselfconsciously, through the study of a content area. The motivation that emerges from an interesting topic will bring about the needed skill acquisition, naturally (Duffy).

3. Students are immersed in literacy events.

A WL classroom will be full of opportunities to read and write, including such formats as: letter boxes for students to send each other notes and letters, a thematic "sentence of the day" by the door which children read when they arrive, Dialog Journals (in which a running dialog, in writing, takes place between teacher and students or between children and parents, containing no editing or correction by the experienced writer), lyrics to a song on big, laminated boards, regular visits to the library and checking out books chosen by the students, daily reading aloud, group story writing and illustrating, browsing through a wide array of books in the classroom for pleasure reading, etc. Students see right away that reading and writing are important parts of the negotiating systems that allow them to receive and transmit meanings to people.

4. Students are surrounded by authentic print.

WL is consciously non-elitist in its choice of reading materials: a medicine bottle prescription, road map, or letter from a pen pal are as valuable as sources of literacy as a story, and may be more valuable than a textbook. If a story book is used, it is because the stories themselves are exciting and stimulating for the children, not because they teach a certain group of skills or lexicon. Texts are not simplified or edited (although they may be carefully chosen for a certain general level) because this strips the texts of some of the redundancy and cohesiveness that formed their integrity to begin with. Most importantly, students are given generous amounts of free time to do Sustained Silent Reading and Sustained Silent Writing and to use print materials in diverse ways. Printed material is incorporated into the daily routine at all levels.

5. Students learn by doing, as active engagement produces results. Students learn to read by reading, and learn to write by reading and writing. "I do, and I understand."

A glimpse into a WL classroom might show children reading curled up in a corner of the room, or in pairs or small groups in almost any area of the classroom. They might be labeling the pets' cages, listening to a song on headphones while they read along with its lyrics, taking turns reading their original stories out loud, or many other activities. They are never seated stiffly in desks listening to a teacher talk. In one of its more controversial features, WL also encourages "invented spelling" as children learn to write, instead of training the children in the correct spelling

of words. WL practitioners believe that the focus should be on content, not form, and students must use their own knowledge, however limited, to write, rather than constantly stopping to be corrected by a teacher.

6. **Teachers respect and value each student's unique background, experience and learning style.**

The uniqueness of each learner is appreciated and affirmed in the classroom, and the teacher tries to facilitate optimal conditions for each student to learn. Teacher control is minimal, unless a student disrupts other students' concentration. Student achievements, serendipitous learning outside the classroom, and other personal features are welcomed as topics of writing, speaking, and research. Regular class time is devoted to giving the students a chance to reveal interesting things about themselves, through "class helpers," "show and tell," and assigning children leadership duties on a rotating basis.

7. **Learning is a collaborative activity.**

Quite the contrary to ability grouping, students are intentionally placed in mixed ability groups, or mixed across age levels, to engage in common projects. Visitation between classes at a school using WL is common, with the older students serving as mentors to the younger ones. Working together allows children to express their knowledge, ask and answer questions together, develop leadership, and problem-solve. It exposes them to the thinking processes of other learners which increases their cognitive mapping strategies.

8. **Students take responsibility for their own learning while teachers facilitate the learning process.**

A variety of activities is available, and children can choose freely from them at certain times during every day. Learning is not something that happens to the children, but is initiated by them and supported by the teacher. For example, if students express a desire one day to learn about the sun and moon, the WL teacher may follow their lead and help build a learning unit, even if it isn't in the teacher's original plans.

9. **Assessment is authentic and appropriate.**

Students are not prevented from moving to new, unfamiliar tasks because they have not passed proficiency tests. Learning is seen as a developing activity, not an attainment of error-free skills. Comprehension may be demonstrated in a variety of ways, including oral reports, writing, or group projects. Often, a portfolio folder of sample works by the child is sent home at the end of the year in lieu of a report card.

Uses and Limitations of WL in Adult Education and ESL

WL is being tried in settings with older children and adults with measurable success. In particular, some L1 adult literacy classes are using WL practices (Kazamek, 1989) because they help build self esteem and a positive attitude toward learning, which are important prerequisites for adult learning. Reading stories aloud (Smallwood, 1993), Sustained Silent Reading, Dialog Journals, and group projects are some of the common WL techniques used in adult education.

Other aspects of WL are less likely to work in the adult

classroom without careful adaptation, due to the attitudes many adults carry about how a classroom "should look." Some adults feel uncomfortable in a class with minimal teacher supervision and minimal correction - at least at the beginning of the course. They want to learn "the rules," want the teacher to be in charge, and expect efficient use of their limited time. Sustained Silent Reading, Dialog Journals and other projects that involve browsing through materials may make them feel that the teacher is wasting their time. It is hard to convince adults who are not WL "believers" that they will develop their skills further by **actively using** the language, however imperfectly, with strategic intervention by the teacher, than by passively copying rules or spelling lists to the neglect of content (Krashen, 1981).

When applied to second language (L2) students, WL presents an additional serious problem. WL assumes that oral fluency in a native language (speaking and listening) can be transfered into the print medium (reading and writing) through various activities. But what do we do when there is no oral language base to draw upon? In L2 classes, there is no natural transfer from oral to written language, but rather from oral knowledge in L1 (and sometimes written, depending on literacy level) to oral **and** written skills in the target language. That means that the L2 classroom must create a "speech rich" environment in L2 in addition to a "print rich" environment, so that new oral language can also be modeled in L2. Also, because of the complex organization of different languages, special care must be taken to highlight formal differences in the oral and written systems of the two languages, while still keeping

a relaxed environment.

When applied to the English as a Foreign Language classroom, the WL challenge is even more complex. The WL assumption that students **can** immerse themselves in a print rich environment may not be realistic, or true. EFL teachers may have very limited access to English language materials, obviating the WL mandate to "surround students with authentic print." In some cases, the English teachers themselves are unable to find a print rich English language environment! Also, when materials are scarce and hard to replenish, security becomes a real problem. No one wants to display irreplaceable materials around the classroom that are going to disappear in the first week.

Furthermore, EFL classrooms do not have the important "speech rich" environment available to ESL classrooms (classes located in an English-speaking country). The students may be learning with a nonnative speaker of English who has never spoken English with a native speaker. Creating opportunities for immersion in - or even exposure to - written and spoken English can be quite a daunting task in such situations.

Finally, WL may be unsuitable for ESL or EFL students who are highly educated in their first language, and thus do not need the WL literacy immersion experience to cross the threshold into reading and writing. They are already the successful products of literacy "immersion" in their native language. Therefore, many WL classroom techniques may not offer the best use of these students' time, either.

Valid WL Applications to ESL and EFL

With all the above warnings taken into account, there are still many ways that WL ideas can be used successfully in the ESL or EFL classroom. I have made a chart below of the basic tenets I described earlier, naming applicable WL activities that work (or might work) well in an adult (or young adult) L2 classroom.

Some Useful WL Activities for L2 adults:

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1. **INTEGRATING THE LANGUAGE ARTS**

Almost any activity can involve student writing and thus, reading back the writing to others, which in turn involves speaking and listening. Reading original stories to one's classmates, creating a group story, writing a story from pictures, discussing a story the group has just written or read....the combinations are endless. The principle is to get all the skills in operation on a regular basis.

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2. **LANGUAGE AS MEANS TO AN END**

Free writing from the very beginning emboldens learners to take risks with new words and language; tolerating misspellings from phonemic/graphemic transfer from L1 can establish early on the idea that the content is what counts, not merely the formal elements it is being hung upon.

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3. **IMMERSION IN LITERACY EVENTS**

Dialog journals between the teacher and individual students, or among students (in a single journal kept by the classroom door) work well; or two teachers can set up a class-wide pen pal

exchange with another classroom in the same city or a classroom in another country. Sustained Silent Reading, with a variety of books to choose from and no followup activities, is another way to "push print" in either L1 or L2.

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4. USE OF AUTHENTIC PRINT

Poems, songs, recipes, food wrappers, traffic tickets, TV Guides, content-based L2 materials - all of these have a place in the WL classroom. Adult students can begin early to discern levels of formality and differing ways to approach an audience in writing, among other benefits. There are implications for vocabulary learning, too: a "thematic unit" might be used to organize activities around a central theme of interest to the students, and the resultant vocabulary would be not a random "word list," but clustered around the thematic unit. The hardest part for an EFL teacher may be getting together a collection of these authentic print materials. The best places to start might be the local library, an English speaking resource living in town, USIS or the British Council. Once a teacher has gathered a beginning collection, it will be easier to keep a lookout for new additions. One can put students to work, too, finding English language materials for the growing collection.

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5. KINESTHETICALLY INVOLVED LEARNING

Fantasy acting to develop oral skills and vocabulary is as useful to adults as to children, whether the settings are role plays to master competencies, skits written by the students on open

topics, or excerpts from plays or short stories. Also, blackboard work, presentations, and "how to" demonstrations by students (alone or in a group) give opportunities to teach and learn which involve the whole body. So do field trips.

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6. EACH STUDENT IS IMPORTANT

What primary school students do with "Show and Tell" (taking turns bringing something special from home and telling about it) can also be done with L2 adults, by taking turns bringing a favorite picture, cherished object, or favorite song to share with the class. Don't forget: the students might like the teacher to take a turn, too!

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7. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

"Shared book reading" can be done with the teacher reading aloud from a poem, song, or story, as students follow the line of print in front of them. Students can also read in unison or taking turns in small groups. Pair work and small group work on projects - whether a skit, a library exploration, a demonstration, debate, or whatever, can create positive attitudes toward learning and build leadership.

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8. STUDENTS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

Teachers of adults are more likely to take this skill for granted, but there are still ways to encourage independent learning outside the classroom. Indeed, this factor is critical in EFL teaching, because if students do not expand their own opportunities

to learn English outside the classroom, their English will wither. So a good WL ESL/EFL teacher will help devise projects that get students out discovering English language resources in their own communities. Adult learners especially need to "learn how to learn," so as to continue it throughout life.

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9. ASSESSMENT IS AUTHENTIC

This one is probably hardest of all to implement, because our ESL/EFL classes are usually part of a larger institution which students attend in exchange for grades they can use (or not use!) later on to procure jobs. As soon as a teacher claims students should be exempt from the grading system because it is stifling, someone in another department will claim that the ESOL program, therefore, lacks legitimacy. At least, then, students should be judged for what they can produce in normal conditions, not necessarily testing conditions, which bring out the worst in many learners, especially older adults. Language use can be tested by asking someone to perform a verbal competency in a specific area. Tests can be given to small groups working together, to complete as a group. Take home tests tend to give students more time to reflect and revise and less stressful time pressure. Another interesting idea tried in some U.S. college classes is to have students write a "contract" at the beginning of the term about what they would like to accomplish, and then grade themselves at the end of the term according to how well they fulfilled their own contract. No pressure is put on them to add more or less to the contract; it is based entirely on their own sense of what they can

do and would like to do.

In conclusion, ESL teachers can pride themselves on the fact that many of them have engaged in communicative Whole Language activities already. Perhaps as the WL approach is modified and applied to other areas, the ESL field can contribute additional activities to WL practicioners, and learn from them as well.

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