

Developing Literacy Skills through Collaborative Tasks for Emerging-Proficiency English as Additional Language Learners in Quebec

Caroline Payant and Philippa Bell

Literacy in a first language or in additional languages involves a set of complex cognitive, social, and linguistic skills that develop over time. However, pedagogical materials for low-proficiency English as an additional language (EAL) learners tend to target low-level literacy skills only, such as responding to fact-based questions. Materials that target the development of high-level literacy skills, such as integrating information and reasoning based on inferencing, with these learners are rare, despite these skills being necessary in today's multimodal, technological world. In this article, we argue there is a need to develop high-level literacy skills with low-proficiency EAL learners which, ultimately, are not language-specific. Drawing on theories of additional language learning and task-based language teaching, we created a multi-day literacy task for low-proficiency learners consisting of various activities. For each activity, we provide examples of the materials with which the students worked and examples of authentic student work, which we obtained through a piloting phase.

La littératie dans une langue première ou additionnelle implique un ensemble de compétences cognitives, sociales et linguistiques complexes qui se développent au fil du temps. Cependant, le matériel pédagogique dédié aux apprenants de l'anglais comme langue additionnelle ayant un niveau bas de compétences tend à cibler uniquement les compétences de littératie de bas niveau, telles que les réponses à des questions factuelles. Le matériel qui vise le développement, chez cette catégorie d'apprenants, des compétences de littératie de niveau élevé, telles que l'intégration de l'information sur la base de l'inférence, est rare malgré la nécessité de ces compétences dans le monde multimodal et technologique d'aujourd'hui. Dans cet article, nous soutenons qu'il existe un besoin de développer des compétences en littératie de haut niveau auprès des apprenants de bas niveau de LA, des compétences qui ne sont ultimement pas spécifique à une langue. En nous basant sur les théories d'apprentissage des langues additionnelles et l'enseignement des langues basé sur les tâches, nous avons élaboré une tâche de littératie étalée sur plusieurs jours et formée de

plusieurs activités, s'adressant aux apprenants d'un niveau bas de compétences. Pour chaque activité, nous présentons des exemples du matériel mis à la disposition des apprenants ainsi qu'un échantillon de travaux authentiques d'apprenants ayant réalisé les activités durant une phase pilote.

Keywords: collaborative learning, integrated tasks, literacy tasks, task-based language teaching, young learners

Literacy skills are essential to function in today's global world; however, we continue to have limited knowledge of literacy development among children who are learning multiple languages (Bialystok, 2007; Murphy, 2018). Literacy, originally defined as a set of skills to be learned in school, has traditionally focused primarily on low-level reading skills, namely, decoding and encoding the printed word (Koda, 2005). However, literacy goes far beyond these low-level, cognitive skills as it includes high-level reading skills as well, such as comprehending and producing texts across genres and modalities, and evaluating, comparing, and synthesizing information from sources whose validity differs (Gibbons, 2015; Luke, 2021). Literacy is thus situated within and across cognitive and social contexts of development (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Street, 1984). However, by and large, in classrooms, literacy is still largely conceptualized in terms of low-level skills despite calls for including today's broad notion of literacy in classrooms, even with very young learners (Luke, 2021).

In additional language (AL) classrooms, one effective research-based teaching approach is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which teachers in a variety of AL contexts use to inform their pedagogical choices (Ellis, 2020; Van den Branden, 2016). Various task types and task features have been used and manipulated to understand the development of school-aged learners' English as an additional language (EAL) language skills (Basterrechea & Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2020; Bourgoin & Le Bouthillier, 2021; García Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2019; Hidalgo & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2020); however, this research examines the development of individual language skills (e.g., writing or speaking). Building on the notion that high-level literacy skills are essential for school and societal success, and can be explored with learners of all ages, we developed a multi-day, high-level literacy task using key principles of TBLT for Grade 6 EAL learners living in Quebec.

Using TBLT as a Framework for Developing Literacy Tasks

Before we introduce the key principles of TBLT and cognitive-interactionist perspectives on AL learning (Ellis et al., 2019; Kim, 2015), we briefly describe the context of English education in Quebec, where English is a minority language (Tedick & Lyster, 2020). Across the province, English as a Second Language (the term used by the government) education refers to its learning in schools whose language of instruction is French within compulsory primary and secondary schooling. As English is not the school language, this excludes classrooms focused on teaching the language of instruction for integration into mainstream schooling (e.g., classe d'accueil in Quebec [Gouvernement du Québec, 2022] or English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development Programs in Ontario [Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022]). Furthermore, Quebec's Charte de la langue française (2021) excludes the use of English to teach other

curricular subjects in French-language schools, thus excluding English content-based instruction (e.g., immersion programs).

In primary and secondary education with EAL learners, compulsory education systems strive to develop higher-order literacy skills (e.g., Quebec Education Program). However, very limited research has examined literacy practices within EAL classrooms in Quebec (Payant & Bell, 2022). Considering that learners who continue on to complete higher education will be expected to complete integrated tasks that frequently draw on English texts, even in francophone institutions, we developed a complex literacy task for EAL learners.

TBLT, introduced in the early 1980s, has since developed into an active field of research to document and create learning opportunities for AL learners (Caruso, et al., 2021; Douglas & Kim, 2014; Ellis, 2003, 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Payant & Michaud, 2020). TBLT is a pedagogical approach to AL learning and teaching informed by cognitive-interactionist and socio-constructivist approaches. From both perspectives, input-feedback-output interactions play a central role in AL development (Ellis, 2020; Van den Branden, 2016). Tasks are meaning-oriented, have a measurable communicative goal, focus on real communicative needs, and reflect authentic language input and output opportunities (Ellis, 2020; Long, 2015). During the completion of tasks, learners interact with meaningful, authentic-like input and output, and they also face communication breakdowns and notice gaps in their language repertoire. These interactional modifications support language development (Kim, 2015). From a socio-constructivist perspective, collaborative tasks support the co-construction of knowledge and ideas. Indeed, learners draw on their plurilingual repertoire (e.g., French in the Quebec English AL classrooms and additional home languages) to mediate their thoughts and activities (Payant & Galante, 2022); they engage in metalinguistic activities, namely *linguaging* (Swain & Watanabe, 2012), where they discuss and question their language use. Given the dearth of complex tasks that target high-level literacy skills in classroom settings, we introduce a high-level literacy task, informed by TBLT task ideas appropriate for younger learners (Ellis, 2020), that promotes collaborative interaction that reinforces the co-construction of knowledge and language (question-posing, clarification requests, feedback from teacher and peers) (Ellis, 2020). To the best of our knowledge, these types of tasks have not been created with the goal of developing higher-level literacy skills with younger EAL learners. Therefore, we carefully developed and piloted a complex task-based, literacy task for Grade 6 EAL learners in Quebec.

A Multi-Day, High-Level Literacy Task for Emerging English Language Learners

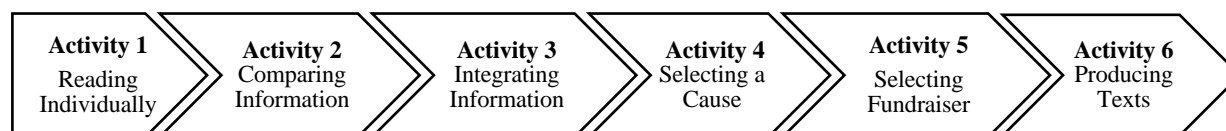
Fundraising Task: A General Overview of the Task and Materials

The communicative goal of the task is for learners to collaboratively plan a fundraiser for one non-profit organization (e.g., Leucan, the SPCA, or Food Banks of Quebec). Each student learns individually about one of these organizations through reading. The readings are short but are meant to be challenging and to introduce academic vocabulary words. Before pooling information in groups of three, due to their emerging proficiency, learners verify their comprehension with another student who has read the same text. Subsequently, learners share information about each organization to reach an integrated understanding of all three texts. Using specific criteria, they then select the organisation for which they will raise funds. These criteria ensure that students use stated and implied information from the texts rather than their beliefs and preferences. Finally, they collaboratively write a newsletter to promote their event based on a template aimed to raise their genre awareness. The sequence of activities is presented in Figure

1.¹ For each activity, or sub-task, we invite teachers to develop pre-tasks and post-tasks to support their learners' academic literacy skill development (for examples, see Ellis, 2003; Payant & Michaud, 2020). Pre-tasks should introduce the topic and the task type and should activate relevant notions but should not "teach large amounts of new language or one particular grammatical structure" (Carless, 2009, p. 52). Rather, reactive focus-on-form is more appropriate during the activities or during the post-task (Ellis et al., 2019).

Figure 1

Activities 1 through 6



Learners and the Task

The task was created for 11- and 12-year-old Quebec students in French-medium schools. The status of English within the community varies across Quebec. Even within Montreal, English is very frequent in the community in certain neighbourhoods and largely nonexistent in others. Quebec students in Grade 6 have received prior EAL instruction of approximately 40 hours per grade. In Grade 6 (Grade 5 in some schools), 15% of EAL learners receive intensive exposure to English (Intensive English [IE] classrooms). These learners spend the equivalent of half a school year in an EAL classroom; the other content areas, taught in French (French, maths, etc.), are thus also taught intensively (Lightbown, 2014). Importantly, due to Quebec's *Charte de la langue française* (2021), EAL classrooms cannot teach other subjects (e.g., maths, ethics and religious culture), as these must be taught in French. Although the pedagogical intentions of the task focused on these learners, it could be used in other contexts to develop high-level literacy skills and provide language development opportunities. Based on their context, teachers may need to adapt the text and provide more or less scaffolding (e.g., pre-teaching words, changing words and structures based on other languages, providing models of more of the handouts). However, as scaffolding and collaborative opportunities are built into the task, learners may not need too much teacher support prior to the task, but teachers should be able to intervene during task completion and during the post-task to respond to students' questions.

Detailed Implementation for Emerging-Proficiency Learners

In this section, we provide a detailed explanation of the task alongside a research-based rationale. We also illustrate with authentic student responses. The use of the task in classrooms has ethics approval, and teacher consent was obtained for the anonymous sharing of the learner productions.

¹ The full (reproducible) materials for the task are available at <https://uqamliteracy.wordpress.com/>. Please contact us to share your experiences with the task.

Activity 1: Learning about an Organization through Reading

Students individually read one of three comparable texts to learn about their organization (see Figure 2), created using authentic information from the organizations' websites (meaningful input). Considering the learners' proficiency, texts are short (between 184 and 212 words), information is presented primarily in bullet form, and French/English cognates are exploited. As this is primarily a literacy task rather than a language task, we did not centralize a specific grammar point or vocabulary. Bearing in mind the scaffolded nature of the overall task, the teacher as resource, and learners' learning strategies (e.g., cognates, dictionaries), the texts are understandable for plurilingual French-speaking learners; however, to support learners and promote plurilingual pedagogies, French versions of the texts are available. Furthermore, it could be important to teach learners translation strategies and cross-linguistic comparisons to exploit their knowledge of French and other languages (Horst et al., 2010; Galante et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Sample Reading

Food Banks of Quebec (*Les Banques alimentaires du Québec*)

Food Banks of Quebec was established in 1988 to ensure that everyone in Quebec has sufficient, nutritious food to live the best life they can.

How Does Food Banks of Quebec Achieve this Goal?

- By collecting donations of food and money
- By distributing food to community organizations across Quebec
- By providing food baskets, meals and snacks to people in need

Why May People Experience Food Insecurity?

- They are in debt
- They have recently lost their job
- They have retired
- They are newcomers to Quebec
- They are homeless
- They have health concerns (mental or physical disabilities)

Impact on the Community

- In 2017 Quebecers in need received over 1 million meals, over 380 000 food baskets and nearly 500 000 snacks
- Every month, food is distributed to over 400 000 Quebecers, including 150 000 children
- Food Banks of Quebec has 19 food banks and is associated with 13 more organizations that offer similar services. Together, these banks provide food to nearly 1200 local organizations

Other Important Information

- Food insecurity reaches its peak during natural or manmade disasters
- Food insecurity has a **long-term impact on a child's life chances**

Students also receive a handout (see Figure 3) to take notes, answer fact-based and inference-based questions, and individually write a short summary of their organization’s mission.

Figure 3

Completed Handout 1 to Accompany Students during Activities 1, 2, and 3

Learning about your Cause	Write 1 or 2 sentences to summarize the mission and 2 reasons to fund this cause.
<p>Read your text and answer these questions carefully. Include important details because you will need to share these details with your partner in activity 2.</p>	
<p>Name of your organization: <u>SPCA Montréal</u></p>	
<p>1. Why does this organization exist? (general issue) For help cat, dog, bird and others and for give them to a other family. For help pet when they are ignored, neglected ect.</p>	<p>Summary of the mission: The mission is advocating for the humane treatment of animals commercially and domestically, sterilizing animals to avoid over population issues.</p>
<p>2. Who uses this service? The pets in difficulty or people to want to buy a pet(s). People they have witnessed animal abuse.</p>	<p>By rescuing and protecting animals from neglect, abuse and exploitation, finding food and adopters for lost and abandoned socialized animals.</p>
<p>3. The text has reasons people may need this service. Name THREE that you find important?</p>	<p>Post discussion notes: 1-What did you learn from your partner? Leucan help children when they have cancer, leucan help children to play game. Food Bank, of Québec give money to the people they can't buy food. 2- Make changes to your summary. Nothing</p>
<p>1. They want to adopt a pet. 2. They want to abandon a pet. 3. They have witnessed animal abuse.</p>	<p>2 reasons to fund this cause: 1. Because to many people abuse the pets 2. Because to many people abandon their pets.</p>
<p>4. What is ONE more reason, not written in the text, that people may need this service? 1. A pet is dangerous for the people in the city.</p>	
<p>5. Does the organization have an impact at the level of the city, the province, or Canada? Explain your response. Only in Montréal because in the name of this organization and in the text they said it's in Montréal.</p>	
<p>6. Is your cause particularly in need of money right now? Why or why not? Yes because with the Covid-19, lot of people buy pet and after abandon it.</p>	

Activity 2: Comparing Information to Become a Student-Expert

Two students who have read the same text discuss their reading comprehension, using their reading notes, to arrive at a deeper and/or more fluent understanding of their text. It is important to encourage oral interaction, moving beyond reading and copying the notes. As they learn new information, students can complement and revise their notes.

Explanation

The individual reading comprehension activity, which may be slightly beyond the learners’ zone of proximal development in some contexts, is followed by this collaborative speaking activity, which allows students to compare, validate, and expand their comprehension of the text. This step is critical, as it creates a safe space for students to explore their comprehension and offers an opportunity to repeat working with the language input through a different mode of communication (written input to oral output). This type of repetition positively supports learners’ language experiences (Ellis et al., 2019), and it could be interesting

to repeat it at the start of the next class. After completing this activity, they are considered to be the student-experts of their own organization.

Activity 3: Integrating Information and Developing Expertise

For this oral activity, triads are created with one student-expert from each organization. They take turns sharing information noted on Student Handout 1 (see Figure 3) within their new group. By the end of this step, each student has detailed information about each organization.

Explanation

At the start of this activity, each student-expert has information about either Leucan, the SPCA, or Food Banks of Quebec. To complete the activity, they pool their information. This information-gap task, commonly used in TBLT, creates opportunities for learners to produce output, which is the source of input for their peers (Ellis, 2020). As they are communicating for meaning, communicative breakdowns may occur and students may ask clarification questions, ask for repetition, and discuss specific lexical items, which boosts AL development (Kim, 2015). An added benefit is that students repeat their information (this time to students who have not read the same text), and through repeated output, research has shown benefits for EAL learners (Hidalgo & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2020; Shintani, 2018). During the implementation of this task, there was no requirement to produce output about the two new organizations (no note-taking activity). However, in later iterations of the materials, we included a handout to help structure this activity. This additional language practice can help learners organize the new information and demonstrate their comprehension through written output.

Activity 4: Ranking to Select an Organization

The aim of this ranking task is to develop students' ability to make decisions based on information and to justify choices based on reasoned arguments (see Figure 4 for task instructions and sample student responses).

Explanation

Students have previously shared fact-based information orally; however, they were not asked to share their opinions about the importance of these organizations. Sharing informed opinions by contrasting and evaluating information is a critical component of literacy development.

During step 1 of Activity 4, students reflect on which organization is most important by critically evaluating all the information based on fixed criteria (e.g., which organization has the widest reach, needs money now, is likely to obtain funds?). They are asked to compare each organization in a systematic way by responding to each question provided in the handout under step 1 (see Figure 4). Since the completion of Activity 4 is likely to occur on a different day from the previous activities, this oral component provides a great opportunity for task repetition.

During step 2 of Activity 4, they must work on identifying reasons to fund each organization (again by using input from the text) and are asked to extend their discussion beyond the information provided in the texts. Specifically, for each organization, they are required to infer one reason by making connections

with prior (general) knowledge and new information obtained through their reading and discussions. This stage targets literacy development in that they are evaluating information (deciding reasons to fund each organization) and also making inferences. Discussing information not directly supported in the text requires students to make explicit connections with prior knowledge. For this step, it is important that teachers step back; the linking of information should come from the students' discussion. Of course, the teacher can scaffold groups who are having difficulty accomplishing this step by asking guiding questions and by encouraging students to tap into their entire linguistic repertoire to support their interactions when needed, a practice that has received increasing support recently (Payant & Galante, 2022). The aim here is to create a space for students to develop their own inferencing skills. In Figure 4, we see that students discussed the need for food in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was ongoing at the time of completion (October-November 2020): "Because the Covid-19 is there, the food banks of Quebec more mony."

In step 3 of Activity 4, using the extracted information about each organization, they rank the three organizations, another task supported by TBLT research. It is again a collaborative activity, as the three students have all the necessary information and they must arrive at a joint consensus. It creates a space to negotiate meaning or form and to repeat the reasons for funding each organization. The selection of an organization should create a lively classroom dynamic, as there may be differences within and between groups.

Figure 4

Handout for Activity 4 with Learners' Collaborative Writing and Ranking

Which Cause Do You Want to Raise Funds for?

Now you know about the three different causes. Working as a group, you now need to choose one cause for which you will raise funds. Which one will you choose?

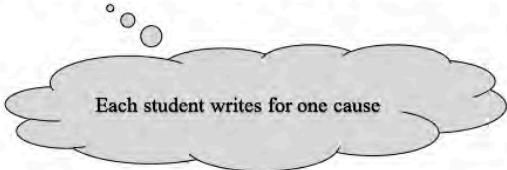
First: Let's Discuss! **Justify all your ideas!**

- Which cause do you think is the most important? Why?
- Which cause has the widest reach (city-wide, province-wide, Canada-wide, international)? Why?
- Does one cause need money NOW more than the other causes? Why?
- Which cause will people give the most funds to? Why?

Second: Let's Justify! – In the table below, **write reasons to support each cause.** Include TWO ideas from the text and ONE you inferred (an idea not directly from the text). These reasons must be related to the text and your answers to the above questions. Of course, you can also have a personal opinion, but it must be discussed in terms of the above questions!

Third: **Rank the three causes!**

Based on the information in the texts and your discussions and answers to the above questions, rank the 3 causes from 1 (the best cause to raise funds for) to 3 (the least important cause based on the criteria).



Each student writes for one cause

Food Banks of Quebec	
1. If a person is in debt, the food banks of Quebec will help her or him	and can't pay for him food
2. If the food banks of Quebec is not here, so many people will be die.	
3. (inferred) Because the Covid-19 is there, the food banks of Quebec more many.	
Leucan	
1. If a family has a debt with car and they can't pay the bank, Leucan can help to family.	
2. Leucan is in Quebec	
3. (inferred) Leucan can help people with debt and give some money to help them to pay their car.	
SPCA	
1. If a person want to abandon a pet they go to SPCA but if SPCA don't exist the person will abandon the pet in the town.	
2. The SPCA is in all Canada so it help many people.	
3. (inferred) If they will by overpopulation of cat, dog, exotic animal etc.	

Activity 5: Selecting a Fundraiser

In this activity, we shift from learning about the organization and transition to the fundraiser. Here, students decide on the type of fundraising event to hold using specific criteria (see Figure 5).

Explanation

In Activity 5, students decide on the type of event based on three pre-determined criteria. By discussing each event, students share their perspectives and communicate their agreement or disagreement. Exchange of ideas through learner-learner interaction is essential for language development and encourages the production of complex structures. For instance, sharing an opinion requires the use of embedded clauses and could naturally elicit superlatives and comparatives (I think that X is better because...). It also creates opportunities to develop language of agreement or disagreement, which is essential in authentic communicative contexts (I agree but I think that...). Another benefit of this repetitive process is that it creates opportunities for students to repeat specific structures, which has been shown to benefit target language development, as discussed above. Once students have completed the table in Figure 5, they apply

a simple formula to calculate the winning event. This creates diversity since each group may arrive at a unique final event. Even though this activity relies on decision making, similarly to Activity 4, the process of arriving at a decision in this case is based on more objective criteria.

Figure 5

Handout for Activity 5

What Type of Fundraiser Will You Organize?

- Previously:** You and your team have selected the cause. Well done!
Question: How do you want to raise money for your cause?
Goal: In your group, discuss and select the type of event that you will organize at your school to raise funds.

First, look at each possible event to check you understand.

Second, for each of the below criteria, go through each possible event (left-hand column).

- Ability to Raise Money
- Materials Needed (e.g., raffle tickets, cake ingredients, prizes)
- Preparation Time (e.g., learning the script for the play, baking cakes)

Using a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = NOT a lot; 5 = a lot), rate each event based on the criteria.

After you have finished, calculate the total points:

raise money – (materials + preparation) = Your winner!

Event	Raise Money?	Materials	Preparation	Total Points
Garage sale				
Bake sale				
Car wash				
Book swap				
Pop up hair salon				
Raffle/tombola				
Play				
Your idea?				

Activity 6: Creating a Promotional Text

In this final activity, students continue to work in their group to write a newsletter in which they describe the organization’s mission and promote their event. Students are provided with an annotated model of a newsletter to highlight elements that need to be included (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Annotated Final Written Product Model (Provided by Us)



Explanation

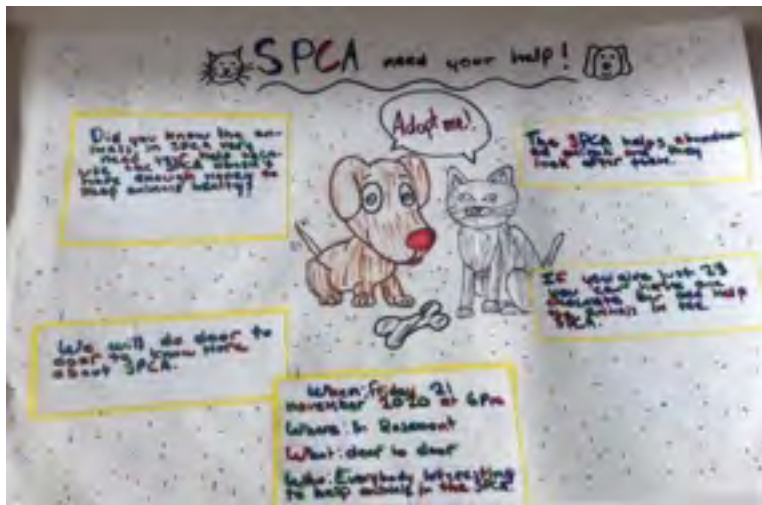
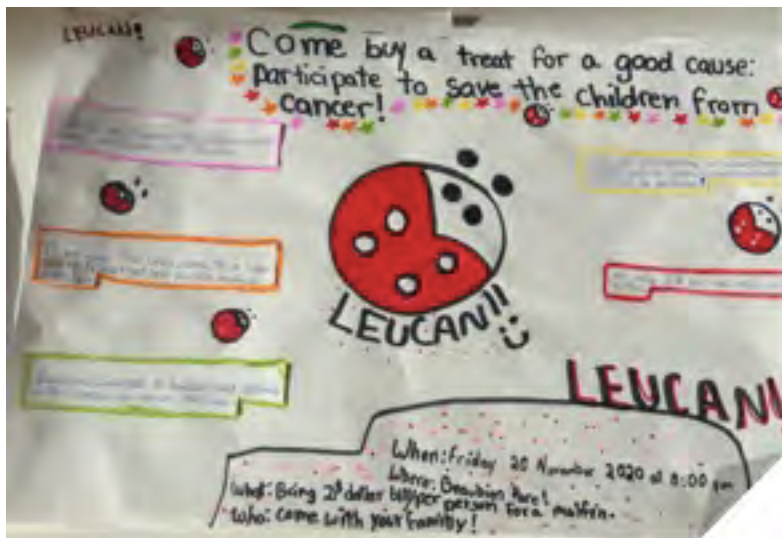
This multi-day, high-level literacy task that includes multiple reading-speaking-listening-writing connections culminates with the production of the promotional text, in the form of a short newsletter. Although input-based tasks are often used with emerging-proficiency learners (Ellis, 2020; Shintani, 2012), it is important that they also participate in production activities. Genre-based writing research in English-dominant settings supports the development of emergent EAL learners' literacy skills and the use of models (Ahn, 2012; Firkins et al., 2007; Gibbons, 2015).

In addition to providing students with an annotated model, we also encourage teachers to plan for a process-oriented approach (Ahn, 2012). Indeed, students are guided through the recursive stages of writing: planning to write (brainstorm), writing a first draft (focus is on the meaning of the message), revising (clarifying ideas and organization of ideas), editing (identifying spelling/grammar errors), and publishing (sharing their work with peers). For this last component, these learners can engage in peer feedback (Lee, 2015).

Writing the promotional newsletter, Activity 6, is a collaborative project, which supports learners' writing development (Firkins et al., 2007; Storch, 2019). Despite having a model, each group appropriates the activity and produces unique, final, multimodal texts (see Figure 7). Finally, teachers may plan for oral presentations during which groups take turns showcasing their proposed fundraiser to the class and receive feedback in return.

Figure 7

Final Written Text Promoting Leucan and SPCA



Conclusion

The scholarship of reading-speaking-writing connections is quite active (Gibbons, 2015; Hirvela & Belcher, 2016; Williams & Lowrance-Faulhaber, 2018); however, tasks that target literacy development with younger learners are seldom discussed. Drawing on AL learning theories and principles of TBLT, our aim, with these materials, was to create a space for emerging EAL learners to develop literacy skills, namely, the ability to comprehend, critique, and construct meaning. Considering that comprehending new information and extracting new meaning are not solely individual cognitive activities, we included numerous opportunities for learners to share their comprehension in writing and orally in small groups.

This literacy task has been used with emerging-proficiency EAL learners in Quebec. Our aim was to target literacy development, and for this reason we did not develop explicit language lessons. It is

important for teaching practices to target literacy skills, decoding, extracting information, evaluating information, and creating new meaning. In the process of engaging in these processes, learners are using language productively. Theories of learning that guide our research confirm that through meaningful interaction and output opportunities, such as those devised throughout the task, language develops. Nevertheless, when using these materials, it will be important to assess the learners' EAL levels to determine how much additional pre-teaching support will be needed.

The Authors

Caroline Payant, associate professor and current director of the Département de didactique des langues à l'Université du Québec à Montréal, specializes in additional language learning and teaching. Her current research focuses on how plurilingual learners mobilize their resources to create meaning in various communicative contexts and on language discrimination in educational settings.

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