Techniques and Materials to Teach Basic Literacy Level ESL Learners

Gretchen Bitterlin

LARAEC

November 6, 2025

What kind of classroom do you have?

- 1. All the students are level 1 (low beginning) and are non-literate or less literate. (can't speak or read or write)
- 2. Level 1 (low beginning) or level 2 (high beginning) with some students who are literate and some who cannot read or write.
- 3. Level 3 or higher with students who speak at the intermediate levels but some students have low literacy skills

Objectives – Participants will be able to:

- Identify language acquisition principles that influence specific teaching strategies for the lowest level learners
- Use the Early Production technique to teach new vocabulary
- Use a variety of interactive activities to facilitate literacy practice
- Identify ways to teach phonics
- Use the language experience technique to create additional lessons for beginning literacy students
- Identify other materials to use with beginning literacy learners

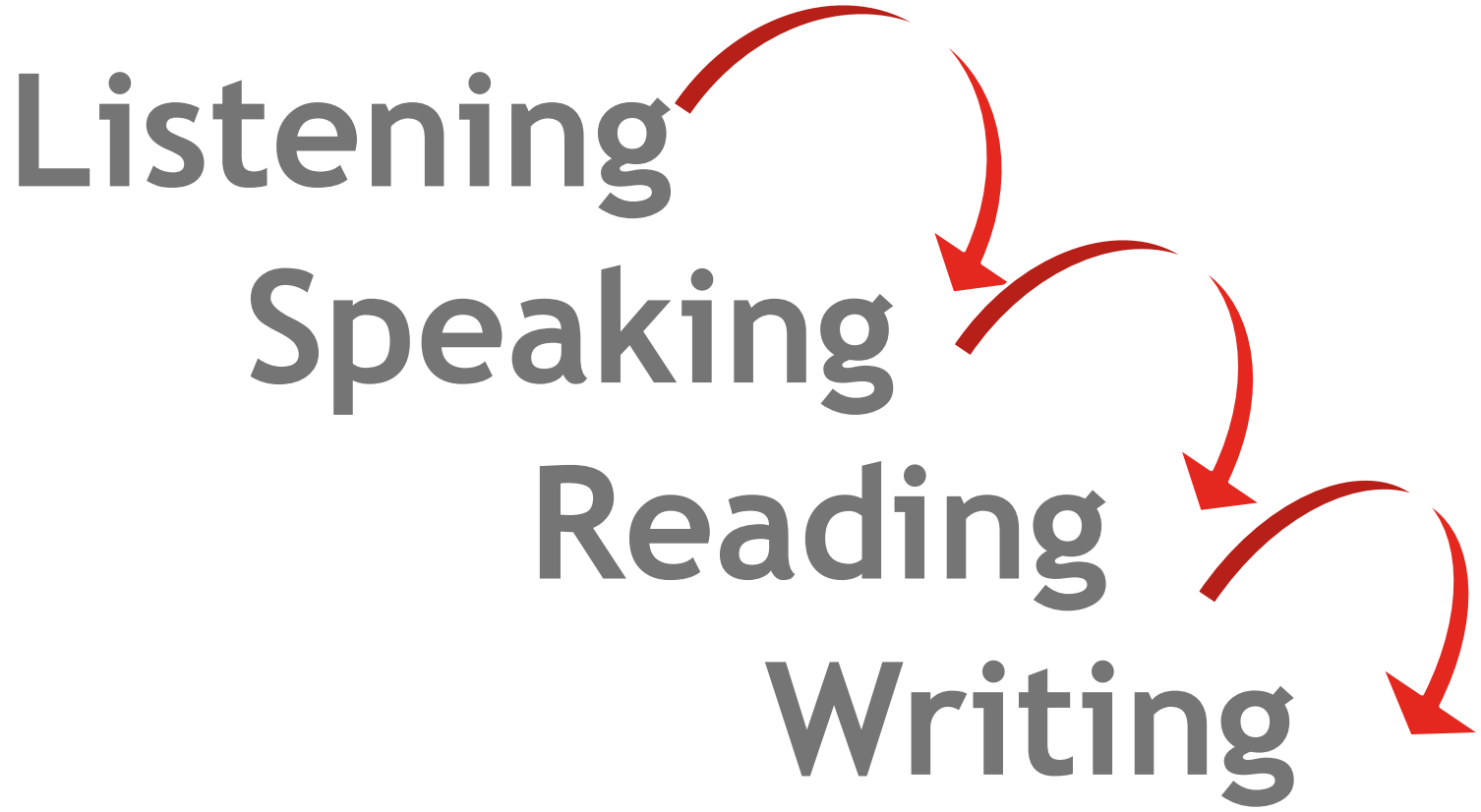
Agenda

- Language acquisition principles
- Early Production Technique
- Use of a big picture to teach vocabulary
- Interactive activities
- Teaching reading to literacy level students
- Integrating phonics instruction
- Language experience approach
- Other resources for teaching beginning level literacy learners

Language Acquisition Principles – Natural Approach

- Adults learn a new language much like children.
- Listening and understanding before speaking
  - **Multiple exposures to new words**
  - Comprehensible input - I +1(Input plus one level above student's level)
  - Non-threatening learning environment
  - Variety of learning styles

Acquisition order:



“Before we own a word, we need multiple exposures – for recognition around 20 times; for production, nearly 60 times. To provide that exposure to their students, teachers need a variety of activities.”

Paul Nation, Teaching and Learning Vocabulary, 1990

Early Production Technique

Use a sequence of questioning strategies to check comprehension before asking learners to produce new words

Early Production technique for teaching new vocabulary

- Comprehension of pictures

- Comprehension of words - book

- Comprehension of words in context of dialogues or short readings

A. What do you need?

B. A book

A. Here. Take this one.

UNIT 2 AT SCHOOL

Lesson A Listening

1 Before you listen

A Look at the picture. What do you see?

B Listen and point: ■ a book ■ a chair ■ a computer ■ a desk ■ a notebook ■ a pencil

CD 1, Track 16

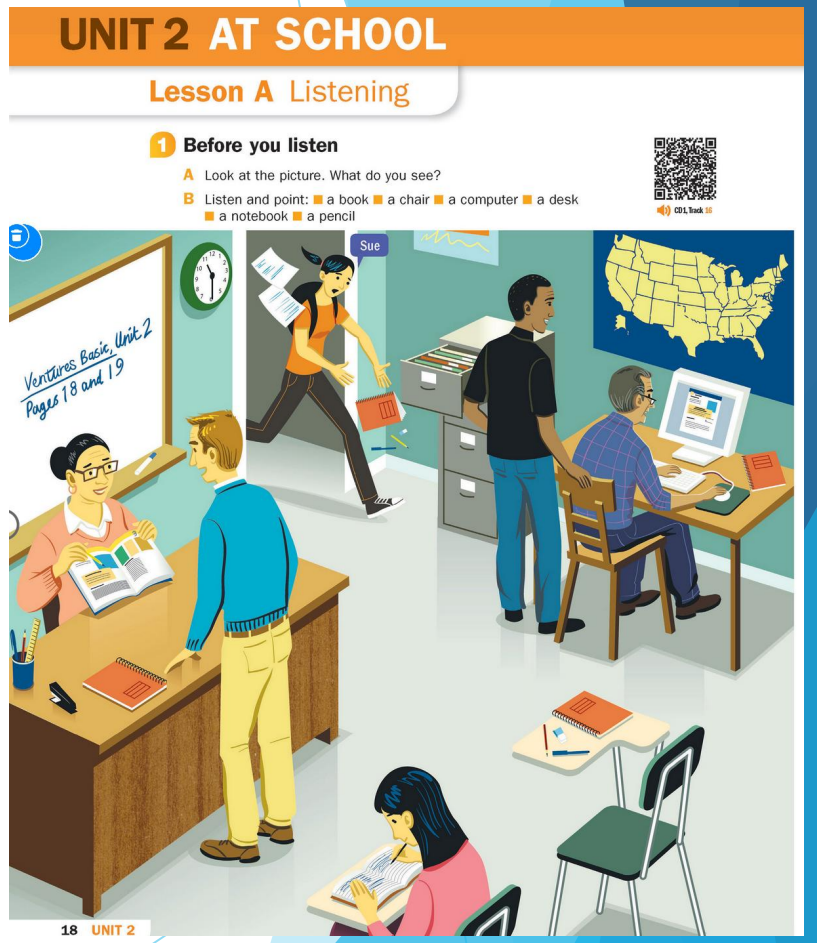
Teach words first with no print

Lesson A *Listening*

Picture cards

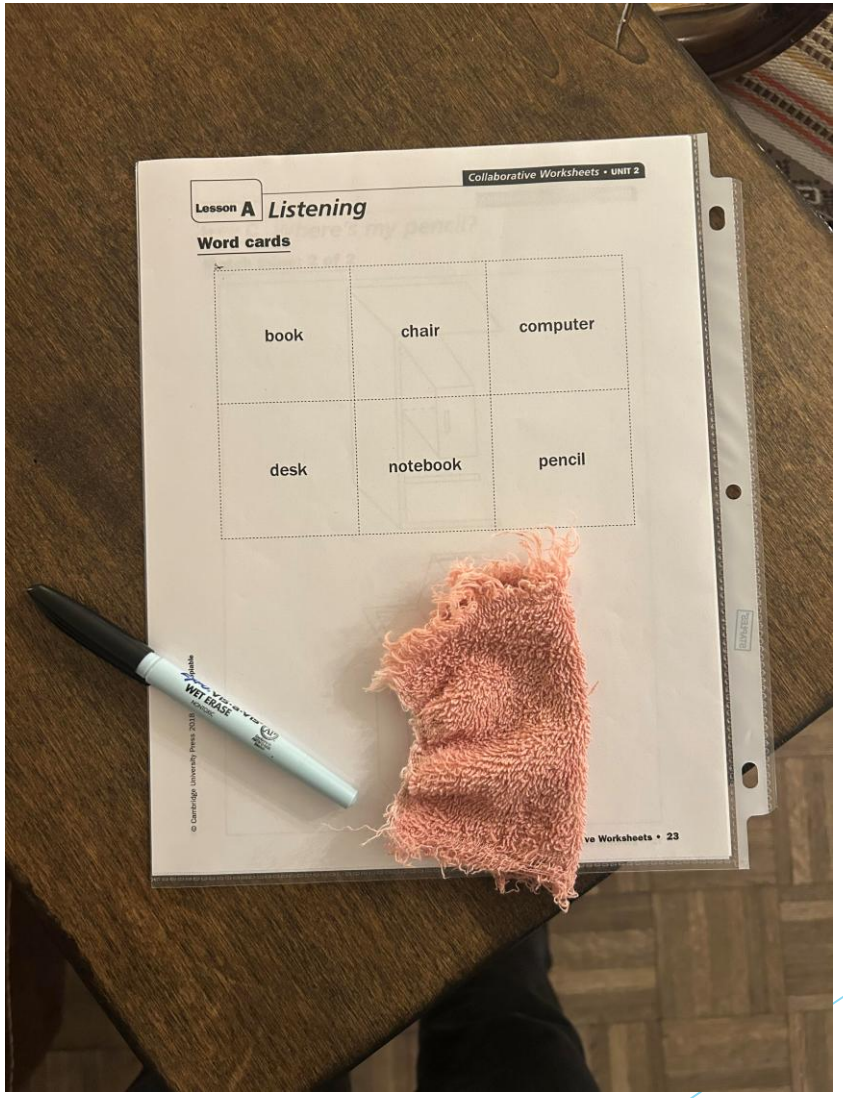
1st Step – Teaching vocabulary in context

1. Elicit vocabulary that learners know.
2. Teach new vocabulary words - Model new words – Don't explain. Use them in context.
3. Check comprehension of vocabulary through Early Production technique:
   a. Ask questions requiring a non-verbal response: "Show me___"
   b. Ask yes/no questions: " Is this a computer?"
   c. Ask either/or questions: Is this a chair or a desk?
   d. Ask WH questions: " What's this?"



Mini white board

- Sheet protector
- Hard stock paper inside or manila folder
- Cut up old towel (for eraser)
- Dry erase marker
- Insert worksheet
- T - “Circle chair.”



Interactive ways to practice new vocabulary

Practice with Word and Picture Cards

Lesson A *Listening*

Picture cards

Collaborative Worksheets • UNIT 2

Lesson A *Listening*

Word cards

book	chair	computer
desk	notebook	pencil

Ventures Basic, Unit 2, Lesson A
cambridgeone.org

Picture and Word Cards – cut up

3rd Edition Ventures

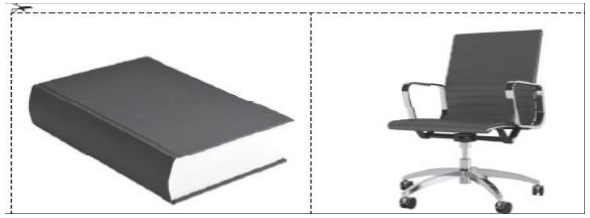
Kinesthetic interactions – "Please give me the book."

Numbered grids - "Put the book on number 2."

Concentration game – Match words with pictures.

Bingo game – Randomly place pictures or words on 9-square grid.

Family literacy activity - Put words and pictures in an envelope to take home and practice with other family members.



Grid: 6 cards

1.	2.	3.
4.	5.	6.

Fly Swatter Game

- Key words on two sides of a board
- table table
- chair chair
- computer computer
- Two teams lined up facing board
- Teacher says a word.
- One person from each team races to the board to slap the word with the fly swatter.
- 1st person to hit the correct word gets 1 point for the team.

Reading

Teach pre-literacy skills

- Teach visual literacy before print literacy
  - Show pictures – Can learners identify which are the same ? Which are different?
  - Show shapes – Which are the same? Different?
  - Numbers - Which are the same? Different?
- Teach left to right movements
- Top / down movements

2 Read

Listen and read.

Sue,

It's Monday, your first day of English class! You need a pencil, eraser, notebook, and dictionary. The pencil is in the desk. The eraser is on the desk. The notebook is on my computer. And the dictionary is under the chair.

Have fun at school!

Mom

Lesson D Reading

1 Before you read

Talk about the picture.
What do you see?

2 Read

Listen and read.

CD1, Track 22

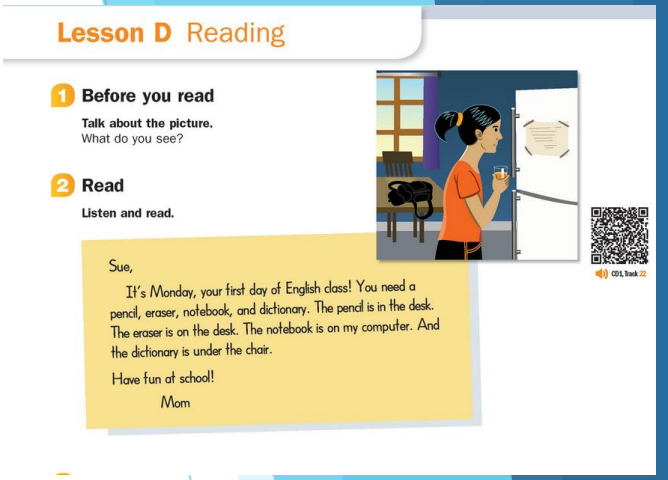
Sue,

[redacted]

Mom

Use masking tool on Presentation Plus to cover text.

Lesson D Reading



- Do pre-reading exercise to set context for reading.
- Cover reading. Play audio of passage. Ask learners to listen for answers to one or two questions.
- Uncover passage. Play audio. Ask learners to follow and underline new words. Explain new words.
- Read passage aloud. Learners repeat line by line.
- Teacher points to text, word by word. Learners read aloud.
- (optional) Learners read to each other in pairs/groups.
- Assign comprehension questions for homework.

CAMBRIDGE

Collaborative Activity – Scrambled Sentences

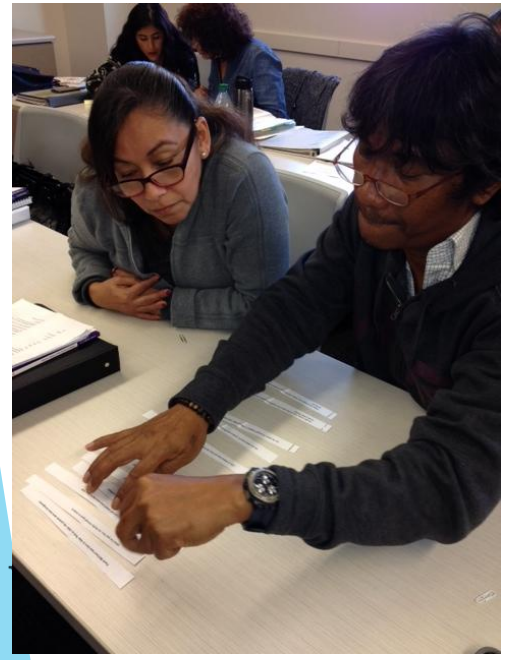
Unscramble

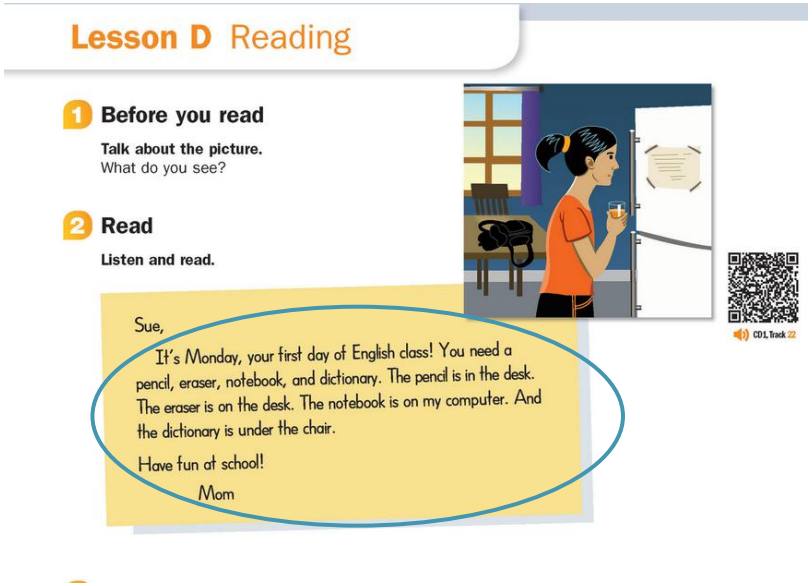
Audio: Class CD1 Track 22, Student's Book p. 24

1 Work with a partner. Cut out the strips. Listen and put the strips in the correct order.

2 Listen again and check your answers.

3 Read the story with your partner. Take turns.





Lesson D Reading

1 Before you read

Talk about the picture.
What do you see?

2 Read

Listen and read.

Sue,

It's Monday, your first day of English class! You need a pencil, eraser, notebook, and dictionary. The pencil is in the desk. The eraser is on the desk. The notebook is on my computer. And the dictionary is under the chair.

Have fun at school!

Mom

Have fun at school!
And the dictionary is under the chair.
Mom
You need a pencil, eraser, notebook, and dictionary.
The eraser is on the desk.
Sue,
The notebook is on my computer.
It's Monday, your first day of English class!

Ventures Basic, Unit 2, Lesson D cambridgeone.org

Role of Phonics Instruction – key principles

(from Literacy Minnesota)

- Allow the reading or story to drive the phonics instruction
- Teach sounds within context of a theme or high frequency vocabulary
- Only practice sounds within words familiar to learners
- Continually recycle sounds already introduced
- Teach consonant sounds before vowel sounds

w___t____r ____a___e_____

Sample question sequence

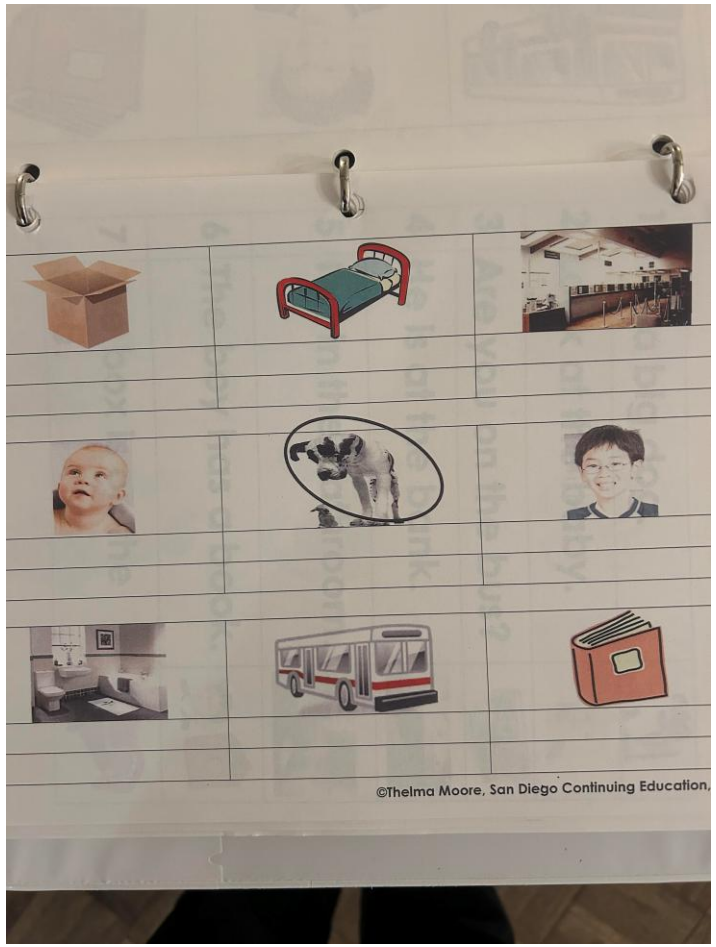
- Teacher: *What is this word?*
- Learner/s: *Bank*
- Teacher: *What's the first letter?*
- Learner/s: *B*
- Teacher: *What sound does the letter B make?*
- Learner/s: */b/*
- Teacher: *What are other words that start with the /b/ sound?*
- Learner/s: *Boy, baby, ball*, etc.

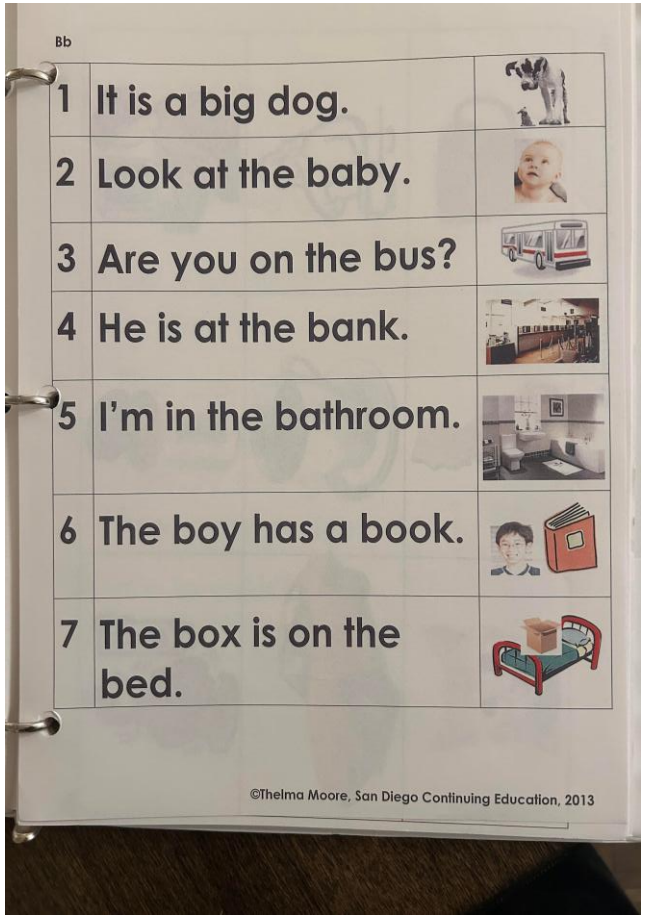
Other phonemic tasks (from Literacy Minnesota)

- Phoneme identity: Tell me the sound that is the *same* in *girl*, *good*, and *go*. */g/*

- *Phoneme categorization: Which word does not belong? Banana, bread, apple?*
- *Phoneme Blending: What word is /s/ /k/ /u/ /l/ ? (school)*
- *Phoneme Segmentation: How many sounds are in "cat"?*
- *Phoneme deletion: What is "hit" without the /h/? (it)*
  - *What if we put an s in front of "it"? (sit)*

Phonics worksheets by Thelma Moore – Focus on “b”





Language Experience Story

- Elicit oral language from students, e.g. news of the day, a student's story, a description of a holiday from another country, weekend activities or a story about a picture.
- Write it on the board.
- Students copy it.
- Model reading. Elicit repetition of the information.
- Conduct pronunciation drills from the text.
- Focus on repetitive sounds to teach phonics.
- Erase sections. Have students recall information
- Have students read to each other
- See sample at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRElUvB7IfE

CAMBRIDGE

Language Experience Samples

News report

Today is Tuesday, September 13, 2022. Yesterday was Monday. Tomorrow will be Wednesday. There are 33 students in class-11 men and 22 women. It is sunny today.

Story about student

Today is Wednesday. Anna is happy today. She passed her driving test yesterday. She can drive now.

CAMBRIDGE

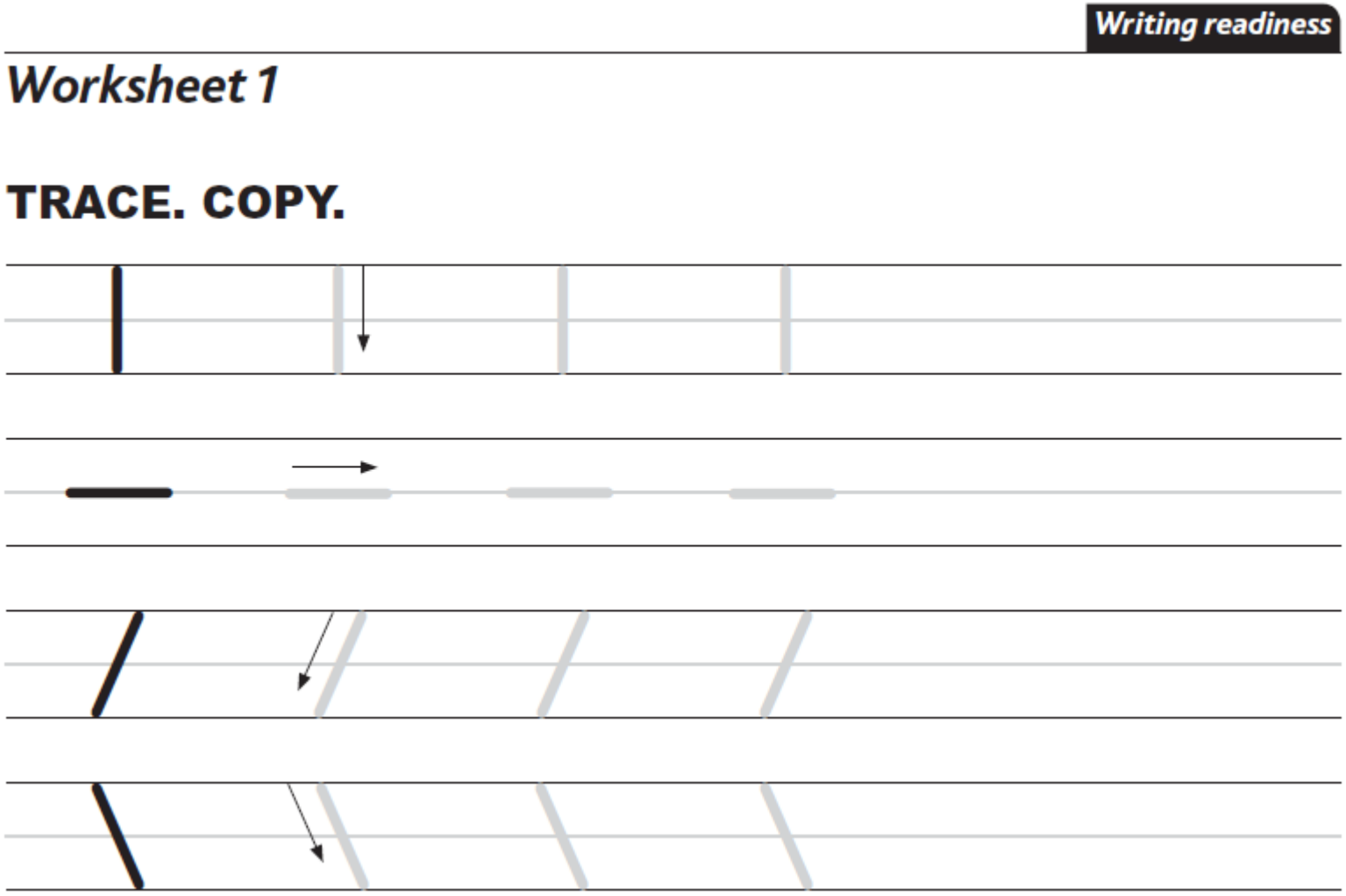
Language Experience Sample from a Big Picture

Sue runs to class.
She drops her notebook.
She drops her eraser.
She drops her pencil.
She drops her pen.
She drops her homework, too.
Poor Sue! Do you need help?

Writing

CAMBRIDGE

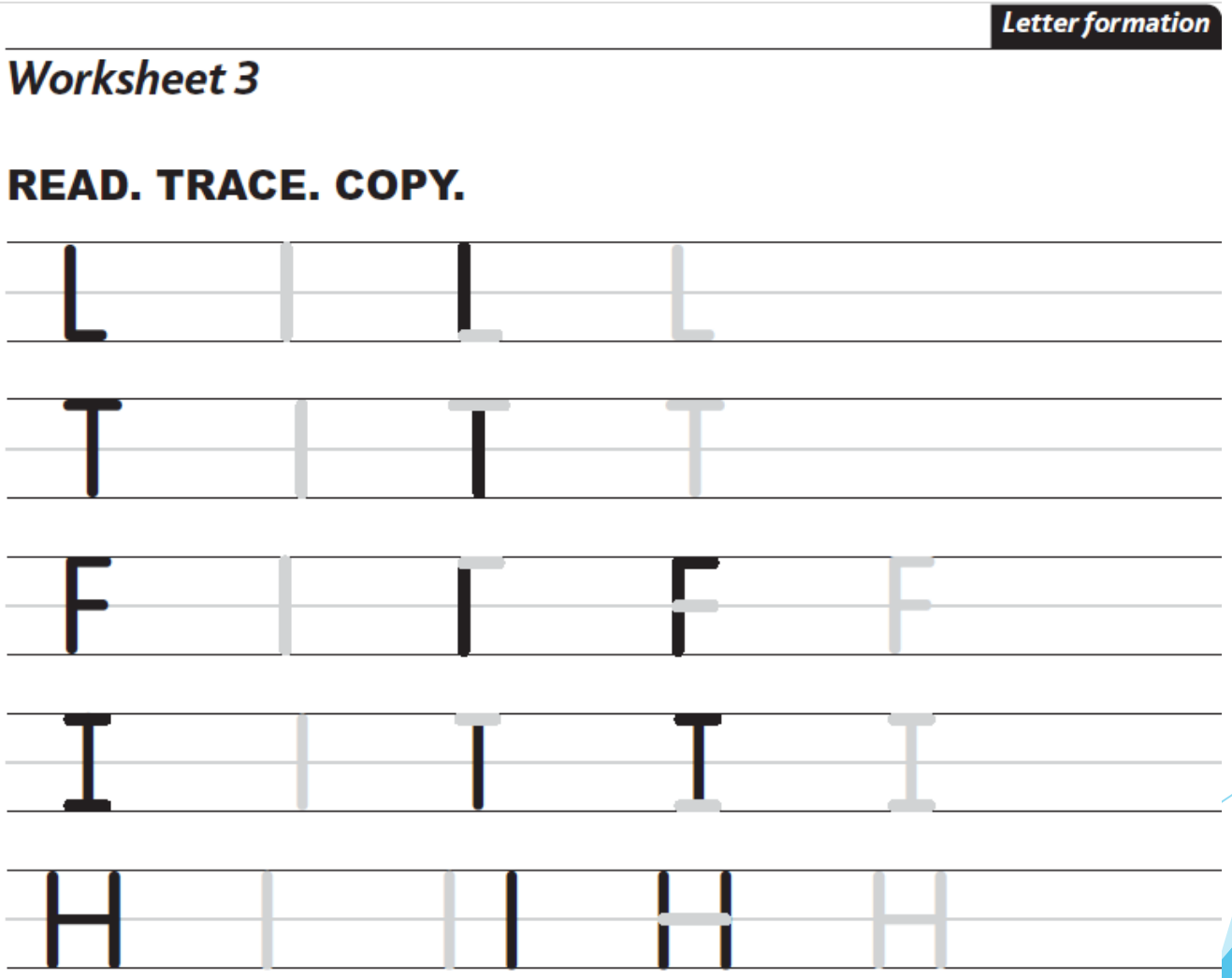
Ventures Literacy Writing Worksheets



cambridgeone.org

CAMBRIDGE

Ventures Literacy Writing Worksheets

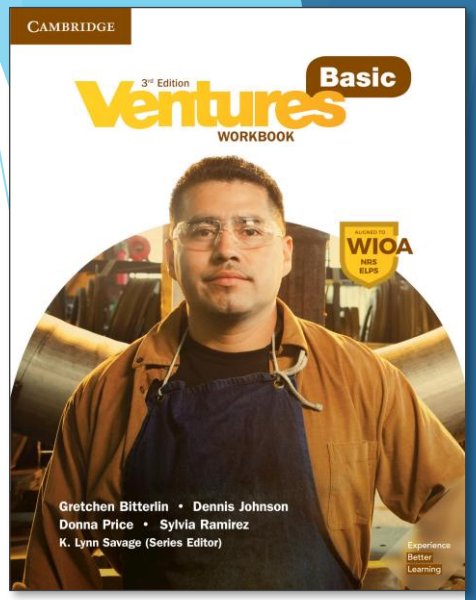


Basic Level

- Two workbooks – at two different levels
  - One for less literate
  - One for literate
- Below level and on level pages in Literacy workbook

CAMBRIDGE

Lesson C: **Basic** Workbook



Lesson C Where's my pencil?

1 Look at the picture. Match. Write the letter.

1.	c pencil	a.	on the desk
2.	_____ eraser	b.	under the desk
3.	_____ paper	c.	in the desk
4.	_____ dictionary	d.	on the chair
5.	_____ notebook	e.	on the notebook

2 Look at the picture in Exercise 1. Write *In*, *On*, or *Under*. Then listen and check your answers.

1.	Where's my pencil?	*In*	the desk.
2.	Where's my notebook?	_____	the chair.
3.	Where's my dictionary?	_____	the desk.
4.	Where's my paper?	_____	the desk.
5.	Where's my eraser?	_____	the notebook.

Ventures Basic Workbook, Unit 2, p. 22

CAMBRIDGE

Lesson C: **Basic** Workbook

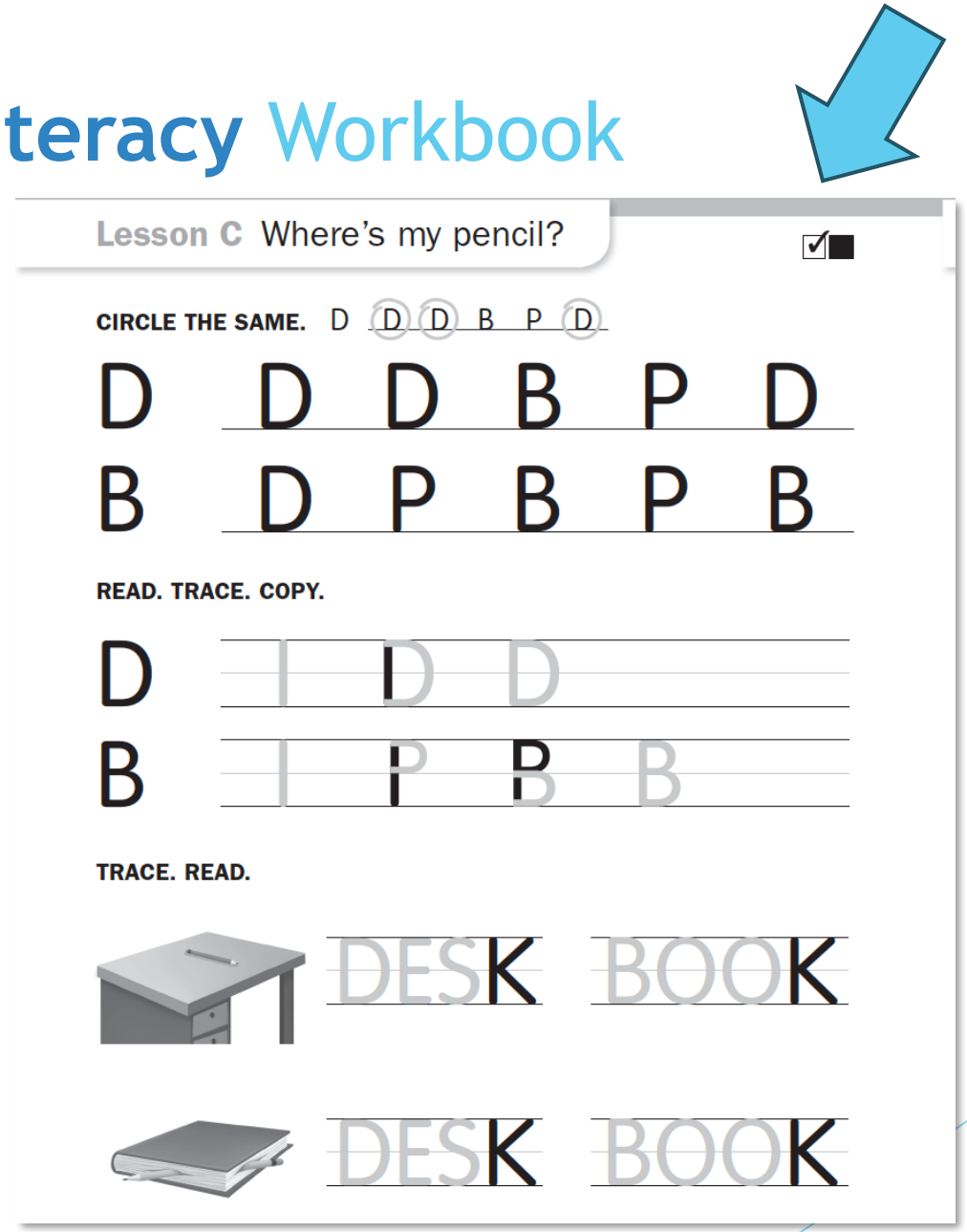
3 **Look at the picture. Write the answers. Then listen and check your answers.**

1. **A** Where's my dictionary?
   B On the desk
2. **A** Where's my pencil?
   B _____.
3. **A** Where's my eraser?
   B _____.
4. **A** Where's my paper?
   B _____.
5. **A** Where's my notebook?
   B _____.
6. **A** Where's my ruler?
   B _____.

Ventures Basic Workbook, Unit 2, p. 23

CAMBRIDGE

Lesson C: **Basic Literacy** Workbook



Lesson C Where's my pencil?

CIRCLE THE SAME. D D D B P D

D D D B P D

B D P B P B

READ. TRACE. COPY.

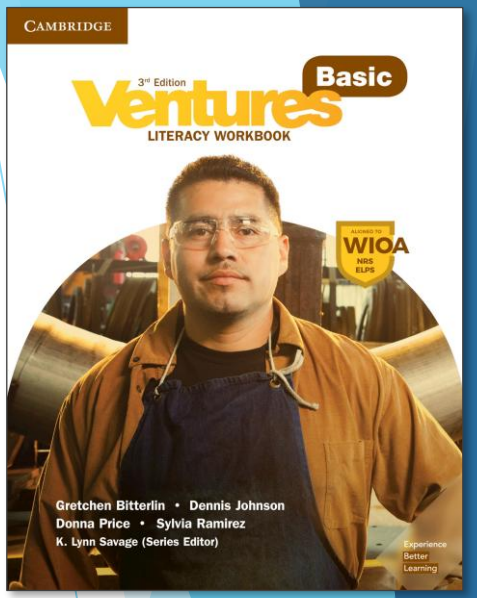
D D D

B P B B

TRACE. READ.

DESK BOOK

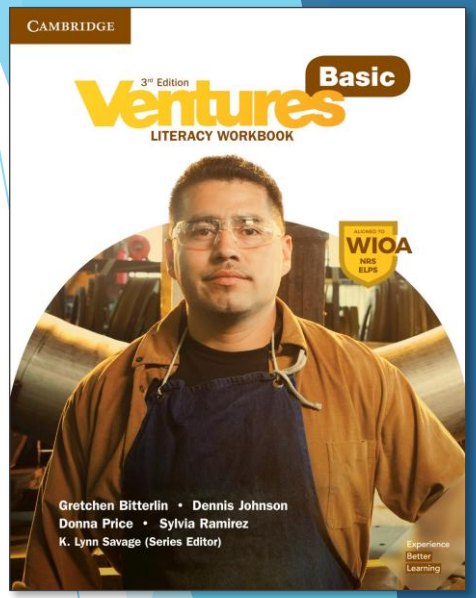
DESK BOOK



Ventures Basic Literacy Workbook, Unit 2, p. 22

CAMBRIDGE

Lesson C: **Basic Literacy** Workbook



Lesson C Where's my pencil?

Trace. Read.

IN in DESK desk

ON on BOOK book

UNDER under

Read. Trace. Circle the same. on on on on son

on	on	on	on	son
in	in	tin	in	in
under	under	under	untie	under
desk	desk	rest	desk	desk
book	book	book	hook	book

Read. Trace. Copy.

on the desk on the desk

in the book in the book

under the desk under the desk

Ventures Basic Literacy Workbook, Unit 2, p. 23

CAMBRIDGE

Digital Literacy Practice

Ventures Arcade: cambridge.org/venturesarcade

CAMBRIDGE

Level Basic / Unit 2

Report

WHAT DO YOU SEE? At school.

Read and match.

Score

0/6

a computer	a pencil
a chair	a notebook
a book	a desk

a book

Start Again | Help | Check Answers | Next Activity

This activity practices vocabulary from Lesson A.

CAMBRIDGE

Examples of Literacy Tips in Ventures Basic Teacher's Edition

2 Practice

A Read and circle. Then write.

Class	Time
English	11:00

1. A Is your class at 11:00?
   B Yes, it is.
   (Yes, it is.) No, it isn't.

November 7
1:00
1:30 *Appointment with: Dr. Martin*
2:00

2. A Is your appointment at 12:30?
   B *No, it isn't.*
   Yes, it is. (No, it isn't.)

The Paramount Concert Hall
Toni Tucker
Tonight Only! 8:30 p.m.

3. A Is your concert at 8:00?
   B *No, it isn't.*
   Yes, it is. (No, it isn't.)

THE LOST CLUES
6:00

4. A Is your movie at 6:00?
   B *Yes, it is.*
   (Yes, it is.) No, it isn't.

Sammy's Birthday Party
4:00

5. A Is your party at 4:00?
   B *Yes, it is.*
   (Yes, it is.) No, it isn't.

Ch. 3	Singing Stars
7:00	Who wins? Final three singers.

6. A Is your TV show at 7:30?
   B *No, it isn't.*
   Yes, it is. (No, it isn't.)

Listen and repeat. Then practice with a partner.

74 UNIT 6

Literacy Tip

Ask literacy Ss to copy the times from Exercise **2A** in their notebooks. Say: *Work with a partner. Say one of the times in your notebook. Your partner will point to it. Then change roles.*

Ventures Basic Teacher's Edition, p. 74, p. T-74

CAMBRIDGE

Examples of Literacy Tips in Ventures Basic Teacher's Edition

At the Doctor's Office

Tony and Mario are at the doctor's office. They are patients. Tony's leg hurts. His head hurts, too. He has a headache. Mario's arm hurts. His hands hurt, too. Tony and Mario are not happy. It is not a good day.

Literacy Tip

Make a list of the words for body parts that appear in the reading passage (*leg*, *head*, *arm*, *hands*) and give it to the literacy Ss in your class. Have the literacy Ss match the words on the list with the same words in the reading passage while the rest of the class reads the paragraph silently.

Ventures Basic Teacher's Edition, p. 50, p. T-50

Other resources for teaching beginning literacy learners

ESL Beginning Literacy Booklet

- Available on Google Drive

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1u-aTpjgyyxZc-Xq_CjU1d79Z5HKu3Rgi?usp=sharing

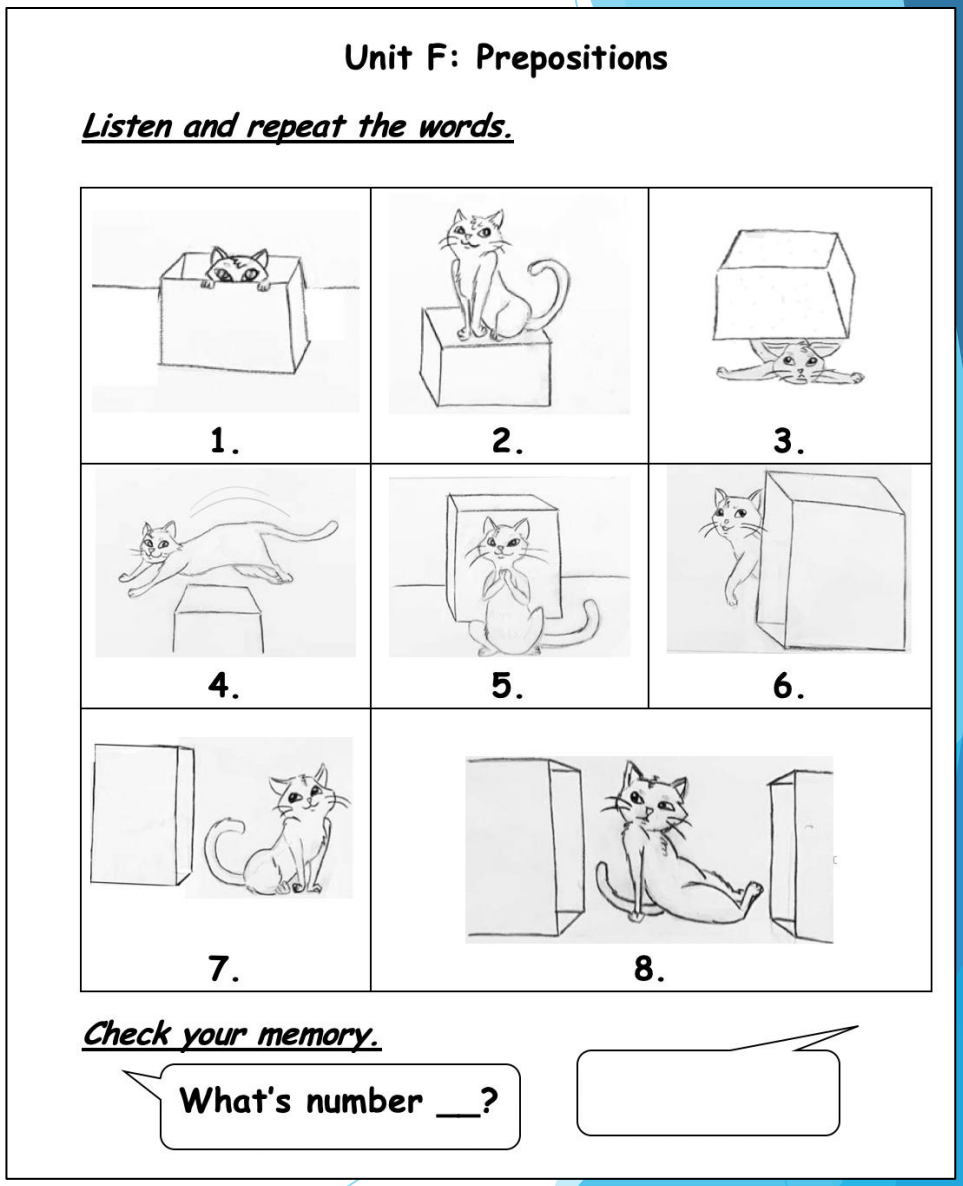
- Download and print unit by unit
- Includes QR codes that link to similar content, e.g. Learning chocolate vocabulary site. https://www.learningchocolate.com/content/classroom-13
- 24 units + unit tests
- More information – Contact Ann Marie at eslannmarie@gmail.com

ESL Beginning Literacy Booklet – Table of Contents

- Welcome unit
- Numbers
- Alphabet
- Feelings
- Ordinal Numbers
- Prepositions
- Days of the Week
- Months of the year
- Personal Information
- Classroom
- Weather
- Family
- The body
- Clothing
- Food
- Money
- Parts of the House
- Things in the house
- Transportation
- Community
- Jobs
- Colors
- Grammar Charts
- Zoom Lesson
- Unit Tests

Wordless Picture Page– Early Production (EP)

- Introduce all the words while learners listen:
  1. Use flashcards and the document camera
  2. Google images
- Next, check understanding with the EP worksheet using these steps :
  - What number is _____?
  - Yes/No Questions – Is this _____?
  - Either or Questions – Is this _____ or _____?
  - Wh-Questions - What is number ___?

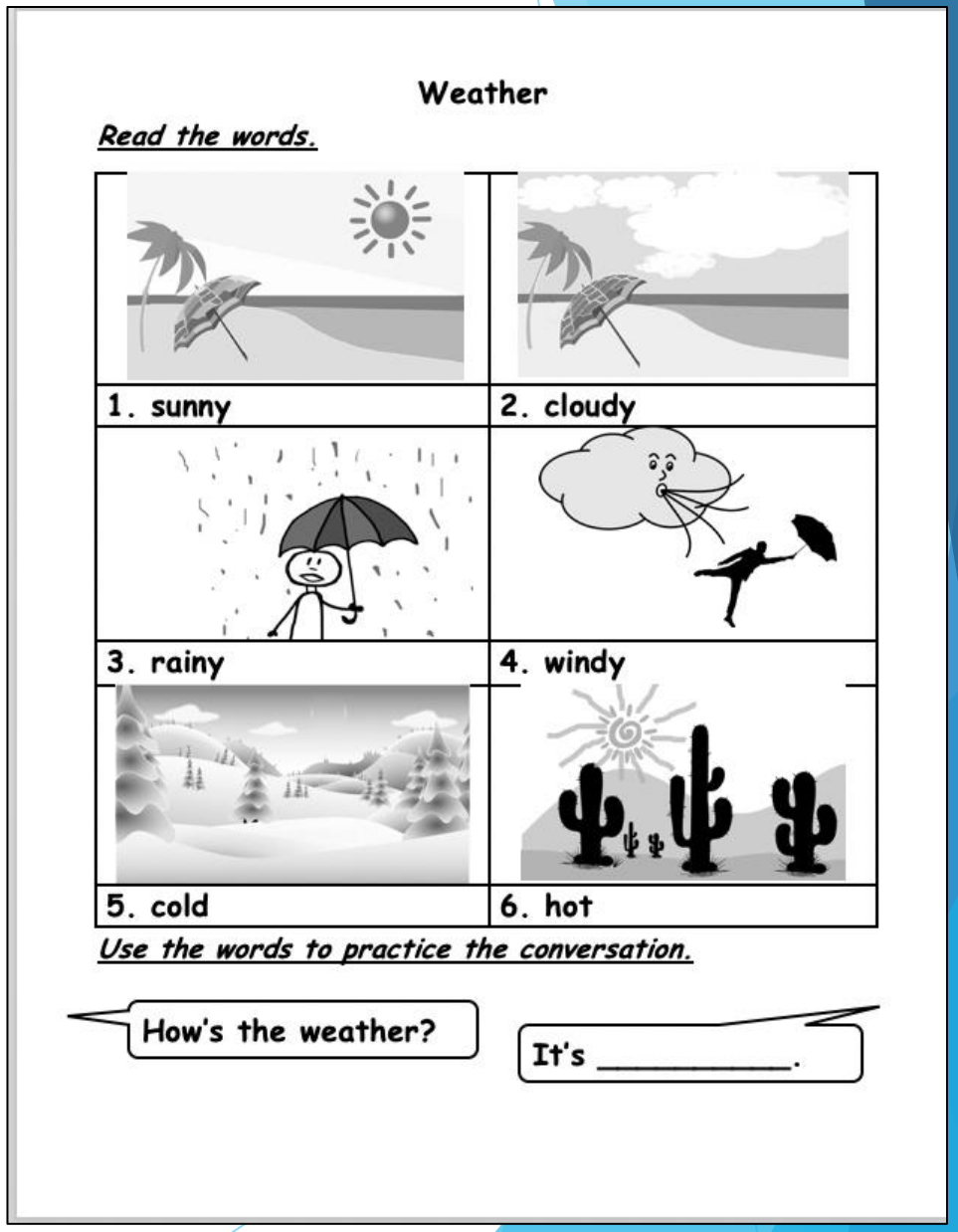


Page with Pictures & Words

- After the instructor models reading the words and pronunciation, learners can:
  - Ask for help with pronunciation by calling out the number.
  - learners can practice with each other and ask each other:

    “What’s number ___?”

- This page always includes a question at the end where learners can practice applying the new vocabulary.



Weather

Read the words.

1. sunny
2. cloudy
3. rainy
4. windy
5. cold
6. hot

Use the words to practice the conversation.

How's the weather?

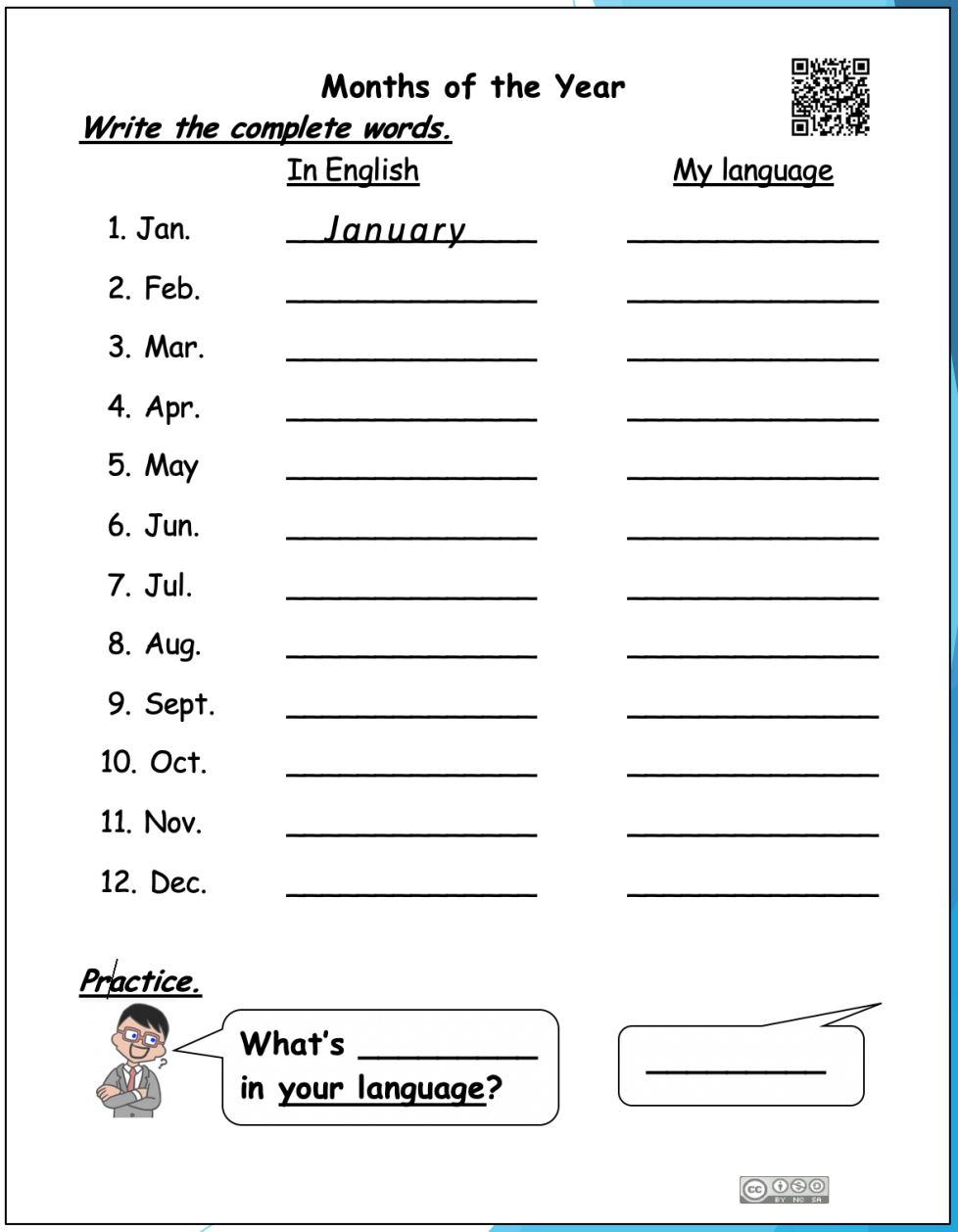
It's _____.

Translate the Words

- First time learners write the unit's vocabulary words.
- Usually done as homework.
- Good page to review previous lesson. (cover the words)
- Lots of cross cultural opportunities

"How do you say _____ in your language?"

Note: If learners can't write in their native language, they can always write in English.



Months of the Year

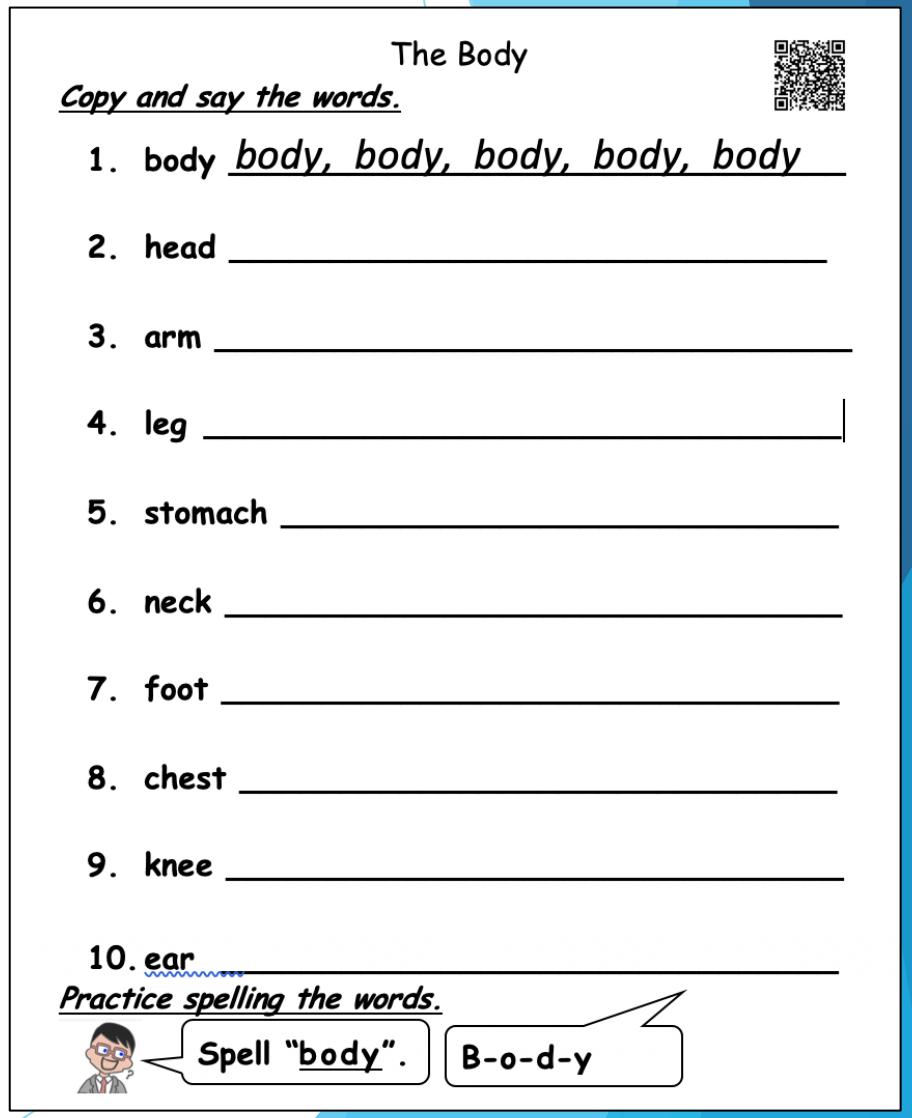
Write the complete words.

	In English	My language
1. Jan.	January	
2. Feb.		
3. Mar.		
4. Apr.		
5. May		
6. Jun.		
7. Jul.		
8. Aug.		
9. Sept.		
10. Oct.		
11. Nov.		
12. Dec.		

Practice.

Copy the Words Page – Homework page

- Always done as homework.
- Next meeting, review with flashcards.
  Hold up a flashcard and Ask:
  - What's this?
  - What number is it?
  - Spell _____.
- Practice spelling the words:
  - Option: Spell the words without looking



The Body

Copy and say the words.

1. body body, body, body, body, body
2. head _____
3. arm _____
4. leg _____
5. stomach _____
6. neck _____
7. foot _____
8. chest _____
9. knee _____
10. ear _____

Practice spelling the words.

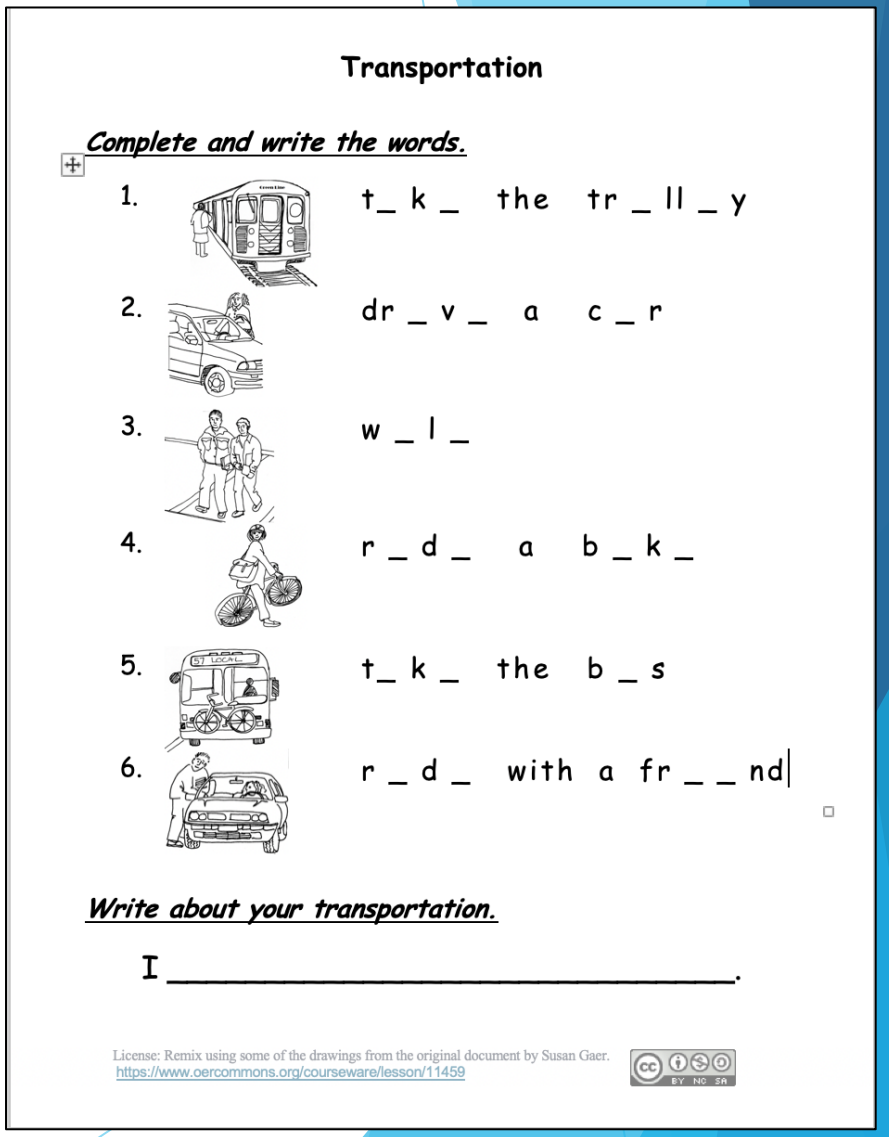
Spell "body". B-o-d-y

Cloze Activity – homework page

- Always assigned as homework.
- The order is scrambled.
- Opportunity for more independence
- Always includes writing activity.

• **Use to review homework errors** – On the blank lines, I write the kind of errors I observed in their homework and ask them if it is okay.
For example: walk _wAlk_

Learners tell instructor what needs to be corrected.



Transportation

Complete and write the words.

1. t_ k _ the tr _ ll _ y
2. dr _ v _ a c _ r
3. w _ l _
4. r _ d _ a b _ k _
5. t_ k _ the b _ s
6. r _ d _ with a fr _ _ nd

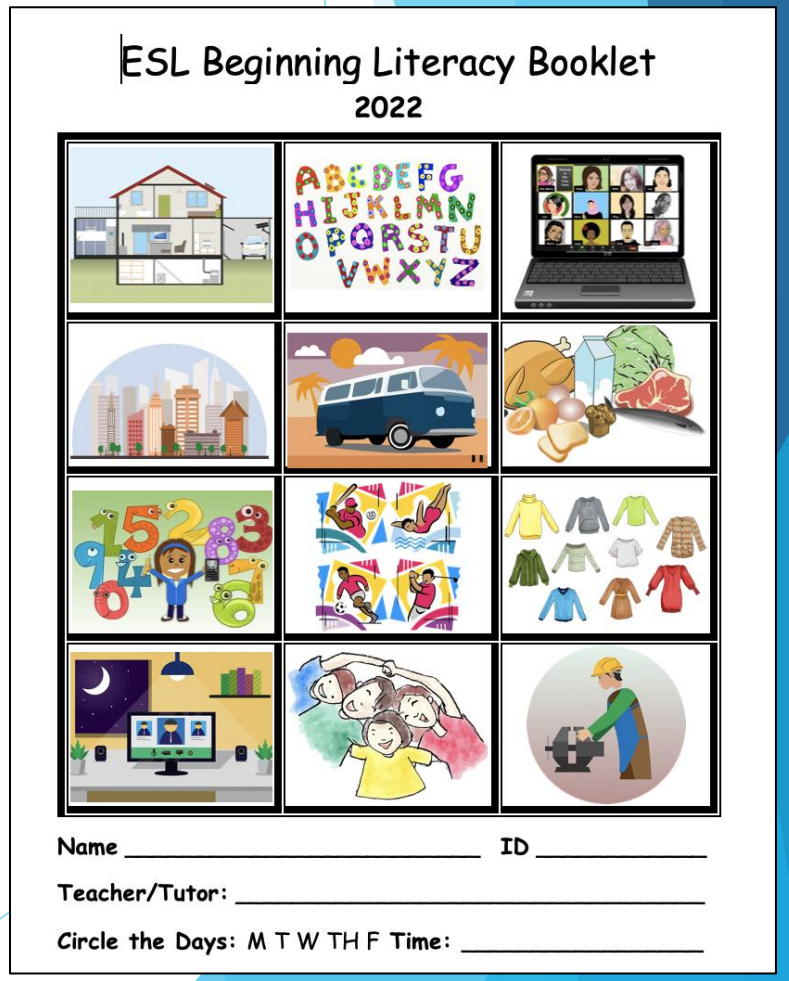
Write about your transportation.

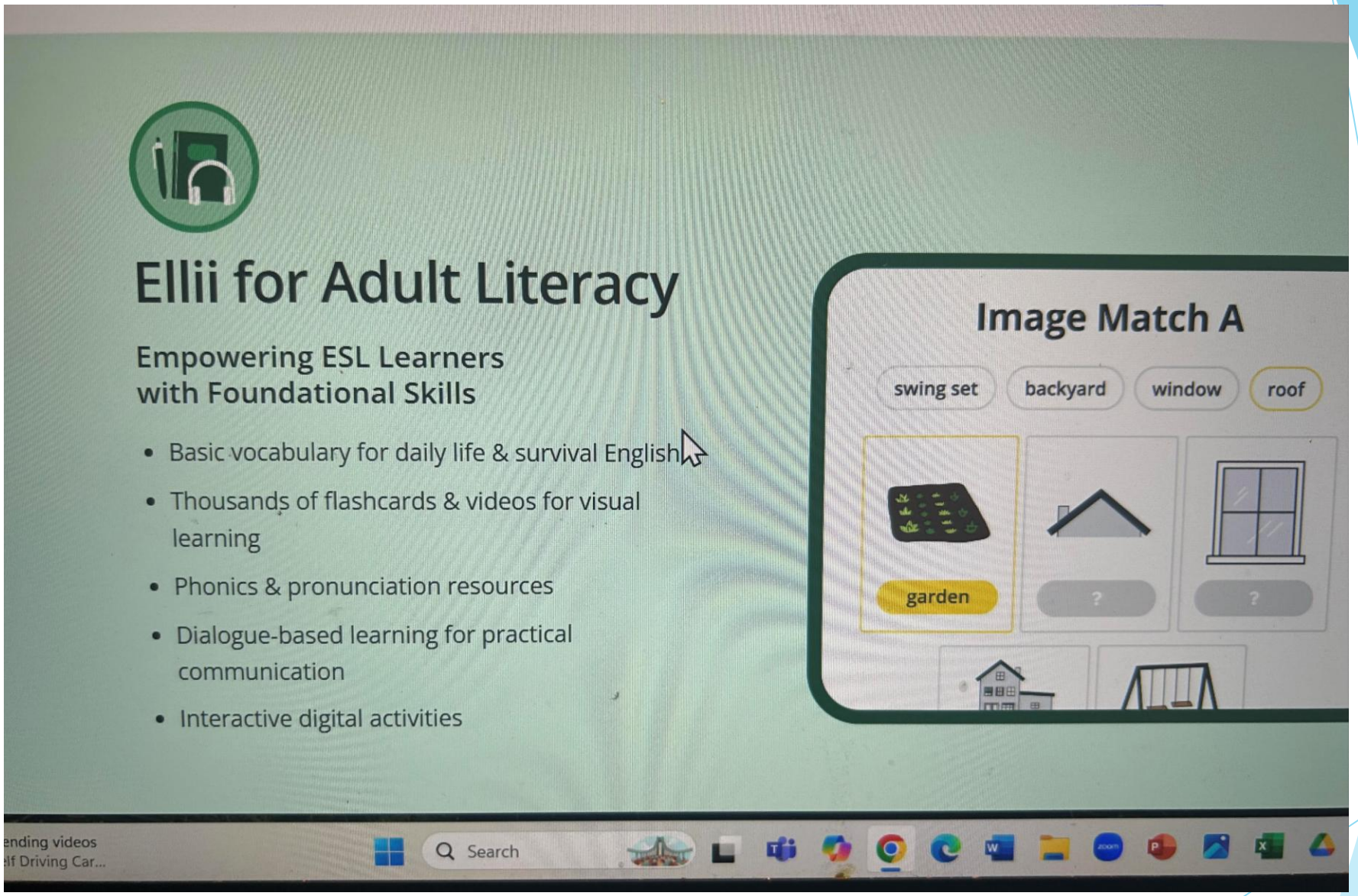
I _____.

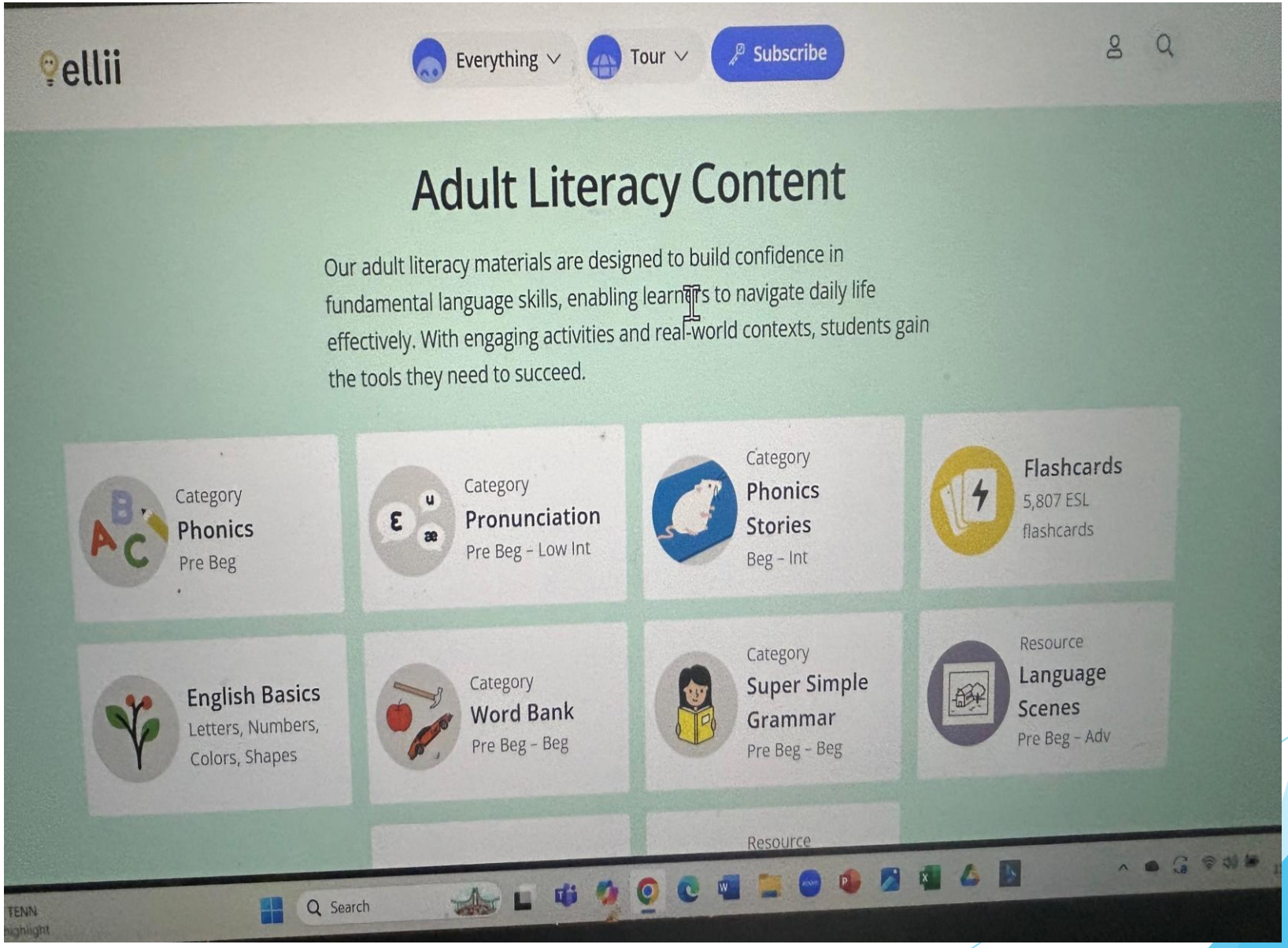
License: Remix using some of the drawings from the original document by Susan Gaer.
https://www.oercommons.org/courseware/lesson/11459

ESL Beginning Literacy Booklet Uses:

- Before introducing new unit in the textbook
- With an assistant, volunteer or tutor
- Review previously taught materials
- Single page, part of the unit or all




Ellii for Adult Literacy
Empowering ESL Learners with Foundational Skills
Basic vocabulary for daily life & survival English
Thousands of flashcards & videos for visual learning
Phonics & pronunciation resources
Dialogue-based learning for practical communication
Interactive digital activities
Image Match A
swing set
backyard
window
roof
garden
?
?
Search


ellii
Everything
Tour
Subscribe
Adult Literacy Content
Our adult literacy materials are designed to build confidence in fundamental language skills, enabling learners to navigate daily life effectively. With engaging activities and real-world contexts, students gain the tools they need to succeed.
Category
Phonics
Pre Beg
Category
Pronunciation
Pre Beg - Low Int
Category
Phonics Stories
Beg - Int
Flashcards
5,807 ESL flashcards
English Basics
Letters, Numbers, Colors, Shapes
Category
Word Bank
Pre Beg - Beg
Category
Super Simple Grammar
Pre Beg - Beg
Resource
Language Scenes
Pre Beg - Adv
Resource
Search

Tips for teaching literacy level ESL students

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

Before opening the book, find out what your students already know and build on students' knowledge by preparing them to handle the key concepts of the lesson. (scaffolding)

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

When giving instructions,
use clear and consistent gestures
to establish routines.

Avoid superfluous language.

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

Don’t ask, “Do you understand?”

Use comprehension checks to find out what they understand.

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

Before you ask students to do something, **model what you want the students to do** and then, check for comprehension.

Show instead of tell.

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

When students seem confused, return to the Early Production questioning strategies:

- Non-verbal responses
- Yes/No questions
- Either/Or questions

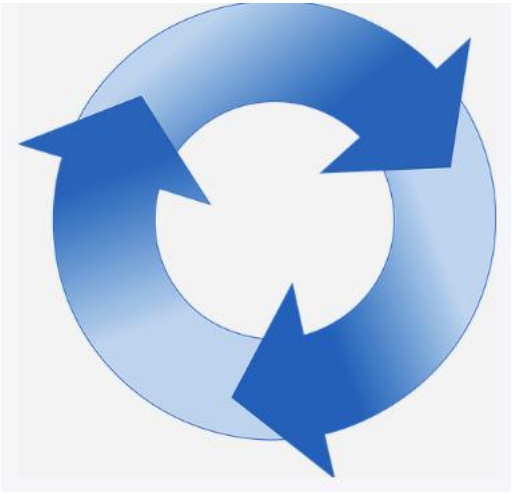
Tips for teaching low level ESL students

Use realia and visuals as much as possible to make meaning clear.

- Google Images
- https://pixabay.com/ – copyright free images

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

Repeat, repeat, repeat



Give students a variety of opportunities to hear the new vocabulary in context.

Tips for teaching low level ESL students

Review, review, review.

Use a variety of interactive activities.

Your Biggest Take Away from Workshop?

Resources for teachers

- Teaching Phonics with Beginning Literacy ESL Students https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq4KX_1s42w
- Warm-Up Strategies – Daily News Report

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRElUvB7IfE
- Online Links that Reinforce Beginning ESL Lessons https://drive.google.com/drive/u/2/folders/1u-aTpjgyyxZc-Xq_CjU1d79Z5HKu3Rgi
- Alphabet and picture cards on all topics. Can print in all size

  www.eslflashcards.com

  Adult ELL Pathway to literacy
- http://www..literacymn.org/ (includes phonics kit with teacher instructions)
- https://ellii.com/adult-ed (picture cards/ phonics/ literacy lessons)

Free online sites for learners

1. www.starfall.com (Basic site for learning the alphabet)
2. www.learningchocolate.com (site for learning vocabulary words on all topics)
3. www.usalearns.org (3 courses for learning English – Beginning, intermediate levels)
4. Ventures arcade – www.cambridge.org/venturesarcade (Interactive practice to accompany Ventures series of textbooks) Free site.

Free Online sites for learners

5. www.webforbeg.weebly.com (lists other sites for learning English for beginners – some no longer available)

6. English Accent Modification with Marsha Chan – YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/user/PronunciationDoctor

7. Breaking News English Lessons: Easy English World News Materials - ESL Reading lessons at different levels

8. News for You Online (Links to an external site.)

Password to read articles: 76B546

Digital Literacy curriculum and resources

- http://digital-esl.org (free course)
- DART Literacy Program
- http://www.abceng.org/

Published materials for Beginning Literacy Learners

- Ventures, Basic Level, Cambridge University Press
- Ventures Basic Literacy workbook, Cambridge University Press
- Sam and Pat, Books 1,2, Thomson/Heinle
- ESL Phonics for All Ages, Books 1-6, by Elizabeth Claire, Eardley Publications
- What's Next? (Introductory), Books 1,2, New Readers Press
- What's Next? (Low Beginning), Books 1,2, New Readers Press
- Available on Google Drive: ESL Beginning Literacy Booklet

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1u-aTpjgyyxZc-Xq_CjU1d79Z5HKu3Rgi?usp=sharing

Thank you

Gretchen Bitterlin, Gretchen.bitterlin@gmail.com