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LEARNER COLLABORATION IN A MULTILEVEL REFUGEE-BACKGROUND CLASSROOM

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Abstract

When refugees come together in a classroom to learn a new language, they bring vastly different backgrounds in formal, school-based educational settings. Some are emergent readers learning foundational skills, while others have higher levels of literacy in other languages. Meeting the needs of learners with widely different experiences is key. The teaching context for this paper is a refugee education program at a community college. Two activities are presented that have led to success in meeting different needs in a multilevel English classroom. One activity is creating a graph as a whole class and the other is telling a story in pairs. Experience-based reflections are shared to demonstrate how activities are implemented and how learners responded in this class. Adding to the growing bank of resources for teaching people who are learning to read and write for the first time in a new language, this exploration of activities is applicable to any context with a diverse group of language learners.

In 2019, I taught a multilevel English class for refugee-background students, most of whom had no prior formal, school-based education. For a long time, I noticed some of the students trying very hard to complete school-based tasks, while it was effortless for others. The former group could spell a word, but after, did not know how to fill in the missing letters to the word on blank lines. As adults with years of experience, they were not beginning learners, but they were beginners in a formal, school-based educational setting. The majority of the students in the classroom described in this paper were learning “how to be in school.” I had to quickly learn how to support those students, especially since this class could be the only place where they were in the majority and had the opportunity to receive instruction geared toward their needs.

In a multilevel classroom, it is difficult to balance using effective practices for adult second language emergent readers and fostering collaboration with other class members who are also second language learners but have prior experience with print literacy in their first languages. Differentiated Instruction, that is, planning strategically to meet the needs of all learners (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy Center [TEAL Center] 2017), is a cornerstone approach in this type of classroom. At the time I began taking up the pedagogies described in this paper, I had been teaching the emergent reader level in a refugee English program at a community college for two years. I became interested in multi-level teaching models due to my experiences in my K-8 school growing up, which was an intentional experiment in multi-grade teaching and learning. That was my first experience with an intentionally multilevel classroom and possibly led to my exploration of the multilevel design of the classroom described in this paper.

In this paper, I present two activities that support Differentiated Instruction in a multilevel classroom drawing on procedures that I originally learned from other teachers of emergent readers. I expanded upon what I had learned from others to reflect the levels of learners in my classroom and respond to their unique needs. The first activity describes a whole-class bar graph, which emphasizes background knowledge and requires contributions from all students. The second is a sequencing activity that uses collaborative partner work to differentiate for different literacy levels. I selected these activities because of how valuable I found them in prioritizing collaborative work and thus in supporting all students in a multilevel classroom. I will also discuss my classroom experiences with the activities and offer considerations for instruction.

Background and Context

In this section, I will describe the classroom context and the learners I worked with. The adults in the emergent reader level English class highlighted in this paper mainly came to the United States as refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Pakistan and South Sudan. They were linguistically diverse, as well, representing even more languages than countries. Worldwide, enrollment of refugees in primary school is 63 percent, in secondary school is 24 percent, and in higher education is 3 percent (UNHCR,

2018). Students in the introductory class in the program where I worked had backgrounds ranging from no formal, school-based learning to several years of high school. Most of the students reported never having gone to school before.

While most students had not had any formal, school-based learning experiences prior to this English class, some had, indeed, arrived in the United States with high literacy levels in their L1 through such experiences. They progressed rapidly since they were already familiar with skills acquired in formal, school-based learning, such as pencil-holding and book-handling. They may have also been familiar with many Western norms of formal schooling, such as student-directed instruction, less emphasis on explicit grammar teaching, and left-right text directionality (Dooley, 2009). Students with fewer of these experiences were learning school structures and classroom routines at the same time as the language (Wrigley, 2009). In addition to the students who reported “no school” and those who had started middle school, some of the learners in the class understood that print carries meaning but were not yet able to decode. In other words, their experiences are similar to those described by Bigelow & Vinogradov (2011), “This is a heterogenous population with a unique set of strengths and needs that require a range of educational approaches” (p. 122). The Adult Emergent Readers (AERs) were not all the same, much like no two learners are the same.

The students’ varying experiences with student-directed instruction, and other Western norms, shaped the group structures that I chose for the activities. One of the experiences they brought as adults was some familiarity with school. This is especially true since some had been to school. Whether students had been to school previously or not, they had expectations for school. Those expectations are partly why I used whole-class structures and carefully structured pair work. These formats reflected their beliefs about how they were going to learn in the classroom, which I valued.

Prior Formal, School-Based Education and Classroom Learning

Some ways of supporting AERs are keeping language learning in context, using top-down and bottom-up processes, drawing from multiple approaches, tapping into strengths, and nurturing learners’ confidence (Vinogradov, 2009; Bigelow & Vinogradov 2011). Tapping into strengths has a different meaning for learners with more formal,

school-based learning experiences than learners with fewer such experiences. Brod (1999) compares “literate vs. non-literate learners” (p. 9), descriptors used in the past. (I am using asset-oriented descriptors, such as emergent readers, so please note that *non-literate* means AER, or “adult emergent reader”.)

For example, in general, experienced readers have been found to make lists to remember, while emergent readers are more likely to repeat to remember (Brod, 1999). Many emergent readers in the class described in this paper remembered the order of events in sequencing activities. They benefited from practicing listening to the words and repeating them with the teacher or a partner. Sometimes they were able to recount a four-word sentence more quickly than the experienced readers could. Meanwhile, the students who were able to write the complete sequence in words and read it benefited from hearing emergent reader classmates repeat the words.

Collaboration in Differentiated Instruction

The pedagogical strategies shared in this paper draw on collaboration and Differentiated Instruction (DI). Specifically, collaboration in mixed-level pairs and groups can turn regular activities into differentiated work for learners. Vinogradov’s (2013) research with LESLLA instructors documented this. One instructor, Mike, commented about independent reading time in a LESLLA classroom,

A pairing that I wouldn’t have thought of worked out really well. A Somali high-oral, low-literacy learner paired up with a newcomer low-oral, logographic reader. They happened upon a numbers page in a picture dictionary and were practicing together. The high-oral learner could read most of the numbers and the low-oral learner was trying to help sound out the spellings of some of the harder numbers (Vinogradov, 2013, p. 138).

Intentionally setting up different learners to work together to achieve their respective goals is one of the strategies of Differentiated Instruction (DI), “an approach that enables instructors to plan strategically to meet the needs of every learner” (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy Center [TEAL Center], 2017). Although the example above centers on differing literacy experiences, varied interests are also a primary way that learners differ (TEAL Center, 2017). In order to

differentiate for learners’ interests, instructors can modify content, process, and product (TEAL Center, 2017). In the description of experiences later in this paper, I focus on how I modified process and product to teach the same content to learners with a variety of interests and literacy levels.

Group Work

Challenges and benefits of group work

Although DI guides teachers toward effective teaching, it is not easy to implement. Danzi et al.’s (2008) research in U.S.-based third, fifth, and eighth grade classrooms describes a common experience of teachers with mixed ability classrooms, specifically, that it “leaves some teachers feeling as if they are teaching multiple grades simultaneously” (p. 31). In other words, often without a co-teacher or a teaching assistant, DI is difficult and takes effort to design carefully ahead of time.

Despite the challenges to teachers, researchers and teachers who explore multi-grade K-12 classrooms have found that such arrangements are associated with social-emotional and developmental benefits, although no difference in achievement or absences has been found (Proehl et. Al, 2013; Miller, 1991). Positive affective impacts are critical in an environment where students may feel a lack of confidence in their learning abilities (Brod, 1999).

To nurture learners’ confidence, teachers also have to consider the potential challenges of groups and pairs across levels. In Wismath and Or’s (2015) research with university students, one of the respondents explained that they didn’t want to work with unfamiliar people for fear of looking “dumb” or “incompetent” (p. 7). This is a reminder to teachers that putting learners in groups should be mindful, allowing learners to work with classmates with whom they are comfortable.

Wismath & Or (2015) further noticed that learning styles possibly influenced collaborative behavior. For instance, one student in their study reported that working with a variety of learning styles was challenging if the group did not all think the same way. Working with others who liked to read and write silently could get the work done efficiently. One consequence of always grouping together students of the same learning style was that he missed out on working with partners who initiated conversation so they could all start sharing ideas.

Similarly, I have observed that some learners are willing to work with anybody while others are reluctant to work with a classmate of a very different level. Besides the clear differences in level related to the tasks, there are certainly social factors at play, as well as the learning styles that Wismath and Or (2015) delineate. Some learners prefer to start their work quietly and consult each other intermittently while others prefer to talk it through from the beginning. In an introductory English class where learners may have sparse vocabulary, different ways of solving problems are still part of peer interactions.

Flexible grouping

Differentiated Instruction involves flexible grouping, which uses collaborative structures to respond to the various English levels of learners. Another way to describe flexible grouping is rotating between whole-class, individual, pair, and group work (Schneiderová, 2018). Flexible grouping breaks apart habitual seating arrangements, so students can interact with classmates they might not otherwise (TEAL Center, 2017). Additionally, flexible grouping permits learners to sit with speakers of other languages, if they typically sit by language groups (TEAL Center, 2017).

Teachers should be aware that, in implementing flexible grouping, there is a risk of unintentionally creating ability grouping, which is a controversial practice amongst some scholars (Steenbergen-Hu et. al, 2016). For instance, in Kim's (2012) study of Korean middle schools with ability grouping, beginner learners expressed low self-confidence and reported unfair treatment from teachers. However, Corley (2005) reminds teachers of adult literacy learners that flexible grouping reduces the chance that some learners will be labeled as fast or slow. Corley further describes how learners can form groups as they choose an activity and work with others who chose the same activity. Based on these recommendations, sometimes I placed learners in groups based on their ability and gave them different tasks which required different processes to learn the same content.

My main strategy for encouraging learner collaboration was pair work, but I also had to decide how to organize the pairs. In Mozaffari (2017), teacher-assigned pairs stayed more on-task than student-selected pairs. Most pairs showed a collaborative pattern of interaction, regardless of whether they were teacher-assigned or learner-selected. I chose a mixture of these options, since I usually did not ask more than

one student to move. Students worked with whomever they had chosen to sit next to that day, which varied since attendance was inconsistent for most students. However, I did choose some pairs to intentionally match more experienced readers with less experienced readers.

Challenges of Applying Differentiated Instruction Research

Despite the focus on collaboration described above, there were times when I purposely chose individual work for students. I did this while still seeking to differentiate the process for every student, which I accomplished by giving the students individual materials and stopping after at least some students had completed an activity. I told students that their work was finished once I felt that they had pushed themselves a little past what I knew them to be capable of doing. I also sometimes gave some students fewer tasks (e.g., fewer words to sort), knowing that it would take them as much effort.

However, notably, my attempts to establish different expectations did not lead to students completing their own work individually at their own pace, in most cases. Students at beginning levels were resistant to the expectation that sorting, for instance, four vocabulary words was enough when other students sorted six. They noticed that they were expected to do less work, as they saw it, than others. I observed students working together, without my prompting, to sort all the words, allowing the more experienced readers to complete the activity when they could not go any further. It became clear to me that the students wanted to assist each other and, if I continued with my plan, I would have been in the position of discouraging them. I would rather guide them toward collaborative habits that supported each other without giving away answers.

As I considered how to continue planning for DI, I hoped to draw on the ways that I saw students collaborate with each other. The structures that I delineate in the following activities utilize both whole-class and pair work, with flexible grouping to differentiate the process and the product (TEAL Center, 2017). The whole-class work eased students into working together by modeling each activity the way I envisioned it. The pair work made space for student-driven

collaboration, a format that I expected would feel familiar to students based on their interactions with classmates.

Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Bar Graph of Student Modes of Transportation

I adapted this from the grid activity in *Making It Real: Teaching Pre-literate Adult Refugee Students* by Croydon, Treat, & Bell (2005), which appears in Appendix A. This whole-class activity allows students with more experience with abstract tasks that are common to formal schooling environments to exercise their knowledge of graphic organizers. Further, it makes the contributions of all students necessary to complete the task and provides opportunities for practicing more foundational skills, such as counting and understanding **X** as a representation of counting a person. Most importantly, this activity includes tasks that are at the appropriate level for students with less experience with abstract tasks, while allowing all students to work on the same product together. For this activity, students will be able to:

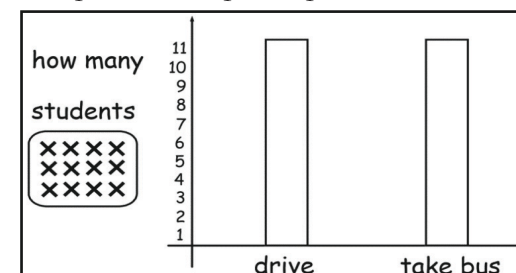
- Collaborate to create a bar graph using personal information from every student.
- Use transportation vocabulary to exchange information with a classmate.
- Mark a graph with their personal information or follow the examples of classmates.
- Respond to questions about the graph.

Creating a Graph Description

Procedures:

1. Before class, create a blank graph as shown in Figure 1, with vocabulary modified as appropriate for your class, or use a SMART Board template (see Appendix B).

Figure 1
Transportation Graph Template

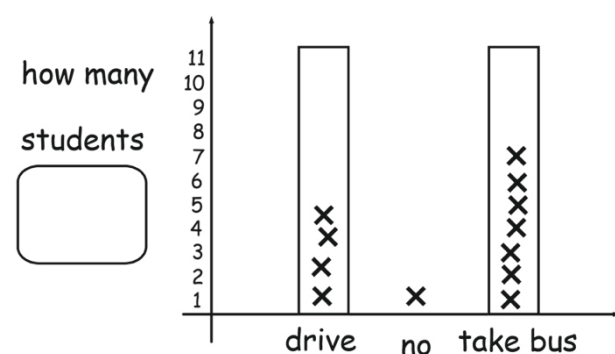


2. Introduce the topic or vocabulary set.
 - a. Share how you got to school and ask some students how they got to school. Use images of cars and local buses as needed.
3. Pose the question. Ask a student if they took a bus or drove a car to school today. Provide as much support as needed to communicate the question, keeping in mind that *today*, *car*, and *take a bus* are all words that students at most English levels commonly know. This activity is at the appropriate level if at least a few students can respond to this question with support.
4. Invite the student to place an **X** in the correct place on the bar graph. For teachers with SMART Boards in class, the student can practice dragging the **X**. On a white board, the student can practice writing or placing a magnet. Placing the **X** requires attention to lines and space, so this step builds spatial literacies no matter what tools are available.
5. Help the student choose a classmate and take on the role of "teacher." They have the same exchange as in step 4.
6. Continue until every student has taken a turn being the "teacher" and there is an **X** for every student on the board.
7. Count the **X**'s and ask questions, such as: "How many students?" "How many students take a bus?", "How many students (drive a) car?", and "What is more students, take a bus or car?"

Experiences with Creating Graphs in the Classroom

In the previous example, every student has to contribute to complete a graph of student information. The teacher can step back and allow students to complete the activity together until asking analytical questions about the graph (Step 7) or even after. While creating graphs such as these in my own classroom, I observed that students truly collaborated once they were familiar with the activity. Also, there were always some students who could teach others where the **X**'s must be placed. In one class, a student suggested adding a category, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Transportation Graph with "no"



In this way, the student gave me the opportunity to show that I welcome suggestions about how to structure the graph. They pointed to the middle of the graph on the SMART Board and said "no." I changed the graph on the computer and they dragged the **X** to the "no" category. This aligns with Vinogradov (2008), who describes how student-generated materials facilitate a memorable and engaging lesson. She writes, "The advantage of using student-generated texts is that the text is already comprehensible, meaningful, and interesting to the learner. Since the learner created it...he/she has ownership over those words and that story" (p. 6). The process of co-creation expands the collaboration from student-student interaction to student-student-teacher interaction, allowing teachers to take input from students. Drawing on student input, teachers can set up the same problem again

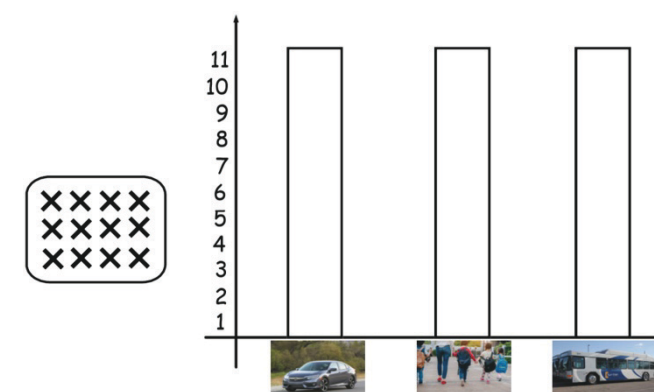
(e.g., one where students' experiences aren't all represented in the graph) and allow students to fix it. Teachers can also show students how their input was incorporated and transformed the graph, such as in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Transportation Graph with Modified Vocabulary



It can be difficult for emergent readers to learn what a graph represents when they are first looking at one; it is simply a series of lines and words arranged in a certain way. While translation can be helpful, if it is not available, I have found that students understand graphs and other abstract visual representations through repetition and simplified target language explanations. Supplemental images, such as those in Figure 4, also help.

Figure 4
Transportation Graph with Images



Activity 2: Collaborative Storytelling

This is adapted from an activity from the CommonBond Communities Literacy Curriculum, a resource from the Elder Literacy Initiative in Minnesota (Young & Vogl, 2014). The activity invites students to arrange photos to tell a story in their own words. Students are given four or five photos and a blank, numbered graphic organizer (see Appendices C and D). Students are encouraged to put the photos in any order that makes sense to them. Differentiation is built into the design of the original activity, but I emphasize how it can be used with the whole class and pair work to bring about collaboration across levels.

For this activity, students will be able to:

- Arrange a series of pictures in sequence.
- Use top-down or left-right directionality to position photos in order.
- Write numbers 1 - 5.
- Retell a simple story, placing events in sequence.
- Agree on an order and descriptions for the photos with a group or partner.

Procedures:

1. The teacher guides students in the following (or similar) steps, taking photos at each step:
 - Turn on hot water kettle.
 - Pour water in cup, as seen in Image A.
 - Put tea bag in cup, as seen in Image B.
 - Add honey/sugar.
 - Drink. (Step suggested by students.)

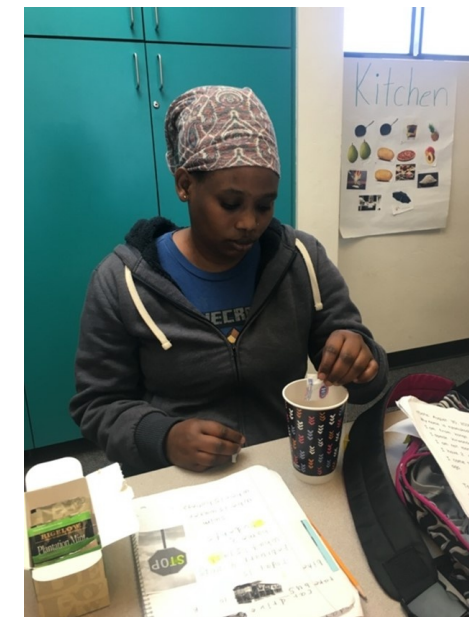
Image A

Students pouring water in cup



Image B

Students putting tea bag in water



2. Modify the specific target vocabulary to fit your classroom's needs. The task should produce about four photos, but the number of steps described above (five) was adjusted upon a student's suggestion to add *drink* to the sequence.
3. The next day or after a break, pairs of students receive printed photos and a blank graphic organizer.
4. Ask the whole class, "Number 1, what photo? Number 2? Number 3?" encouraging students to arrange the photos in a sequence from top to bottom or left to right. Glue or tape them in place.
5. Students write descriptions for each photo in pairs. Encourage students to reference the board or their notebooks.
6. Share students' work either by swapping papers or showing on a document camera. Sharing work allows students to see that all students' responses are acceptable answers.

Experiences with Collaborative Storytelling in the Classroom

I have used story organizers such as the one described above in class and gained some insights into how to facilitate collaborations and contributions across language proficiency levels. Story organizers help emergent reader learners develop left-to-right and top-to-bottom print directionality, and all learners can use this activity to practice reading and writing language that is familiar to them. Following, I offer some suggestions to better facilitate the activity.

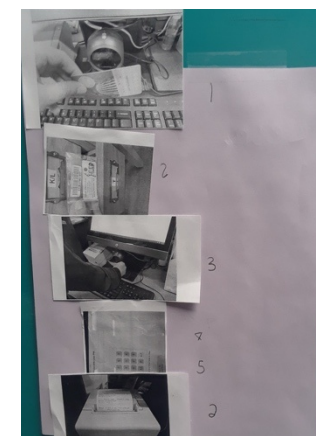
Flexible sequencing and building toward independent writing. To make sure instructions are clear, I recommend starting out using story organizers as a whole class, rearranging the photos together on a SMART Board. This is an important step because there may be students who are able to put the photos in order on their own but can only describe the photos if they have a model to copy from, despite that the story organizer allows students to write as little as a number per photo or as much as a sentence. By the second time using the task in my own classes, I encourage at least one-word responses and do not prescribe photo captions.

Considerations for paired sequencing activities. While I was teaching the class where I developed these practices, I shifted from using photo sequencing as an individual task to using it as a partnered task. First, we would do this activity as a whole class together, without me providing answers. Then the students sat with a partner and one

set of photos. They used a list of vocabulary words in the room or in their notebook to find the words that they chose to write for each number on the graphic organizer. After the shift, I noticed that the descriptions were usually as complex as I would expect from the more experienced writer in the pair; I interpreted this to mean that the more advanced writers in each pair were supporting the more novice writers. The following student work samples demonstrate additional ways that students may support one another, or that teachers can provide additional support in collaborative storytelling. In the activity shown in Figures 5, 6, and 7, students were tasked with sequencing photos of checking out items at the library. Students wrote words or numbers next to each corresponding picture, depending on which skill they were focusing on at the time. Figure 5 shows a sample from a pair that was working on correctly writing numbers.

Figure 5

Story Organizer Student Work Sample 1



To support emergent readers, the Elder Literacy Initiative's original worksheet is very useful because it includes the numbers 1 through 4 nearby to copy, or boxes in which to place the photos. A format that allows the photos to fit neatly on a page aids the students to organize photos, numbering, and writing; both Figures 6 and 7 show how I attempted that with a piece of paper, but I could have given students larger pieces of paper so the photos didn't dangle off the page.

Figure 6
Story Organizer Student Work Sample 2

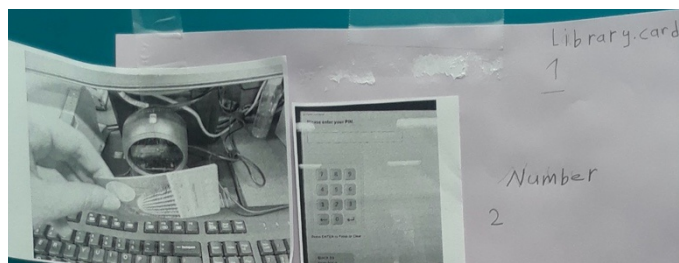
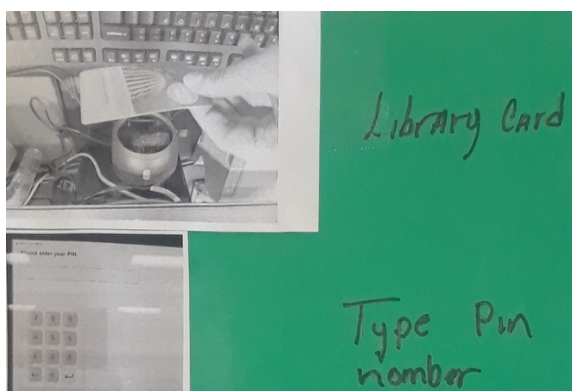


Figure 7
Story Organizer Student Work Sample 3



When pairing students at very different levels of experience with print literacy, the student with more experience may choose to write many words that the other student does not know. Regardless, both students have can learn something from the activity. Emergent readers can learn about the placement of objects from their partner, thus receiving literacy support. For instance, as shown in Figure 7, a student with more experience with alphabetic print literacy had turned the first photo upside down, which I saw their partner correct afterward. This is evidence of how both students can contribute, including the one learning about text directionality.

In collaborative storytelling, every student writes slightly different descriptions. The students with less experience in formal school settings appear to react more positively to a completed story organizer than to the product of working individually (with few or no supports) and attempting to produce as much language as possible. Such activities can cause frustration for emergent readers when they don't finish describing all the photos as quickly as others or write shorter descriptions. The spectrum of successful finished work for this activity helps students to see that they are all at different places in terms of language development, rather than two distinct groups.

Recommendations for Implementation

Each of the activities described above has its own strengths in supporting literacy development for adult emergent readers. Creating a graph engages emergent readers and more experienced readers alike through collaborative tasks. The process includes flexibility for student roles--from less complex tasks like writing numbers, to more complex ones like writing complete sentences. Instructors of multilevel classes can ask higher-level students to create a graph template by modeling graph creation on the board, erasing and inviting them to take a turn. After completing these activities multiple times, students in my classes knew what to do when I handed out photos and asked them, "Photo one? Photo two? Three? Four?" They also knew what to do with a graph and what tasks they could challenge themselves with. At the same time, these activities are not routine; they are adaptable for a wide range of topics in multilevel classrooms.

Additionally, teachers can use graphs to ask students what country they are from, what language they speak, if they live in an apartment or a house, or if they have been to a hospital. These are all questions that I have posed with graphs in emergent reader classrooms. Before and after creating graphs, I have also invited students to stand in a circle and toss a ball around asking a target question to one other and answering. While a graph is an abstract task, a ball toss reinforces the fact that students learn to ask questions. The ball toss is a common routine for question-and-answer practice in classrooms. Teachers can identify other familiar routines in their classrooms that can serve to introduce or review a question posed on a graph.

Similarly, story organizers are also a tool for teaching a range of topics. The Elder Literacy Initiative (2014) has story organizer photo

sets in units for Money/Shopping, Food, and Health/Appointments. To support all students, it is vital to choose a sequence that is already familiar. For instance, I created a photo set of checking out an item at the library and, while the students with the most experience in formal educational settings were able to put the photos in the correct sequence, others struggled since they were learning two things simultaneously: how to check an item out of the library and how to use English vocabulary to complete an abstract task. In contrast, making tea was familiar for all students so they could focus on the language needed to complete the task.

Conclusion

Teachers in multilevel classrooms with adult emergent readers can use collaborative activities with differentiation built in. Students often help those around them when they finish their own work and push themselves to achieve more when they see their classmates have harder tasks to accomplish. For instance, for the students in the classroom described above, part of the definition of school may have been standardization: that is, a belief that “all students work on the same assignments.” It was never my goal for students to change their expectations of what they could or should do. However, for teachers who encounter this belief as I did, one option is to leverage students’ tendencies toward peer mentorship and their desires to complete the same work. It worked well for this particular group of students. Based on my experiences with this class (and others like it), I recommend for teachers to experiment with matching students by similar level *and* to pair them across levels—any method to get them working together. However, every class is different and, overall, it is best to learn from your own students what works by trying different activities.

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Appendix A

Grid of Student Likes and Dislikes Croydon, Treat, & Bell, 2005

Model the new language.
Grids most naturally lend themselves to questions and answer format, but statements also work well.

Do you like pizza?
Do you like tea?
Do you like ice cream?
Do you like crab?

Mark the student's answers on the grid.

Repeat for the next student.

				
Mohamed	✓	✓	X	X
Hawa	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kadijah	✓	X	✓	✓
Abdi	✓	✓	X	✓

Appendix B

Transportation graph templates for teachers to use in class
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1oeGsr34nBxhWQUI2Fq7U8mVJSCKifvBd?usp=sharing>

This Google Drive folder contains a preview of the transportation activity described in this paper, as carried out on a SMART Board. As such, the document provides a template for creating your own SMART Notebook file. (Note that the X’s cannot be moved because they are permanent images.)

Appendix C

Blank Story Organizer
(Young & Vogl, 2014)

1	
2	
3	
4	

Appendix D

Story Organizer Health Photo Set (Young & Vogl, 2014)

