

Combining openness and structure in the initial literacy curriculum

A language experience approach for beginning teachers

"Do we really need another reading and writing scheme?" teachers may ask, when scanning the folder with the workbooks of the "ABC-Learning Environment"¹. But this superficial impression is deceptive: the ABC-LE is not a linear course of instruction, it is conceived as an open curriculum². The material offers children a set of tasks for independent work. Side-by-side children can work on different tasks. Corresponding to their respective levels of development they learn at different pace and each child in its own way. Moreover, the many tasks are "open" in another sense: they allow children to read and write about topics that are of personal interest.

This concept responds to the following assumptions about the conditions of literacy acquisition based on research of the last twenty years³:

- 1 Regarding print school beginners are no "blank slade" when they enter first grade. Therefore the idea of "introducing" print, letters and words by controlled instruction becomes problematic.
- 2 Between children the preschool experience of print differs tremendously, however. Therefore the idea of starting from the same point and progressing at the same pace through a graded scheme becomes problematic, too.
- 3 Mistakes necessarily accompany learning as a process of reiterated construction ("from invention to convention"). This insight questions the idea of conveying units of knowledge intact into the heads of children by drill and practice.
- 4 Learning is not the direct product of teaching; mechanistic models of cause and effect do not fit the nature of learning as an implicit ordering of experience. Therefore the idea of teaching the system bit by bit (practicing words or explaining rules) and storing these units in the heads of children as a basis for further learning is obsolete.

¹ Brinkmann, E., u. a. (2008ff.): ABC-Lernlandschaft. vpm/ Klett: Stuttgart.

² cf. for a general outline of this concept Brügelmann (1975) and for a concrete model related to early literacy Brügelmann (1986).

³ cf. for a detailed account: Brügelmann (1999). Our research heavily relies on the seminal work of Clay (1982), Ferreiro/ Teberosky (1982), Gentry (1982), Harste et al. (1984) and others working on similar lines in the 1970s and 1980s.

5 The advantages of direct teaching are restricted to the "playpen" of practiced skills and to short-term recall⁴. The developmental logic inherent in childrens constructions of orthographic systems filters what school offers; short term behavioural changes do not mirror cognitive progress.

6 Language experience as an "open" approach is not to be equated with laissez-faire on the one hand, or with whole word learning and context guessing on the other. Both, children and teachers need structures to be built into materials used and into the organization of activities⁵. Task demands have to correspond to the (psycho)logical structures of print (cf. our "didactic map", appendix 1). But structures have to support and not to restrict participation of children.

7 The evidence on effects of open classrooms is promising. Specifically research on the "writing to read" method supports the potential of a "language experience approach": it activates the personal experiences and interests of children, it allows for relevant uses of print from the beginning, it matches the early stage of orthographic development, it discloses the phonological basis and alphabetical nature of print, and orthographic spelling does not suffer in the long run.

Many teachers share these assumptions, they do not feel secure enough, however, to let children go their own way. Therefore, the ABC-LE has been developed as a set of materials organized within a structure that gives guidance and helps them to keep track of the progress and difficulties of single children⁶.

At a first glance many tasks in the ABC-LE may appear familiar. They have been changed in important details, however: they offer models and ask for specific activities, but do not expect blind imitation or simple rote learning. The tasks do not require to memorize isolated elements. They promote insights and the development of cognitive structures⁷.

Just one example: in phonics-centered reading schemes children often are asked to "synthesize" words that are presented to them letter by letter (or grapheme-wise). Many beginners end up by producing oral and semantic artefacts, since letters are polyvalent. We agree with the criticism of whole word approaches in that children have to learn to

⁴ cf. our comparison of orthographic achievement of East and West German children shortly after the fall of the wall in Brügelmann (1993).

⁵ cf. Dorr (2006) for a similar view.

⁶ cf. for comparable approaches in the U.S. McGee/ Richgels (2006) and in New Zealand Clay (2005), characteristic for ABC-LL, however, is that materials are provided for children for independent work - at different levels, in different order, and at their own pace.

⁷ cf. Brügelmann (1989).

recode words from letters and letter groups. Thus, we too present words grapheme-wise creating, however, another context by asking from the beginning: "Which word could grow out of this letter/ these letters?" For example, <c> can become "cow" and "car", but also "child" and "circus". In the next step we add <h> and it is clear, that "cow", "car" and "circus" are out; instead - besides of "child" - words like "choke" and "cheers" are possible. The task is not a mechanical one as if letters simply add up to words. It is necessary instead to develop a more comprehensive strategy combining two tactics so to speak: sounding out letters/ graphemes and activating semantic expectations stimulated by story context or by the personal vocabulary of spoken language.

At a more general level our "language experience approach"⁸ implies three principles⁹:

- starting from the *individual literacy experience* children bring to school from home and every-day life and
- offering activities that stimulate *new experiences with the functions and structures of print* and expand their competencies in this area
- by documenting and communicating *personal everyday experiences*, e.g. writing stories, and discovering new worlds by reading about the *experiences of others*.

A language experience approach in this sense is highly demanding for teachers because of the openness and variability required. Over the past 25 years we therefore have developed different types of support for them¹⁰. The ABC-LE contains the a differentiated set of tasks within the framework of the ABC-LE which is based on a four-pillar-model (cf. appendix 4) including:

- free writing of personal stories, initially by invented spelling¹¹ that is "translated" and complemented by the teacher in "book spelling";

⁸ In the German speaking countries the LEA does *not* rely on a whole word reading ("look and say") concept, but starts from free writing with invented spellings introducing children into phoneme-grapheme-correspondences from the beginning.

⁹ cf. for earlier conceptions of the LEA the seminal publications by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) and Paolo Freire (1972).

¹⁰ cf. the "Box of Activities for Literacy Classrooms" (Brinkmann/ Brügelmann 2010) containing 164 index cards with ideas that are organized within eight areas of learning of a "didactic map" (cf. appendix 1).

¹¹ cf. for the positive effects of invented spellings Adams (1980, 387): "*the process of invented spelling is essentially a process of phonics... The evidence that invented spelling activity simultaneously develops phonemic awareness and promotes understanding of the alphabetic principal is extremely promising*" and for more details the contributions to Henderson/ Beers (1980), Clarke (1988), McBride-Chang (1998), Brügelmann (1999), Richgels (2001; 2007); cf. for more comprehensive overviews: Anderson et al. (1985), Stahl et al. (1990); Torgersen et al. (2006). The research reported in these overviews provides additional evidence that a phonics orientation from the beginning is helpful, it does not require graded schemes, however.

- independent reading of individually selected books (e.g. easy to read texts¹²) that is stimulated by the teacher reading more demanding books to them and exchanging different views on the text;
- systematic introduction of elements such as grapheme-phoneme correspondences and basic methods of work such as using a spelling table for writing or the above mentioned strategy for sounding out words;
- collecting, clustering and practicing frequent words as well as those with common orthographic patterns in a pre-structured "Language Researcher" booklet¹³.

The set of materials contains carefully considered software for independent work with the computer, e.g. the "Speaking Table of Letters and Sounds" (cf. appendix 2) enabling children to construct unknown words during the alphabetic phase¹⁴ and the "Workshop for Building a Sight Vocabulary" supporting children at the beginning of the orthographic stage to acquire and remember high-frequency words.

As a complement to the ABC-LL, together with Bartnitzky et al. (2006) we have developed tasks that support children in working independently to gain basic insights or training specific skills - and at the same time help the teacher to keep track of individual progress. Strategy change rather than increasing correctness at the surface level is the basic criterion for this kind of observation.

Teachers experienced in open teaching can use modules like these to enrich their didactic repertoire. The ABC-LE does cover, however, all areas of competence important for initial readers and writers. In this respect the materials can provide the basic medium for grade 1, if a teacher plans to adopt an open approach for the first time.

In classes, where instruction is based on a traditional primer the use of selected materials may help to open up small spaces, at least, for more independent learning. This makes sense only, however, if the teacher takes seriously the didactic information and methodical commentaries, such as the observation aids at the end of the booklets, for example, and if s/he concedes to the children some freedom to choose tasks and to develop individual solutions.

¹² ...as offered, for example, by Balhorn et al. (2010) with their "Rainbow Box of Booklets" graded in five stages of increasing difficulty.

¹³ cf. Brinkmann et al. (2009).

¹⁴ cf. the stage models of Beers/ Henderson (1977), Frith (1985), Bear et al. (2008) for example, and more generally for the importance of invented spellings the literature quoted in note 11.

The specific potential of the ABC-LE would be wasted, if teachers simply tried to integrate tasks and materials in their familiar framework of teaching in a small steps at equal pace for all. They would miss the core idea of the approach using the materials offered simply as a quarry, without trying to understand the intentions of the authors and giving some choice of the tasks to the children. This is not always easy as is reflected in the evaluation of the ABC-LE. Nevertheless, teachers increasingly felt secure to give autonomy to children, as they saw their children working successfully on their own.

The ABC-LE offers teachers a great chance to open spaces for children to independently master basic skills of reading and writing without them being afraid that the children miss important experiences for successful learning in the area. Taking seriously the language experience approach implies to accept,

- that children have NOT to work through the materials in the same pace,
- that they NOT are given tasks in the same order (page by page),
- that that reading and writing attempts do NOT have to be correct from the beginning, but are seen as gradual acquisition of the conventions of reading and writing¹⁵.

It is therefore a pedagogical attitude, the distinguished the ABC-LE from more standardized reading and writing programmes - not merely a different method. On the other hand, the materials provided offer structure to both teachers and children and give security that often is missed in other versions of the LEA.

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¹⁵ cf. for more details Brügelmann (1999).

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Appendix 1: Didactic Map of the Learning Landscape of Initial Reading and Writing

Eight areas within which beginning reading experience can be offered to children

	Understanding different types and functions of symbols	
Analysis of oral language and distinction of phonemes	Understanding the structure of print and the technical role of its elements	Using written language in and for different contexts and purposes
Knowledge of letters in different fonts and writings	Grouping of letters and segmentation of words in frequent morphemes, syllables, etc.	Extending and automatic mastery of a personal sight word vocabulary
	Production and comprehension of different types of text	

Appendix 2: Lena's individual PC-version of the "Speaking Table of Letters and Sounds" (children select from the range of pictures with the same beginning sound the one they find most helpful; words can be pronounced by clicking on the corresponding picture)



Appendix 3: Stages of Development in Reading and Writing (cf. for more differentiated stage models Bear et al. 2008 and Ehri 2005, for example).

Four critical steps in the development of handwriting, spelling, and reading

Handwriting	Spelling	Reading
From aimless to directed scribbling	From analogous drawings to arbitrary symbols	From telling stories to mock reading
From scribbling to imitating shapes and experimenting with them	From arbitrary letter combinations to a sound-oriented shorthand	From mock reading to context oriented calling or naming
From single letters to letter rows	From sound skeleton to phonetic spelling	From context guessing to deciphering text
From rows of separate letters to connected movements ("melodies")	From sound analysis to orthographic patterns and finally specific orthographies of individual words	From conscious decoding to automatic decoding and comprehension guided by context and personal experience

Appendix 4: "Four Pillars" of a Rich Learning Environment

<p>Free Writing of Personal Texts (Graves 1983; Spitta 1985; 1992)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * invented spellings as direct route to print * no demand for complete orthographic correctness * revision of individually selected problems * correction (e.g. by teacher) for readability only * selecting personally important words for practice 	<p>Reading from Books and Other Children's Texts Individually and (Aloud) in the Group (Bambach 1989; Niemann 1993/95)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * motivation for reading and writing * tacit knowledge of patterns of written language * encountering different types and styles of texts * material for implicit orthographic learning
<p>Developing and Using Aids / Methods to Spell (Balhorn 1989; Brinkmann/ Brügelmann 1993)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * sensitivity for orthographic problems * group discussions about "traps and tricks" * consulting a dictionary and other index systems * systematically studying and remembering spellings * recognizing the stem principle and derivations * jointly formulating "rules" * "research" on orthographic history of words 	<p>Collecting, Sorting, Practicing: Working With (Structured) Word Samples (Balhorn et al 1990/96; Brinkmann/Brügelmann 1993)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * frequent, personally important, orthographically exemplary words * tasks for collecting, analyzing and ordering words according to orthographic criteria * practice with index cards and "word lists" * different types of (self) dictation as learning aids