

## ***KEY WORDS WITH LADYBIRD FOR ELLS***

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I was delighted when Angelika Infante came to our Professional Development last month and emphasized the need to teach the sight words to our English Language Learners. I have been using a sight word based reading curriculum with my ELLs for the past 3 years with exceptional results, and I want to thank Abby Baruch for inviting me to share it with you.

The sight word reading curriculum I have been using is called, Key Words with Ladybird. For 40 years, it has been the reading curriculum of choice in England, a country which enjoys a literacy rate of 99% and the highest literacy scores in the English speaking world. Over 80 million copies of the Ladybird readers have been sold.

The scientific basis of the Key Words with Ladybird reading scheme is the use of key words. This is the name given to a group of the most used words of the language. The reverse side of the first page of my handout lays out the Key Words Reading Scheme. Research has established that a relatively few English words form a very high proportion of those in everyday usage. In fact, looking at the diagram on the right hand side, you will see that...

The first 12 Key Words make up 1/4<sup>th</sup> of those we speak, read and write.  
The first 100 Key Words make up 1/2 of these we speak, read and write.  
About 300 Key Words account for 3/4ths of those we speak, read and write.

Instead of having to master the bulk of the words in a dictionary, the Key Words boil down 75% of the work to just a few pages.:  
300 words and our English Language Learners are 3 quarters of the way there! Imagine the feeling of accomplishment! Of early success, if we, as teachers, focus on these!

As you can see on the front page of my handout...

There are a total of 12 reading levels in the Key Words with Ladybird curriculum:

Level 1 introduces the beginning reader to the first 12 Key Words.

Levels 1 through 4 introduces the most important 100 Key Words.

Levels 1 through 8 introduces the most important 300 Key Words.

Levels 9 through 12 include nearly 2,000 common words and bring the learner to fuller reading fluency.

The books are written using a controlled vocabulary so that the new words are introduced gradually, have a high rate of repetition and are carried over to following books in the series. The first books are written using very few words to aid understanding, so the learner can make a rapid and confident start.

The main body of the reading scheme consists of three parallel sets (a, b, and c), each set being made up of 12 graded readers (or 12 levels), and are illustrated throughout. At the first level there are 3 books: 1a, 1b and 1c. [display] All three sets are written using the same carefully controlled vocabulary. Each of these 3 books contains the same 16 words, but is otherwise different in text and illustrations. Book 1a is read first, then Book 1b, and finally 1c, which provides the link with writing.

The learner then proceeds to the second level, and reads Book 2a. This book contains the same 16 words already learned, but also has 27 new words. These 16 plus 27 words are also to be found in Books 2b and 2c.

The aim of presenting 3 books at each level, all using the same vocabulary yet different in content, is to maintain a high rate of repetition of words while maintaining the interest of the child. Children who learn to read quickly, or those who are using additional books from another reading scheme, can if they wish, read straight through the 'a' set (Books 1a-12a) without the use of the 'b' and 'c' books, as there is a complete carry-over of new words from stage to stage.

The controlled vocabulary, beginning with the most common sight words, and gradually introducing new ones combined with high repetition of each word and simple sentence construction, make this curriculum especially accessible to our ELL population.

I discovered that I could introduce reading to beginner level, new arrival ELLs. They didn't have to wait to read until they had acquired a substantial vocabulary. In fact, this reading scheme serves to combine the teaching of reading with the initial teaching of a second language. A new arrival might only know 20 words, yet begin to read Level 1 of the Key Words with Ladybird. It is an excellent vehicle not only for teaching reading, but for introducing the sight words to ELLs.

In summary, the Ladybird readers teach reading and English at the same time. They provide a focal point for speaking and listening exercises. Ladybird text-to-self connections make for nice little conversations. The book themes cover common everyday activities, which are the focus of English as a second language instruction as well. For example, the first 5 books in the A series have the titles, "Play with Us;" "We Have Fun;" "Things We Like;" "Things We Do;" "Where We Go..." These themes provide a spring board for great beginning ESL lessons.

In other words, using the Ladybird readers brings together BICS and CALPS. The CALPS, the serious literacy pieces, don't have to wait until the BICS are established.

Further, the Ladybird readers introduce new words in context, in narrative form—much more fun than vocabulary lists used in isolation. This also conforms to what the linguists teach us, namely that ELLs learn new words through usage: hearing and seeing them repeated in a variety of ways. Yet vocabulary lists are included both at the bottom of the page and at the back of each reader, so the student can refer to them for speaking and writing exercises.

Not only do the Ladybird Key Words readers introduce the most common words first, but they also begin with the most basic syntactical structures. The first conjunction introduced is "and," and complex sentences do not appear for several levels. The beginning ELL can therefore tackle these readers very early on, even if they are only speaking short phrases. At the same time, they are learning the elements of basic sentence construction as they work their way through these books.

## Successful Results:

Over the past three years, I have been applying the Ladybird Key Words Reading scheme to teaching ELLs with notable success.

Two years ago, I had a group of Ladybird students, 1<sup>st</sup> graders, who rose to be among the strongest readers in their regular class. Three of them passed the NYSESLAT at the end of the year.

Last year, one new arrival went from 0 on the LAB-R test to Advanced on the NYSESLAT by the end of the same year. She was also reading on level 3 of the Ladybird Key Words readers. Today, she reads on Ladybird, level 8 and is one of the strongest readers in her regular first grade class.

Last year, over 60% of my ELLs moved up at least one notch over the course of the year, and a couple moved up two notches, that is, from Beginner to Advanced. Of my special education ELLs, 50% moved up a notch. All of the students made significant progress, for example, a couple of new arrivals who began with 0 knowledge on the LAB-R completed their first year at high Beginner level.

Students who otherwise can't seem to catch onto reading English, can hook on with these readers, and this includes students who are in Special Education. I found transitions from book to book to be smoother than anything else I have used, because of the focus on sight words, the gradual manner with which new words are introduced and the high repetition of each word.

Where can you buy this curriculum?

The Ladybird Key Words curriculum can be purchased through Bank Street Bookstore at Broadway and 112<sup>th</sup> Street, 212-678-1654. Each of the 36 books in the curriculum sells for about \$4.00. One full set of the curriculum is about \$145 plus tax, but it is open stock and you can purchase as little or as much of it as you like. It is ordered and received in a month's time.

## FURTHER DETAILS:

How I, myself, found the Ladybird curriculum:

My experience in grad school using frequency lists in 2<sup>nd</sup> lang. acquisition; also reading knowledge of a language first. At Bank Street Bookstore, when I inquired into a sight word based curriculum, this is what the staff referred to—as they explain, it's unique in this regard.

More on Ladybird readers being good for teaching the fundamentals of the English language:

The Parts of Speech Covered in the first 4 books:

In analyzing the composition of the Key Words in the first four levels, I have discovered that the students are introduced to 46 nouns, 13 pronouns, 29 verbs, 7 prepositions, 2 conjunctions, 3 articles, 10 adjectives and 11 adverbs. Such is the grammatical composition of the 120 most common English words—it covers nearly all the parts of speech. Since these words comprise more than ½ of what we all use everyday, in speaking, reading and writing, the ELLs who follow this curriculum are quickly on their way to mastering English.