

USING THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH AS A PART OF  
DIFFERENTIATED LITERACY INSTRUCTION

by

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers often encounter groups of students with wide varieties of levels of readiness in literacy skills because of students' different educational backgrounds and previous English instruction. These students want to learn English for a variety of reasons. Some need to speak English for business or employment. Some enjoy studying languages. Others take English classes because they like the community experience. These students also come to English classes with a wide variety of educational backgrounds and life experiences. Some studied English in schools or universities. EFL students could have a basic secondary level education or advanced degrees.

Some students never had opportunities to study English. For example, in the Czech Republic, where this study was conducted, public schools did not offer English instruction until 1989. Many participants in this study grew up under a political regime that did not allow English instruction in most public schools. However, in 1989, the people's revolution ushered in a new government. Almost overnight, a large percentage of the student population began studying English, since they were suddenly free from decades of limitations instituted by the former regime. Some of the younger participants in this study were offered the chance to study English in public schools.

Although, little research addresses how to engage adult English Language Learners (ELLs) with wide varieties of readiness in English reading skills, one approach to engaging learners with different levels of readiness is differentiated instruction. In recent years, differentiation of instruction has become a popular topic in education as an approach to adapting curriculum to meet the needs of individual learners rather than expecting all learners to adapt to one curriculum (Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999, 2001;

Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Much of the research on differentiation is written for K-12 educators and recent research on differentiation does little to address the needs of teachers of groups of older EFL students who have mixed levels of readiness.

### My Experience Teaching Adult EFL Students

When I began a new teaching assignment in a community education program in the Czech Republic, I was faced with a group of adult EFL students with a wide variety of English reading abilities. Students enrolled in my "intermediate" level English class of their own free will. They actually ranged, however, from beginning to advanced English readers. Some of my students read aloud slowly and haltingly and they could not comprehend a complete sentence in English while others could fluently read and easily comprehend English.

My students' erratic attendance created an additional challenge because my class was always changing, with some people showing up one week and a different group of people showing up the next week. These students were under no obligations to take my class. Attendance was voluntary. The course fee was nominal. Many of the students had frequent absences due to family responsibilities, work obligations, or illness. Students were joining and dropping out of the class throughout the year. We could not build on what had been done earlier in the year because of the inconsistent attendance so I tried to implement curriculum that was not necessarily built on previous lessons.

Using LEA in my class proved to be a useful strategy for teaching adult EFL students in a class with erratic attendance because each LEA lesson with supplementary activities could be completed in two or three lessons and did not necessarily require previous instruction. Even the newest students with the least English skills could

contribute something to the LEA story when they were grouped with students at similar levels of English skills. Writing LEA stories did not require any specific skills from previous lessons, although students could and many did use what they learned. Students could use all their background knowledge of English with LEA.

LEA is based on an experience shared by a group of learners, who create their own text. Key vocabulary words are taught to students before they write their text. After the text is created, it can be used as part of subsequent lessons with the same group of students. Supplemental activities can be done with an LEA text so one topic could be completed in a few class periods (Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Moustafa, 1987; Savage, 1992). For example, students can receive a photocopy of the LEA text so they can identify vocabulary words in the text.

I also used LEA as a way to differentiate instruction for my students. Changing student grouping from whole class instruction to similar-proficiency groups is a part of flexible grouping, a hallmark of effective differentiated instruction. For example, students can be grouped based on similar proficiency levels, different proficiency levels, cooperative groups, student selected groups, teacher selected groups, pairs, and whole class groups (Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Dividing my class into groups allowed me to differentiate activities by student readiness. Each group used their own student generated story according to typical LEA procedures.

The positive results I had seen from using LEA in my past experiences piqued my interest in using it as a topic for this research. I became interested in using it more and finding out better ways to use it in my instruction. I wanted to develop better lessons that could engage all the students in my class at all levels. LEA showed itself to be effective at engaging the students at even the lowest readiness levels. However, I also wanted to challenge the students at the highest levels of readiness so I used flexible grouping as a

part of differentiated instruction (Heacox, 2002). I wanted to match my curriculum with students' readiness levels. LEA works because it uses students' prior knowledge and experience, which are elements of best practices in teaching (Freeman & Freeman, 2000, 2002; Wiggins & Mctighe 1998).

LEA provides an additional means of assessing students' literacy skills. Test scores cannot give a complete picture of what subjects from a different culture know about the content being tested, so researchers should build into their research design several ways to find out what their subjects understand about their tasks (Griffin, 1990; Jimenez, 2004). State mandated standardized tests often contain content that requires cultural background knowledge. For example, one test contains a reading passage that describes a family reunion where the characters play a game of tag, fish in a stream, and eat brownies. Some students may have never played tag, gone fishing, or eaten brownies so they are at a disadvantage to answer questions about that reading passage. Even standardized tests designed especially for ELLs contain pictures and drawings that may be difficult for some students to comprehend. ELLs may not comprehend some black line drawings because they don't understand the conventions of drawings (Hvitfeldt, 1985; Griffin, 1990). In fact, ELLs show higher levels of literacy attainment when they receive instruction using instructional media familiar to them (Griffin, 1990).

### Research Gap

The recent increase in ELLs in the U.S. and the demand for speakers of English as an international language has led to concern among educators as to how to most effectively teach English reading skills to teen and adult students. Some recent research has suggested that teachers use curriculum that is culturally relevant, builds on the

experiences of learners and taps students' background knowledge in order to help emerging readers achieve comprehension (Jimenez, 2004; Toledo, 1998; Freeman & Freeman, 2002). There is more than a century of research that claims LEA is effective with beginning readers (Cooke, 1900; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Smith, 1973). But little research has examined whether LEA is an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for adult EFL students.

Teachers need ideas they can apply immediately in their classrooms. There are limited resources such as low-level books for teachers to use with older ELLs that are culturally relevant and age-appropriate. In other words, there is a lack of materials that are low level but without pictures of babies and bunnies! Some ESL teachers have few books besides out-of-date hand-me-down books that nobody else wants to use anymore or books purchased personally by the teacher. It is difficult to find relevant materials that are age-appropriate at low levels for older learners. Fortunately, teachers can learn new instructional approaches at little or no cost.

The question remains, Is LEA an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students? This present study seeks to answer this research question:

Is LEA an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide range of proficiency levels?

I answer this question by analyzing data from research in which I used LEA as a part of differentiated literacy instruction. In order to differentiate by flexible grouping, I divided participants into two groups using results from a questionnaire and pre assessment test results. Then I collected data from teacher-developed post-tests which helped me determine if the instruction was effective. Going through this process and answering this question made me a better teacher. It may also be of interest to other researchers and ESL/EFL teachers.

Chapter Two describes some of the current and past research on topics of differentiated instruction, literacy acquisition in a native language, English literacy acquisition for ELLs, and LEA. Chapter three explains the methods used in this study. Chapter four reports the results and analyzes the data. Chapter five addresses the implications of this study.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Increasingly, students with unique backgrounds and different levels of emerging literacy skills are being placed together in classrooms. Therefore, teachers need to adapt their curricula in order to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners. In recent years much has been written about differentiation as a way of adaptation (Gentz, 2003; Fullerton, 2002; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999 & 2001; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003) and using students' prior experience in classroom lessons (Freeman & Freeman, 2000, & 2002; & Wiggins & Mctighe, 1998). The Language Experience Approach (LEA) has received support from other research as an effective approach for teaching native English-speaking beginning readers (Cooke, 1900; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; & Moustafa, 1987) and ELLs (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001) using their prior experiences. However, little research has combined those two areas to determine whether LEA is an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students.

This chapter includes a review of literature on differentiation, literacy acquisition in a native language (L1), English literacy acquisition by ELLs, and LEA. Then I describe the need for this study by looking at some practical applications of research on LEA. Finally, I express the purpose of this study and state my research question: Is LEA an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide range of proficiency levels?

## Differentiation

Teachers often have groups of students with wide varieties of levels of readiness, which refers to the current knowledge, understanding, and skill level a student has related to a given lesson (Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Students in classes with wide ranges in levels of proficiency often need more options in the curriculum. Much has been written on this topic, calling it differentiation (Gentz 2003; Fullerton, 2002; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999 & 2001; & Tomlinson & Cuningham-Eidson, 2003). Differentiation is a student-centered approach to teaching that seeks to engage students with ideas they can relate to and connect to their lives through providing choices in the curriculum in order to increase the likelihood of academic success (Heacox, 2002). Differentiation can be described as personalized instruction; although that does not necessarily mean that each student will have his or her own curriculum. Rather, differentiation provides options, levels, and opportunities for all students (Gentz, 2003; & Tomlinson, 1999 & 2001). For example, students may be given a couple choices in which text they will read.

Differentiation is a process of adapting instruction to make it accessible and challenging for all learners (Tomlinson, 2001). A teacher who differentiates uses a holistic and meaningful approach to the curriculum. Units are planned around a few key concepts that will help students relate to, organize, and remember what they study. Each unit has a defined set of facts and terms that are essential for students to know in order to understand the topic. The list of facts, terms, and skills should come from the teacher's knowledge of the discipline and the state's learning standards (Tomlinson, 1999). Essential questions can be used to engage students and help them see the connections

between the lesson and their lives. Students can be involved in goal setting and decision making in curriculum decisions (Tomlinson, 1999; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

There are three student characteristics that teachers can respond to when planning differentiated instruction. This study will address only one of them, student readiness, which refers to the proficiency level of the student (Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). For example, some EFL students in a class may be proficient enough to decode and comprehend an intermediate level textbook. However, others may be proficient in decoding and comprehending only beginning level texts (Law & Eckes, 1995). Decoding refers to the ability to read aloud a passage and comprehension refers to understanding a passage.

Certain principles distinguish a differentiated classroom from other classrooms. First, learning experiences are based on a diagnosis of student readiness. Second, content, activities, and products are developed in response to varying needs of learners. Needs of students include readiness as well as other factors such as interest. Third, teaching and learning are focused on key concepts, understandings, and skills. Finally, flexible grouping is implemented (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Flexible grouping means the teacher instructs students in various groups. Groupings can be determined by similar proficiency levels, mixed proficiency levels, cooperative groups, whole class, pairs, student selected, teacher selected, or randomly selected groups (Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Flexible groupings according to similar proficiency levels and whole class instruction were used in this present study.

The three elements of classroom instruction that can be differentiated by teachers and are used in this present study are content, process and product (Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). First, content means what students learn. For

example, students may choose one of two texts to read. Second, process means the activities students perform during the course of a lesson. One example of differentiation by process is tiered assignments, which present work at different levels of difficulty (Gentz, 2003; Fullerton, 2002; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). Third, product is what students produce. Differentiated product may be two different written responses to a prompt by two writers.

Bloom's taxonomy can be used as a guide to developing tiered assignments at varying levels of challenge. Bloom's taxonomy is often used by educators as a guide to differentiate between higher order thinking skills and lower order thinking skills as they relate to producing questions for educational activities and tests. The different levels of Bloom's taxonomy in order from most concrete to most abstract are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. For example, the simplest tiered assignment, at the knowledge level, may ask students to fill in blanks. A more challenging tiered assignment, at the synthesis level, may be to compose an essay.

The following are concrete examples of differentiated instruction which are used by high school teachers according to Nunley (2006):

**Differentiated Content:**

Require “running assignments” which continue for a whole grading period and can be completed in students’ spare time such as book reports (14).

**Differentiated Process:**

List vocabulary students need to learn and give them choices in how to do that. Students can learn vocabulary by a) Writing the word, the definition, and their own definition. b) Dividing the words with a

classmate, then making flashcards and quizzing each other for 20 minutes (15).

**Differentiated Product:**

Require small-group discussion of homework. Have students (a) discuss what they have learned and what they still struggle with, and (b) get peers' feedback on their progress. Have students ask questions and find a peer who can provide the answer (16).

A growing new area of research has erupted regarding differentiating instruction for children as U.S. classrooms become increasingly diverse in ethnicities and educational backgrounds; however, little research has addressed differentiation for groups of adult EFL students. The present study focuses on differentiating content, product, and process according to student readiness for a group of adult EFL students in the researcher's classroom. The content, product, and process of this study are literacy-based, using LEA, so knowledge of how people acquire literacy is essential.

### Literacy Acquisition in a Native Language

Literacy acquisition is relevant to this study because knowledge of how people acquire literacy in their L1 can help teachers to plan more effective literacy instruction. In the U.S.A. teachers have been instructing beginning readers of English in primary schools in their L1 for quite some time, although in recent years, ESL and EFL instruction have been in more demand. The increasing globalization of business and travel has made English the international language, so there has been an increase in the

demand for EFL instruction worldwide. Also, since the latter part of the twentieth century, the U.S. has received an influx of non-English speaking immigrants of all ages who have a wide variety of literacy skills. Some understanding of the meaning of the term *literacy* and the components of beginning literacy instruction is required in order to determine if LEA can be used as an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide range of proficiency levels.

### Literacy Defined

Literacy is essentially proficiency in reading and writing. Webster (1976) defines "literate" as able to read and write or versed in literature or creating writing. A more precise definition of *literacy* is the ability to use and interpret graphic symbols to represent spoken language (Griffin 1990, p. 39). Participants in this present study meet that criterion in their native language. However there were some participants who did not meet that standard in English. The following research describes the components of reading instruction that help learners develop literacy.

### Components of Beginning Reading Instruction

There are five components of beginning reading instruction. These components include: phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle are considered the most important predictors for reading success. Learners' ability to quickly name letters and phonemic awareness are the most salient predictor of reading success for young children in general education classrooms (Windemuller, 2004).

First, phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds (Birch, 2002). It includes the ability to distinguish sentences and words within sentences. Given

a word, students with phonemic awareness can identify beginning, middle, and ending sounds. For example, they can tell you there are three sounds in the word "cat". Also, they can manipulate sounds by replacing one sound with another to create a different word, such as changing "bat" to "cat". Exposure to rhyming words also develops phonemic awareness in children. Phonemic awareness also helps learners to identify syllables. The ability to distinguish sounds is necessary in order to develop understanding of the alphabetic principle.

The second component of beginning reading is the alphabetic principle, which refers to the ability to associate sounds with letters and use these sounds to form words (Birch, 2002; Windmueller, 2004). Phonemes are represented by letters of the alphabet. Cunningham (2000) has developed a curriculum based on the alphabetic principle called *Systematic Sequential Phonics They Use*. This curriculum uses letter tiles as manipulatives. Given a set of letter tiles, students move the tiles around to spell words the teacher reads.

The third component of beginning reading is fluency with text. Fluency refers to a reader's effortless, automatic ability to read words in connected text. A reader with good fluency can easily decode text. A lack of fluency produces a slow, halting pace, frequent mistakes, poor phrasing, and inadequate intonation (Blevins, 2005). Automaticity frees a reader's cognitive resources so he or she can put more effort into comprehension (Blevins, 2005; Windmueller, 2004).

Automaticity refers to the reader's proficiency in accurately and quickly recognizing many words as whole units. Before readers develop automaticity, written words are meaningless strings of letters. The advantage automaticity brings is that words have meaning, so they can be remembered much more easily than a meaningless string of letters. The average native English-speaking child needs four to 14 exposures to a word

in order to achieve automaticity (Blevins, 2005). Some participants in this present study could decode an English passage yet they struggled with comprehension of the same passage.

The fourth component of beginning reading is vocabulary. Vocabulary refers to the ability to understand and use words to acquire and convey meaning. This component can be a key to reading comprehension. If students decode fluently, yet they do not understand the vocabulary, they are prevented from comprehending the text. Many of the participants in this present study have some English literacy skills, yet they lack English vocabulary necessary for comprehension of the text.

The fifth and final component of beginning reading is comprehension. Comprehension is a complex cognitive process involving intentional interaction between the reader and a text in order to convey meaning. Comprehension strategies for beginning readers may include looking at pictures and reading titles and captions. Other comprehension strategies may include application of syntactical knowledge in order to ascertain the function of a word or application of semantic knowledge in order to choose a word that fits the context of the sentence. Teachers can model the comprehension process by thinking aloud. Development in the components of beginning reading is typical for young native English speaking children who enter school at the traditional age; however, the process takes longer for ELLs.

### English Literacy Acquisition for ELLs

#### L2 Literacy Acquisition

While much research exists on literacy acquisition for children, relatively little research can be found explaining how to approach L2 literacy instruction for adult ELLs.

In order to achieve literacy skills, ELLs need exposure to English in multiple ways, vocabulary instruction, and opportunities to practice using English in meaningful contexts (Windmueller, 2004). Lack of vocabulary is one of the major obstacles for the ELL reader (Birch, 2002). The first step in L2 literacy is listening comprehension, which is actually a pre-reading step (Birch, 2002). Teachers can use auditory discrimination activities to develop students' listening comprehension. Minimal pairs are often used in auditory discrimination activities. For example, students signal when they hear ch- in the words: chin, win, chair, fair. Participants in this present study often showed they could distinguish minimal pairs according to my observations of our lessons.

Literacy is more abstract than speaking and listening. In conversation, word meaning comes from the context of speaking (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; & Griffin 1990). Spoken messages are context embedded because they occur with intonation, stress, and nonverbal actions that all contribute to the meaning of the utterance (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). Writing, however, establishes a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent which is more general and abstract. (Griffin 1990).

Oral reading fluency is the most important component for ELLs' overall literacy achievement (Windmueller, 2004). Fluency is a predictor of reading success for ELLs just as it is for native English speakers. In Windmueller's (2004) study, ELLs who improved reading fluency attained significant improvement in literacy achievement. Furthermore, oral language skills significantly predicted overall reading, writing, and oral language achievement. Following is a list of many ways to develop ELLs' fluency adapted from Blevins (2005).

1. Teachers should model reading fluently or present books on tape (14).

2. Teachers should provide direct instruction and feedback to students by conducting speed drills, allowing students to read a lot, and teaching appropriate phrasing and intonation. Grammar instruction helps students learn phrasing in sentences (14).
3. Teachers should support readers through providing activities such as choral reading, reading while listening, echo reading, reader's theater, paired reading, and books on tape (14).
4. ELLs need to read a passage repeatedly (15).
5. Teachers should cue phrase boundaries in text. Any passage can be marked with a slash between syntactical phrases and double slashes (//) between sentences (15).
6. Provide ELLs reading materials at their independent reading levels. They should accurately read 95% of all words in a given text (15).

ELLs should build their knowledge of morphemes, rimes, and syllables through extensive reading practice as they learn new words in English. English syllables are made up of onsets and rimes. The onset is the first consonant in a syllable and the rime is the vowel and last consonant. Words that have the same rimes with different onsets are called word families or phonograms. For example, members of the “-at” word family include bat, cat, and sat. Readers of other more transparent alphabets that have closer relations of graphemes to phonemes do not use rime awareness, so they must be explicitly taught rime awareness. Rime familiarity has been found to help English readers (Birch, 2002). ELLs can also build their knowledge of morphemes inductively by comparing words with or without prefixes, such as kind and unkind. Or they can compare suffixes

that change the part of speech of a word, such as care and careful (Birch, 2002; McBride-Chang, et al., 2003).

ELLs should also learn the two processes of phoneme segmentation fluency and decoding simultaneously, so the two skills work together. Phoneme segmentation occurs when a learner separates the phonemes in a given word. For example the teacher says “sat” and the student says /s/, /a/, /t/. ELLs should be taught phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle together. However, knowledge of the sounds and names of letters is not necessarily a prerequisite for ELLs to read (Birch, 2002; Windmueller, 2004). In Windmueller's (2004) study, first grade students were able to quickly decode nonsense words even though they had not mastered phoneme segmentation.

ELLs' ability to decode written words does not necessarily mean they comprehend what they are reading. ELLs can recognize and recite words without comprehending them (Griffin 1990). Therefore, it is important to pre-teach the vocabulary to students before they read. Then they can understand the meanings of the words presented in their lessons. In my observations I have seen students recognize and read aloud a written word without understanding it. In this study, I also observed participants decode well and yet they struggled with comprehension of the same passage. Comprehension skills can be taught through various media.

Students' familiarity with the type of instructional media used in lessons strongly influences literacy acquisition (Griffin, 1990; & Hvitfeldt, 1985). Griffin's (1990) study demonstrated that students learning with instructional media familiar to them acquired English literacy faster than students who used instructional media that were unfamiliar to them. Participants were more familiar with watching video as an instructional media than photographs or flash cards. Consequently, those participants who were given videos to

watch acquired English literacy faster than those who were instructed with photographs and flashcards.

Experience methods may actually inhibit literacy acquisition rather than promote it. Instruction using live teacher demonstration with real objects may inhibit ELLs' acquisition of English literacy skills even though it has been an effective method for promoting development of oral and aural skills. During a live demonstration there are many things happening that may confuse the student. The ELL may not discern what they are expected to focus on. Students may not make connections between verbal and nonverbal stimuli. It may be even more difficult to make the connection between nonverbal stimuli and written words. The teacher demonstration method distracts from literacy because it overloads ELLs with verbal and nonverbal information (Griffin, 1990).

### L2 Reading Models

It is important to understand the models of L2 reading because they can help to identify effective instruction. There are three reading models: top-down, bottom-up, and integrative. Top-down and bottom-up refer to the flow of information from the reader to the text and from the text to the reader. The integrative model incorporates both perspectives (Birch, 2002; Windmueller, 2004). This subsection on the topic of ELLs acquiring English literacy explains each of the three models.

The Top-Down Reading Model. The top-down reading model is one of three models of reading in the area of L2 literacy and it has dominated the field for quite a while (Birch, 2002). The top-down reading model suggests that learners can develop comprehension using broad-based skills, such as reading and vocabulary strategies, cultural knowledge, and appreciation of reading. LEA, the approach used in this study, fits into the top-down reading model because it uses students' prior experience to create

authentic student-generated text. Learners build their vocabulary and acquire literacy through a natural, student-centered approach to reading (Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Hall, 1981; Heller 1988; Herrel, 2000; Hildreth, 1965; Moustafa, 1987; Savage, 1992).

Reading instruction using the top-down model should focus on making meaning rather than getting text details right. Students will acquire academic language as they read. Some strategies for constructing meaning include sampling the text and making predictions. When readers sample the text they look at words and phrases rather than focusing on the phonological environment in which letters occur. ELLs face unique challenges in making predictions because often they do not recognize English spelling patterns or syntax patterns (Freeman & Freeman 2000).

According to the top-down reading model, students need time to read rather than to be explicitly taught phonemic awareness. Learners subconsciously acquire graphophonic cues. Graphophonics refers to the combination of visual, sound, and phonemic information that readers use when they scan a text. For example, letters and punctuation are graphophonic cues. Readers use these cues to construct meaning. For example, students may identify letters, decide on sounds, and connect visual and sound information while reading (Freeman & Freeman, 2000). This reading model contrasts with the bottom-up model, which I will describe next.

The Bottom-Up Reading Model. The bottom-up reading model takes the opposite approach to reading. It is similar to the skills-based approach to literacy instruction. It has also been called the phonological approach to literacy instruction. Skills research says developing skills, such as phonological awareness and vocabulary are essential to developing literacy (Crow, 1986; Peck & Scarpati, 2004). However, other advocates of the skills-based approach have produced research that also values top-down approaches.

Lazo, Pumpfrey, & Peers (1997) admitted their research failed to show that metalinguistic awareness, which is a literacy skill, had stronger effects on later literacy attainments than pre-conventional reading and invented spelling, which are broad-based skills. Metalinguistic awareness can be measured by students' proficiency in manipulating sounds, such as producing rhyming words. Pre-conventional reading refers to the ability to produce phonemes correctly when given a word in print. For example, given the word "bat", a child may produce the initial /b/ phoneme correctly, but mispronounce the medial vowel. In the study above, a test was given to five year old children who were pre-readers. The children were able to produce some phonemes correctly even though they were not reading the whole words correctly. However, graphophonemic awareness was shown to affect pre-conventional reading and spelling. Therefore, it was a combination of metalinguistic awareness and pre-conventional reading that influenced literacy proficiency.

The Integrative Reading Model. Some research suggests a combination of top-down and bottom-up models is necessary to help ELLs achieve literacy acquisition (Birch, 2002). The integrative model is based on cognitive-constructivist philosophy (Windmueller, 2004). Those holding the integrative viewpoint believe the reader is an active participant in the reading process as he or she searches for meaning in the text. A good reader, according to the integrative model, is one who can make decisions and problem solve using extensive knowledge of the world and language, effective comprehension strategies, and automatic low level processing strategies to interact with a text efficiently (Birch, 2002). This model states that bottom-up processing serves top-down processing because automaticity allows the reader to focus more on comprehension of the text. Dixon & Nessel (1983) suggest using skills-based lessons within the context of the LEA activity. They say students need to learn to use context clues, phonics, and

structural analysis to develop word recognition skills. Furthermore, word recognition lessons should supplement the basic program of discussion and dictation and should be planned to tie in directly with the words and sentences students use in their dictation. The next and last subtopic of this literature review, LEA, can be used as part of a top-down approach.

### The Language Experience Approach

More than a century of research shows that the Language Experience Approach (LEA) is an effective instructional strategy to use for beginning native English-speaking readers (Cooke, 1900; Hildreth, 1965; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1981; & Moustafa, 1987) and ELLs (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; & Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). The prevalence of its use in beginning literacy instruction led me to the question that drove this study. However, little research has addressed the topic of LEA for adult EFL students with the exception of Savage (1992). A thorough understanding of LEA is necessary in order to know if it can be used as an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction. LEA uses students' experiences and background knowledge. Therefore, it eliminates some cognitive load that occurs in most commercial reading books. The vocabulary is already known to the students because it comes from their own experience. The approach integrates oral, aural, reading, and writing skills in a natural manner.

LEA has advantages for teaching oral reading. By using students' own spoken language, it helps students realize they must supply the intonation of the spoken language while reading out loud. The teacher should model and students should practice suprasegmental pronunciation, such as the appropriate juncture, stress, and pitch

normally employed in speech. Gradually, punctuation will come up in discussion as part of intonation (Hall, 1981). Teachers should think aloud their metacognitive processes. For example, tell students that you pause when you see a period at the end of a sentence. The remainder of this subsection on LEA will describe the history, components, and procedure of LEA.

### History of LEA

While more than a century of research presents LEA as an effective, natural approach to literacy instruction for young, native English speaking beginning readers, little research has discussed using LEA for adult ELLs. Consideration of the origins of LEA as well as ideas and activities that led up to it, where it was used, and what students benefited from it helps determine if the approach can be effective as part of differentiated literacy instruction for adult ELLs. LEA uses experience to make a lesson. It uses students' own language and does not require contrived drills. It is a natural approach because it requires students to have some experience rather than studying some abstract concepts they may have no interest in or cannot relate to.

Part of the intellectual roots of progressive, natural approaches to literacy lessons came from Rousseau, who "made many disparaging remarks about book learning in Emile, his best-known treatise on education (Shannon 1990, p.23)." A natural approach to learning is proposed in mid-eighteenth century writing by Rousseau (1762) who suggested children should learn naturally, by experience (167-170). He said, "Give your scholar no verbal lessons; he should be taught by experience alone....(56)" "When I thus get rid of children's lessons I get rid of the chief cause of their sorrows, namely their books....Reading is the curse of childhood (80)."

The beginnings of LEA can be traced to the old sentence and story methods popular in the middle of the nineteenth century and to the use of experience story material in the progressive education movement in the 1930s (Hall, 1981). Field notes from 1883 in a classroom in Quincy, Massachusetts describe a lesson based on students' oral language in meaningful contexts (Shannon, 1990). It was called *The Quincy Method*, and it was an experiential approach implemented district wide. The teacher negotiated the content of the lesson beginning with the students' natural language and moving toward language forms.

The following paragraphs describe the historical development of LEA throughout the twentieth century into an internationally recognized method of literacy instruction. The only source this researcher found that clearly mapped out this historical development was Hildreth (1965). Even though it is an older source, it is still relevant since this researcher seeks to identify the original method and historical facts never change. The more recent LEA research is not as useful for distinguishing the original method because recent authors often include new variations that complicate the approach. An early version of LEA was a "natural" method of teaching beginners to read through recording on the blackboard the children's oral expressions relating to current experiences. Cooke's (1900) hypothesis concerning this innovation was that children may learn to read as naturally as they learn to talk and for exactly the same reason, from the desire to find out something or to tell something. Some other related activities she mentions in her article include children discussing the experience, the statements copied and printed by the teacher, and children making personal word banks. Montessori also pioneered the natural activity and language related methods of teaching reading in 1907-08 (Hildreth, 1965).

The 1920s were a period of change in education from traditional lessons to project method and activity teaching. Activity-related methods of teaching reading were

extensively developed in college and university demonstration schools and the more progressive private schools. The Maury School of Richmond, Virginia, which enrolled a substantial number of children from backgrounds with limited resources, some of whom came from families receiving financial assistance from the state, experimented with activity teaching and experience reading. The school continued with those methods through 1941. At about this same time, the introduction of manuscript-style writing in the primary school enabled teachers to prepare current reading more efficiently. Many studies discussed the approach beginning in 1926. The movement spread rapidly from about 1925 for a period of about 20 years (Hildreth, 1965).

Also in the 1920s, experiments were conducted with ELLs in two public school demonstration centers in California. In 1942 the New York City schools undertook an experiment with a new activity program in three Harlem schools enrolling a large ELL population. A feature of this new curriculum was an activity-linked introduction to reading and writing. Schools abroad were experiencing similar movements in England, France, Central America, and South America (Hildreth, 1965).

The approach was first referred to as the *experience method* in 1934. The term *language experience* was not used until the 1950s. During that time, LEA was also written up as an effective approach used in New Zealand. The result was new interest in the approach in the United States. Language experience reading surfaced significantly in San Diego, California schools in the late 1950s. The programs then spread across the United States (Hildreth, 1965).

Research confirmed the effectiveness of LEA, it became established as an instructional approach, and its' use as a method of literacy instruction increased considerably in the 1960s (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007). The National First Grade Studies, the largest research project to that date in beginning reading, included LEA as

one of the major approaches studied. Language experience programs were employed in many states including California, Texas, and New York. In that decade the approach was validated on the basis of its mention in textbooks, at reading conferences, and in research studies. The need for appropriate materials for the learners from other cultures has also supported the use of LEA reading. Furthermore, the informal, open education movement in British schools contributed to the acceptance of the setting that is conducive to LEA learning (Hildreth, 1965).

In the 1970s, LEA teaching received more attention in methods textbooks than ever before, and more pre-service and in-service teacher education was devoted to this approach. Another indication of widespread support for LEA was the publication of a journal called *The Journal of Language Experience* from 1978-1992 by the LEA special interest group of the International Reading Association. Unfortunately, it is not available online today. Many components combine to make the original LEA an effective approach to literacy instruction.

### Components of the Original LEA Instruction

Understanding the distinguishing components of the original LEA help determine if it can be effectively used today as part of literacy instruction for adult ELLs. Many authors have recently written about LEA with unique variations added to the basic LEA; however, they generally share certain ideas in common. The main ideas of LEA that most sources agree upon are that it uses students' experiences and language; it is useful for pre-reading and beginning reading instruction; and the primary goal of the LEA framework is to develop the ability to communicate in all facets of language including speaking, listening, reading and writing (Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Hall, 1981; Heller 1988; Herrel, 2000; Hildreth, 1965; Moustafa, 1987; Savage, 1992).

The following are 10 distinguishing components of the original experience-related reading methods as used in first grade classes for children age six, adapted from Hildreth (1965). Even though this and other research has been written for young children, the approach has been found useful for all ages and levels of students (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007; Hall, 1981; Nessel & Jones, 1981).

1. The activity comes first. Initial reading experiences are based on the children's lives and current interests, and they use the students' modes of expression. The children's daily activities, classroom activities, and the language the students used to express these things take precedence over other sources of reading material. Children discover their name on the class chart, the calendar, the weather bulletin for the day, the schedule of plans for the day, the daily schedule, etc. A class news bulletin records events of the day and week (281).
2. Initial experiences with reading are not isolated from instruction in other language skills: oral expression and learning to write and spell. Deriving lessons in all these language areas from a common core of experience are mutually reinforcing for all the separate language skills (282).
3. The use of commercial readers, even the simplest pre-primers and workbooks is delayed until a beginning is made with activity-related materials. Children's readiness for commercial readers depends on the children's maturity and rate of learning. The length of time before systematic use of commercial readers begin is usually about two to

three months for faster learners and up to a year for slow starters (282).

4. The vocabulary of the text is not controlled to conform to a word list of any reading series or standard list (283).

5. The use of experience-related reading is not considered readiness that precedes real reading. Instead, it is considered in and of itself to be the first direct step in learning to read at school (283).

6. The experience-related script text is not restricted to materials prepared by the teacher well in advance of a reading session. Instead, it includes informal jottings, and other writings prepared as needed (283).

7. Vertical manuscript-style lettering was used for preparing the text from the 1920s onward (283).

8. Extensive use is made of attractive books along with the script text from the child's first days of school, including familiar picture books, story books, the easiest reader units, etc. There is daily storytelling and reading aloud from the books the children themselves selected, with the children watching the page, enjoying the pictures, trying to pick out words, and sometimes supplying words they know (283).

9. The students practice from the beginning all the skills and habits needed by mature, independent readers: directional orientation,

vocabulary building, word discrimination, phonetic and structural word analysis, the use of various clues to sentence meaning: context and pictures, as well as the child's own fund of knowledge and experience. The use of the experience material for developing these basic skills is supplemented by handmade drill materials, practice cards, and worksheets employing the chart vocabulary (284).

10. The link between learning to read and learning to write is fully recognized. From the beginning children take a hand in copying their own name cards. They write captions for pictures (284).

#### Typical Cycle of LEA Instruction

The components of LEA can be implemented in a five-part cycle of activities over the course of five days maximum, although the student-generated stories should be revisited by students throughout the term. The LEA cycle is effective for learners of all ages including pre-readers and beginners, remedial readers, culturally and linguistically different children, and illiterate adults. There are a variety of types of reading material that students produce through LEA. The first type is the experience story. Both individual and group stories are widely used. A variation is the group book that is made from separate pages by each student on a selected topic. The general process includes having children express thoughts through speaking, recording those thoughts in printed language, and finally reading the story. The five steps in the cycle are: preparing for dictation; taking the dictation; reading the story; conducting immediate follow-up activities; and developing basic skills (Fisher, Brozo, Frey & Ivey, 2007; Hall, 1981; Nessel & Jones, 1981).

In the first step of the cycle, the teacher is responsible for providing a meaningful experience or stimuli, which should be something important or interesting to the students. For example, a field trip, a live animal, houseplants, photographs, and collections can provide a stimulus for a story. A group discussion should precede the writing of the students' ideas. Teachers should draw many lively comments from students that will produce interesting writing material (Hall, 1981; Nessel & Jones 1981). See Appendix C for student-generated stories used in this study.

Second, the teacher should record the story on a whiteboard or chart paper using the students' language. The teacher records exactly what students say, not making any improvements to the students' language at this point in the process. Consequently, all the writing is coming from the students, which is one of the main goals of the approach. This makes the passage embedded in the context of the experience, which is familiar to the students. There should be no constructions that are new to the students in order to reduce the cognitive load. Too many new grammatical constructions presented to an ELL simultaneously may only confuse the learner (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007; Hall, 1981; Nessel & Jones, 1981; Savage, 1992).

Third, immediately after the recording, the teacher reads the group experience story aloud. The teacher should emphasize the left to right progression of print for pre-readers. Then allow time for students to read silently before inviting them to read aloud. Next, the teacher will invite the students to read aloud together in a choral reading. Then, a few students may volunteer to read individually. The experience story should be read with natural phrasing and pacing. It is also helpful for the teacher to point, indicating words as they are read aloud (Hall, 1981, Nessel & Jones, 1981).

Fourth, conduct follow-up activities, reinforcing vocabulary. The previous reading of the story begins to establish sight vocabulary; however, students need to learn

to identify those words in isolation and in a variety of contexts. Teachers can ask students to find a word in the story; count the number of occurrences of a word; point to a word; and write a word. (Nessel & Jones, 1981, Savage, 1992).

The fifth and final step of the cycle is to develop basic skills. Activities in this step can occur on the days following the completion of the first four steps. On subsequent days, much of the process is repeated. The story should be shown to students on chart paper. Again, the teacher should read the story aloud for the students. Students should be given time to read silently. Then they should read it together, chorally. Then a few students should read it individually. The reading should be successful, not frustrating. A student may feel frustrated if he/she has not heard it read aloud by the teacher (Hall, 1981).

Other follow-up activities can be completed in the same week and revisited throughout the school term. A completed record of the experience story is posted in the classroom. Charts containing the student-generated stories can be collected and reread occasionally throughout the school term. Students can choose to read the charts in their free time and duplicated copies may be given to them. They can underline words they know, match word cards to the story, and illustrate the story. Many stories can be collected and made into a book, which can be read by students in their free time. Word, phrase, or sentence cards which correspond to the chart can be made and students can match the cards to the story. Children can frame certain words on the chart using a large index card with the middle cut out. Each child should keep a folder with each story in it because this will become one of his or her reading books. The story can be acted out in drama form. Finally, students should take home the stories and read them to a parent or sibling at home (Hall, 1981). LEA is an essential element of this present study, and its prevalent use and prior research led me to the question which drove this study.

### Purpose of the Present Study

The recent increase in numbers of ELLs in the U.S. and demand for EFL instruction abroad due to the emergence of English as the common worldwide language has led to concern among educators as to how to teach English reading to older students. Some recent research has suggested teachers use curriculum that is culturally relevant and builds on the experiences of learners in order to help ELLs achieve reading comprehension (Jimenez, 2004; Toledo, 1998; Freeman & Freeman, 2002). Others have suggested differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse groups of learners (Tomlinson, 1999 & 2001). Also, there is more than a century of research that claims LEA is effective with beginning readers (Cooke, 1900; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Smith, 1973).

Little research has examined whether LEA is an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for adult EFL students. This study seeks to apply selected information from research on differentiation, literacy acquisition in a native language, English literacy acquisition for ELLs, and LEA to this researcher's classroom by using LEA as a part of differentiated literacy instruction and collecting data from a teaching journal, an educational background questionnaire and literacy assessments. An analysis of this data will help me answer my research question:

Is LEA an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide range of proficiency levels?

The next chapter explains the methods used in this study. It describes the setting, participants, research design, and data collection procedures. It includes a table

illustrating participant demographics. Chapter four reports the results. Chapter five discusses the implications of the results.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This action research seeks to determine if the Language Experience Approach (LEA) can be used as an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students with a wide range of proficiency levels. Research shows that LEA is an effective instructional strategy for beginning readers of any age who have little experience with English literacy (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Nessel & Jones, 1981; & Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). This present study included participants with a wide variety of experience with English literacy, ranging from one to twenty years (Table 3.1). I chose to use the action research design because I wanted to become a better teacher and I did not want to alter the classroom instruction for the purpose of this study. My students' variety of levels education and previous English instruction contributed to their wide range of abilities, which caused daily dilemmas over how to engage them all simultaneously. I attempted to solve this problem by implementing LEA as a part of differentiated literacy instruction.

This methods section of this capstone restates my research question. Then it describes the setting, the participants, the research design, and the procedures of data collection. I explain why the methodology is suitable for my research. Implementation of the methods is described, including a discussion of what elicitation procedures were used. Examples of the procedures are provided. Finally the conclusion summarizes the main points of this chapter and previews what will follow in the next two chapters.

The following is my research question:

Is LEA an effective approach for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide range of proficiency levels?

## Setting

The setting of the study was a classroom of a community service program in Prague, which is the capital city of the Czech Republic. This educational program was designed to serve people in the community who wanted to improve their English skills for purposes of employment or enjoyment. The study was conducted over four months from January to April 2007 as part of normal classroom instruction with eight subjects although up to twenty students participated when they were in class. Students' erratic attendance limited my data collection efforts so I only received full sets of data from eight students. Classes were held one evening per week and each session went from 7:00 to 8:15 in the evening. Data were collected during the class sessions, except for the teaching journal, which was completed after class.

## Participants

### Demographics

Participants consisted of one teacher (the present researcher) and eight intermediate adult EFL students. These eight students were chosen because they volunteered to participate and their attendance was more consistent than their classmates. This class was called "Intermediate English." However, in reality, students were not all intermediates. They chose their own classes for personal reasons. Actually, students entered this class because it fit into their schedule or their friends were in it, regardless of the level of the class. Therefore, there was a wide range of proficiency levels, from beginning to advanced, in the same class.

All participants had strong literacy backgrounds and many had previous opportunities to study English, although that had not always been the case. The Czech Republic contains a highly educated population although the quality of English instruction varies greatly. It boasts a virtually 100% literacy rate. Consequently, all of the participants of this study were literate in Czech. Many participants in this study were literate in English. Since the revolution in 1989, which led to the creation of a democratic government, students have had the opportunity to study English from the first grade. However, Czech teachers varied in their readiness to teach English. After the revolution, teachers who had formerly taught Russian were simply told to start teaching English, although many teachers did not understand English themselves yet. In this study, in most cases, those with conversational English proficiency were the younger members of my class, who had studied English after the revolution. For example, the one teenage participant had studied English for 11 years in school and she was the most fluent of all my students according to my observations and test results. However, many of the older participants, who grew up under the former regime, never had the opportunity to study English in school.

Table 3.1

*Age and Education Background (years)*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Uni Grad?</b>	<b>Formal English</b>	<b>Informal</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>High Group</b>						
a	40s	18	Y	0	20	<b>20</b>
b	17	11	N	11	3	<b>14</b>
c	30s	16	Y	5	7	<b>12</b>
d	21	16	In Progress	5	1	<b>6</b>
Average		<b>15.25</b>		<b>5.25</b>	<b>7.75</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Low Group</b>						
w	50s	17	Y	5	4	<b>9</b>
x	40s	13	N	0	6	<b>6</b>
y	60s	13	N	0	2	<b>2</b>
z	40s	13	N	0	1	<b>1</b>
Average		<b>14</b>		<b>1.25</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>4.75</b>

Participants varied widely in previous English instruction and age. They had from one to twenty years of prior English instruction (Table 3.1). Some participants received only informal instruction while others had formal instruction. For the purposes of this study, formal education means the study of English in a school for academic credit. All other instruction is informal. The program this research was conducted in was informal because no academic credit was given. Also, the students varied in age from 18 to 60 years old. While participants' English experience varied, they invariably possessed literacy skills in their native language.

Participants also varied in their years of education and degrees attained. Czechs attend grammar school and high school for a total of 13 years. Therefore, many participants reported 13 years of education on their questionnaire (Table 3.1). They usually graduate at age 19 or 20. Most high schools prepare students for a trade in areas such as business, economics, nursing, printing, cooking, etc. Students graduating from those schools expect to find employment in their field after graduating. Other high

schools provide university preparation instruction. Participants in this study included one high school student, two high school graduates, one university student, three university graduates, and one person with a Ph.D.

### Research Design

Through this study, I sought to learn more about effective approaches to literacy instruction and improve my own teaching skills, so I chose the action research design. Action research is performed by a teacher on his or her own classroom instruction. The goal is for the teacher researcher to improve his or her own instruction. Action research is appropriate for my study because my research question comes from my own experience teaching and I want to answer the question in order to inform my own teaching. I did not want to restructure the basic flow of my teaching for the purposes of the research process (Freeman, 1998). In this study, most activities were a part of normal classroom instruction.

When considering action research in the ‘teacher as researcher’ model, Cohen and Manion define it as:

“an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem in an immediate situation. This means that ideally, the step-by-step process is constantly monitored over varying periods of time and by a variety of mechanisms (questionnaires, diaries, interviews and case studies, for example) so that the ensuing feedback may be translated into modifications, adjustments, directional changes, redefinitions, as necessary, so as to bring about lasting benefit to the ongoing process itself rather than to some future occasion...” as cited in (Bell, 1999, p.8).

Many authors, including Kemmis and McTaggart, Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, and Reason say the goal of action research is to “resolve a problem in a practical way through empirical and reflective processes, engaging people as participants in the research process,” as cited in (Stringer, 1996, p. xvi). The basic routine of action research is 1) Look, 2) Think, and 3) Act. Look by gathering data, defining and describing the situation. Think by hypothesizing and theorizing. For example, “What is happening here? Why?” Act by planning, implementing, and evaluating (Stringer, 1996, p.16). The routine should be a continually recycling set of activities. There will be a constant process of observation, reflection, and action (17).

All four methods of data collection used in this study fit in with normal classroom instruction. First, I have been keeping a teaching journal since I started my teaching career. In this study, I documented many things related to the data collection in my teaching journal. Second, one principle of differentiated instruction is diagnosis of student readiness (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003), so for this study, participants completed an educational background questionnaire (Appendix A) and took pre-assessments (Appendix B), which are commonly used for instructors to gather information about students’ background knowledge in specific areas. In this study, the pre-assessment informed me of participants’ reading skills in decoding and comprehension so I could confirm the results of the questionnaire and create proficiency-based groups. Finally, post-assessments are a common method for instructors to determine if students met instructional objectives. In this study, a series of four post-tests helped me answer the research question as it relates to determining if LEA is effective as a part of differentiated literacy instruction.

### Grouping

In the present study, this researcher approached literacy instruction using differentiation based on principles of flexible grouping, student readiness, content, process, and product. Given the wide varieties of participants' readiness levels due to educational backgrounds and previous English instruction, I chose to divide participants into similar-proficiency groups. In this research, I call the groups "high" and "low" in reference to the readiness level of each group compared only to each other, with no intention of suggesting any participants are not capable of academic success. Each group used different content during the lessons in this study because the LEA process required each group to produce their own written story about a shared experience. The post-tests contained different questions for each group.

The grouping arrangement of this study fills the gap in the prior research. Much research has been done on LEA as a part of whole class instruction for children who are beginning readers or ELLs (Cooke, 1900; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001, Savage, 1992). Also, a recently growing body of research advocates for flexible grouping as a part of differentiated instruction in K-12 classrooms (Gentz 2003; Fullerton, 2002; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999 & 2001; & Tomlinson & Cuninghameidson, 2003). However, little research examines whether LEA is effective as a part of differentiated literacy instruction for adult EFL students. In this present study, participants were divided into two similar-proficiency groups based on English proficiency in order to help answer the research question as it relates to differentiated instruction.

This study was limited to two proficiency groups because it fit with the action research design which aims to solve a concrete problem in an immediate situation in a

practical way through a routine of describing the situation, hypothesizing, and planning (Bell, 1999; & Stringer, 1996). Everything about this study fit in with normal classroom instruction. My problem was how to differentiate literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with wide varieties of readiness in my classroom. I had 20 students in my intermediate level class who participated at various times in the study; however, only eight participants submitted all the data required for this study because of erratic attendance. Therefore, I only report on the eight participants in this study who had more consistent attendance than their classmates. For the purposes of this study, participants were sometimes divided into high groups and low groups. Considering the wide levels of readiness of the students, I could have created three or more different levels of groups. However, three or more levels would have made the research process more complicated and time consuming, detracting from my action research design rather than supporting it.

Participants were divided into two groups in order to answer the research question as it relates to differentiated instruction. Flexible grouping is a principle of differentiated instruction. Grouping in this study was flexible because participants changed between a whole class group and smaller similar-proficiency groups; however, introducing more types of grouping would have been more flexible. In this study, I used similar-proficiency groups, chosen according to participants' readiness levels. The groups were determined by the results of the educational background questionnaire and pre-assessments as well as affective factors. The pre-assessments were adapted from an intermediate level English textbook (Moor & Cunningham, 2001). I chose four students from each group, for a total of eight, to include in this study. Specific grouping arrangements were given as a suggestion to participants, not a requirement. One time, a participant chose to join the other group and she never came back to class, appearing

discouraged about the contrast in her proficiency level and the students with higher levels.

Both quantitative and qualitative data established grouping arrangements since I used test scores, questionnaires, and my observations to make decisions. It was obvious that those who earned perfect scores on the comprehension pre-test should be in the high group. The fourth person assigned to the high group scored only one out of three but was chosen among the others with the same score because of a high level of education and prior English instruction as well as closeness in age with the other high group participants. There was one low group participant with more education. However, considering affective factors, this researcher decided the person with a Ph. D would collaborate better with the low group. So I put him with the lower group who were closer in age because I thought they would be more comfortable working together. Also, throughout the school year, those participants usually chose to sit together when self-selecting their seating.

Table 3.1 shows a compilation of data gathered from participants' responses to the questionnaire, which helped to establish proficiency levels. It compares the high group with the low group. In the first column, each group's mean years of education are presented. The second column shows participants' approximate ages, the third column shows many university graduates were in each group, and the last columns show years of English instruction in formal settings, informal settings, and total years. One high group participant was in progress toward completion of university studies so he was not counted as a graduate. At the bottom of each column, average years are presented.

## Data Collection

The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection increased the validity of this study. The purpose of qualitative analysis is to gain provide a complete, detailed description. It is usually done with a small sample size. Data collection is not structured and non-statistical. Findings are not conclusive and cannot be used to make generalizations about the population. Quantitative analysis is more generalisable. It classifies and counts features and can be used to create statistical models in order to explain what is observed. The sample size is usually bigger than qualitative data and the methods are more structured (Snap Surveys, 2007). The teaching journal and observations used in this study are qualitative data and the other methods used are quantitative.

Some research suggests triangulation as one way inquirers can increase the validity of qualitative studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Triangulation makes a study more valid because it uses multiple forms of evidence (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). It is “a systematic process of sorting through the data to find common themes or categories by eliminating overlapping areas (127).” In this study, I used a questionnaire, pre-assessment and observations to establish similar-proficiency groups. Also, a post-test measured how effective the instruction was.

Data collection tools used in this research consisted of four parts: a teaching journal, an educational background questionnaire, a pre-assessment, and post-assessments. The total amount of data collected in this study was 21 pages of teaching journal entries, 32 answers from questionnaires, 24 short answers and eight decoding passages on a pre-assessment, and 96 answers to comprehension questions and 32 reading decoding passages from four post tests. Data from the questionnaire and the pre

assessment were used at the beginning of the study to aid in this researcher's placement of participants into one of two groups. This grouping helps to answer the research question as it relates to differentiated instruction. The post tests helped to determine if LEA was effective as a part of differentiated literacy instruction, which is essentially the research question of this study.

I chose these methods of data collection because I wanted to determine if LEA is effective as a part of differentiated literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with wide varieties of readiness. First, the questionnaire, pre-assessments, and my observations helped to establish participants' proficiency levels so I could differentiate literacy instruction by grouping, content, process, and product. Then, I implemented LEA instruction, which was differentiated according to different groups, content, and process. Finally, the post-assessments and teaching journal told me whether the instruction was effective or not. These methods of data collection fit with the action research design; I wanted to collect data that would tell me if my instructional method helped my students so that I could expand my repertoire of effective instructional strategies and become a better teacher. I did not want to restructure my class time for the purpose of this study. Methods of data collection used in this study were chosen because they fit in with routine classroom instruction.

I used criterion-referenced tests for the pre-assessment and post-tests. Criterion-referenced tests determine if students meet a given criterion or not. I chose to use this type of pre-test because I wanted to separate participants into two groups, high and low proficiency. After students were placed in proficiency groups, I began the post-assessments, which were also criterion-referenced tests. I chose this type of test again because I wanted to determine if students achieved a specific skill or not (Huitt, 1996).

In order to answer my research question, I needed to determine if students met certain criterion, namely, to decode and comprehend English reading passages.

### Teaching Journal

My teaching journal included useful details about the process of this study that quantitative data could not measure. Observations from my qualitative teaching journal helped me to interpret the results of the quantitative data collected throughout the study and to gather ideas for future research. Each day of the research process this researcher documented facts, observations, reflections, and opinions about the process. Reflections led to adaptations of the process since it was an action research design.

### Pre-Assessment Questionnaire

The questionnaire included four questions that determined which participants belonged in each of the two groups, so that I could answer the research question as it relates to differentiated instruction. Establishing two similar-proficiency groups to alternate with whole-class instruction is a way to differentiate instruction since the grouping changes in certain parts of the lessons. The questions elicited information about participants' educational background (Appendix A). The results told me how much formal education and English instruction students had. In most cases, if students had a university degree and formal English instruction I put them in the high group. Otherwise I put them in the low group. I chose to divide the participants according to length of formal schooling and English instruction because studies have shown that length of English instruction is a factor for ELLs to achieve English proficiency. In this study, all four of the high group participants studied English previously for six or more years. The average length of English instruction of the high group was 13 years. On the other hand,

only two of four low group participants studied English longer than three years. The average English instruction of the low group was only 4.75 years.

### Pre-test

The purpose of pre-test was to confirm the results of the questionnaire and assist this researcher in dividing participants into two groups for the purpose of differentiating instruction. In addition, this test employed the first principle of differentiated instruction: Learning experiences are based on a diagnosis of students' levels of readiness (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). It measured participants' English decoding and comprehension skills. I used all results from this test to rank students in order of English literacy proficiency, comparing each participant's test results with all the others. The combination of questionnaire and pre-test data enabled me to differentiate between high and low levels of proficiency. Having identified participants' proficiency levels, I was informed enough to separate them into like-proficiency groups. Even though I assigned participants to groups, they were allowed flexibility to choose another group. Most students appeared to feel comfortable and enjoy working with their assigned group; however, one day a lower proficiency student chose to work with the higher group. After that day, she never came to class again. I observed that during that lesson she seemed discouraged as she listened and watched the higher proficiency students, while not contributing anything herself.

The content of the pre-assessment allowed me to measure participants' English reading decoding and reading comprehension skills. There was an English reading passage for measuring decoding skills and five short answer questions measuring participants' comprehension (Appendix B). It was 284 words in length. The reading passage was adapted from a pre-intermediate level English textbook (Moor &

Cunningham, 2001). This researcher listened to each participant individually and marked errors as the participant read the passage aloud. Only segmental errors were considered in decoding tests in this study.

This researcher assessed participants' abilities to pronounce each word correctly with a focus on communicative function rather than form. "Correctly" means that this researcher could recognize each word participants decoded. "Communicative function" means that the participant decoded well enough to convey the meaning of each word in its context. If I understood what the readers meant as I listened to them read I considered pronunciation successful regardless of whether or not some suprasegmental errors occurred. For example, mistakes due to stress, intonation, and participants' accents were ignored unless they prevented me from understanding the meaning. In addition, some morphemes commonly mispronounced by these participants due to transference were not considered mistakes for the purposes of this study unless the mistake affected the meaning. For example, the past tense -ed verb ending does not occur in the Czech language so some Czechs tend to overstress it in pronunciation. These mistakes did not affect the meaning of what was being read, so they were not counted as mistakes for purposes of the decoding tests.

The second part of the pre-assessment was a reading comprehension test completed individually by participants (Appendix B). The short-answer questions were developed by the teacher using Bloom's taxonomy, which categorizes questions used in educational settings. This taxonomy, or classification, is composed of six levels with each level becoming increasingly abstract. The six levels of the taxonomy from most concrete to most abstract, are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. I created knowledge-based questions for the low group. For example, listing objects mentioned in a text is a knowledge-based activity. Some

students from the low group needed more concrete questions because with their limited English skills, they could only understand and produce the more concrete language elicited at the knowledge level.

### Post-Assessments

Content. The post-assessments consisted of a series of four teacher-developed tests that were interspersed throughout the data collection process in order to determine if the instruction was effective, which is part of the research question. The post-tests contained a decoding section and a comprehension section. Students in each group were required to decode the student-generated story which their group created, so the length of the passages differed by group. The low group averaged 97 words per passage and the high group averaged 128 words per passage. I chose a criterion-referenced test because I wanted the results to answer the research question: is this method of literacy instruction effective? I wanted to determine if the students met the educational objectives (Huitt, 1996).

The comprehension section included questions tiered according to challenge level, based on Bloom's taxonomy, in order to determine if LEA is effective as a part of differentiated literacy instruction. Tiered assignments are one way to differentiate instruction according to students' readiness levels (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; Nordlund, 2003; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Heacox (2002) says, "You can use Bloom's taxonomy as a guide to developing tasks at various levels of challenge (91)." Nordlund (2003) says, "Bloom's taxonomy levels are given in a hierarchy ranging from the easiest to the most difficult. One of the easiest ways to begin diversifying instruction is to apply this theory to class discussions (8).... This strategy can also be used when writing test questions (9)."

In this study, the high group received questions developed at a higher level on Bloom's taxonomy that would engage their higher order thinking skills. These students needed more abstract questions because of their higher English proficiency. The knowledge based questions were too easy for them. They needed questions from Bloom's synthesis or evaluation levels, which are the most abstract. The low group participants' limited English proficiency prevented some of them from answering the more abstract questions, so I began the study giving them only concrete questions. For example, one question to the high group was: "Design a new home for the animals." One knowledge based question for the low group was: "What things were in the car? (Appendix C)." Answers were rated according to a rubric (Appendix D).

Over the course of the study, reflection on the process led this researcher to change the levels of the low group's post-test comprehension questions. The first two post-tests included only concrete questions and the last two post-tests included abstract questions, because some of the low group participants showed by their test scores they needed more challenge. Since this study is action research, this researcher chose to adjust the difficulty of questions based on test results and reflection of the process (Appendix C).

Lesson cycle. A certain cycle was repeated four times during this study as part of the post-assessment data collection. Each cycle took three class periods, for a total of 12 class periods. The first class period consisted of direct instruction of vocabulary, watching a video, and collaborating in groups to write a story. Before watching the video, this researcher pre-taught vocabulary that students were to use in writing their stories. This allowed students to create a "word bank", which they could use while writing stories. Then students watched a video clip which lasted five to ten minutes.

After the video, students separated into proficiency groups which were predetermined by this researcher using the results of the questionnaire and pre-assessment. In those groups, participants discussed what they saw in the video and wrote a story retelling what they saw in the video. All participants had literacy skills in their native language and many were already literate in English. As they wrote their own stories they taught each other and used their dictionaries to learn new words. This researcher helped in the writing of the story only when called upon.

This researcher chose a video as the experience for the LEA instruction instead of the typical hands-on experience because in this case, the video was more likely to result in students demonstrating literacy achievement than live teacher demonstrations. Some prior research has indicated that using instructional media that students are familiar with increases their literacy achievement and that live teacher demonstrations do not promote literacy (Griffin, 1990). On the other hand, other prior research has indicated hands on experiences as part of LEA increased their English literacy achievement (Savage, 1992). In this study, all participants were familiar with the video and the video equipment was readily available. The video was a five to ten minute segment from the "Krték" video, which is a popular cartoon character in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic, where this study was conducted (Miler, 1992). I chose this video because it was simple enough to facilitate students' production of a variety of English, yet avoiding confusion about the lesson's content and limiting distractions from the lesson's process.

Students score higher on assessments when using an instructional media they are familiar in lessons (Griffin 1990). For example, Griffin (1990) found photos and flashcards to be the most effective instructional media for a group of Hmong students because it was the media the students were familiar with, even though the participants preferred learning by teacher demonstrations. Live teacher demonstrations with real

objects have been effective in promoting development of oral and aural skills. However, Griffin's results showed the teacher demonstrations did not promote English literacy. In contrast, subjects who learned by photos and flashcards scored well on a literacy achievement test, despite the fact that they did not like these instructional media. The photos and flash cards were effective because students were familiar with them from use in ESL classes. In the Czech Republic, the particular video this researcher used was one of the most familiar media available.

During the second of three class periods in the cycle, students received direct instruction as a whole group. Each student received a photocopy of both the low group's story and the high group's story. Participants were given an opportunity to practice reading the story and ask questions. They listened and followed along as this researcher read the stories aloud. The stories from each group were analyzed for errors and the whole class participated in revising the stories. This researcher chose two to four grammar topics to address in direct instruction. For example, topics included past tense verbs, run-on sentences, and subject-verb-object word order.

The third of three class periods in the cycle consisted of the post-assessment, which helped this researcher determine if the instruction was effective. Participants were assessed in their ability to decode the LEA story which they produced in the first lesson and answer three short-answer questions about the story in writing. The content of these assessments is described above in further detail under the topic: post-assessment content. This three class period cycle was repeated for a total of four times. Accordingly, the researcher collected four post-tests from each of eight participants, totaling 32. After all the post-test data were collected, they were analyzed to provide the results of this study which answered the research question: Is LEA is an effective approach for

differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide variety in levels of readiness?

This methods chapter has included an introduction, a conclusion, and subsections about the setting, participants, research design, and data collection. The introduction tells about why this research was conducted. It also states the research question. The setting describes where the study occurred and the circumstances under which the study was conducted. The participants section describes demographics and grouping of participants who were involved in the study. The research design explains why I chose the action research design. The data collection section explains the three methods of data collection used and why the methods were suitable for this research.

Chapter four explains the results of the data collection. First, it presents a summary of research. Second, it makes connections between this study and other research. Finally, it identifies themes that emerged from the results. Chapter five discusses the implications of this research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to make the present researcher a better teacher through an action research design that will attempt to discover how well the Language Experience Approach (LEA) works as a part of differentiated literacy instruction for adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This research answers the question, “Is LEA an effective method for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide variety of readiness levels?” The previous chapter explained the methods of data collection. This chapter describes how the results of this study correspond to the research question, analyzes the data, and connects the results with other research. The next chapter is the concluding chapter, which addresses the implications of this study.

### Summary of Results

The data collected in this study showed that LEA can be effectively used as a part of differentiated literacy instruction. The questionnaire provided data concerning participants’ educational background that was used to establish similar-proficiency groups. Questionnaire data is presented in *Chapter Three: Methods* because it fits there with the description of the participants (Table 3.1). The pre-test combined with the questionnaire data to confirm how participants could be grouped to allow me to answer the research question as it relates to differentiated instruction.

Decoding test results contrasted with comprehension test results. Both the high group and the low group scored high in decoding with no significant difference. They averaged 100% and 98% respectively on both the pre-test and post-tests. However, the

groups contrasted in their performance on comprehension tests, which were measured on a scale of zero to three points. The high group only improved their scores by .19 points and the low group improved their scores by an astounding 1.31 points. On the pre-assessment comprehension tests compared with post-tests, the high group average score increased from 2.5 to 2.69 while the low group average score increased from .75 to 2.06, thereby suggesting the instruction was effective (Table 4.1). The qualitative teaching journal data helped me interpret the quantitative data, confirming that the instruction was effective and providing more details that could be studied in future research. The remainder of this chapter explains these results more thoroughly.

Table 4.1  
*Test Scores*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Pre-test</b>	<b>Post-test 1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Decoding (%)</b>						
a	100	100	99	100	99	<b>100</b>
b	100	99	100	99	100	<b>100</b>
c	100	100	99	99	100	<b>100</b>
d	99	99	100	99	100	<b>100</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
w	97	97	99	97	98	<b>98</b>
x	100	99	99	99	99	<b>99</b>
y	95	96	96	97	99	<b>97</b>
z	98	100	97	100	98	<b>99</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Comprehension (0-3)</b>						
a	3	2	3	3	3	<b>2.75</b>
b	3	2	2	3	3	<b>2.5</b>
c	3	3	2	3	3	<b>2.75</b>
d	1	3	3	2	3	<b>2.75</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.69</b>
w	1	3	2	3	3	<b>2.75</b>
x	1	3	3	3	3	<b>3</b>
y	1	3	2	0	0	<b>1.25</b>
z	0	3	2	0	0	<b>1.25</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>.75</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.25</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>2.06</b>

### Pre-assessment Procedure

The pre assessment procedure established a baseline of participants' decoding and comprehension and helped determine groups for the LEA instruction. Dividing participants into two groups helped answer the research question, suggesting LEA can be used effectively as a part of differentiated literacy instruction. The use of different groupings is a principle of differentiated instruction (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). The questionnaire results gave me information which helped determine the groupings and the pre-test confirmed the groupings. The questionnaire results are found in *Chapter Three: Methods* under the heading *participants* and in Table 3.1. The pre-tests in this study allowed this researcher to compare each participant with the others. Participants were ranked from highest to lowest score. This ranking informed this researcher's decisions as to which participants belonged in which group. Each student was given a pre-assessment of English reading, decoding, and comprehension skills (Appendix B). The decoding test was adapted from a published text (Moor & Cunningham, 2001). The comprehension questions were developed by the teacher.

The decoding test scores show participants effectively pronounced segmentals; suprasegmentals however, were another story. For purposes of this study, I measured only segmental pronunciation, not suprasegmentals. Groups averaged 98-100% on decoding tests and no individual test scored below 95% throughout the study. However, my observations indicated a lack of reading fluency and much trouble with suprasegmentals, especially among the lower proficiency participants.

The comprehension tests presented more problems than the decoding tests for the low group participants, so it gave clear indications as to which participants belonged in which group. The pre-assessment results showed the following scores in descending

order: 3,3,3,1,1,1,1,0. It was obvious that those who scored three out of three should be in the high group. The fourth person assigned to the high group scored only one out of three but was chosen among the others with the same score because of a high level of education and prior English instruction as well as closeness in age with the other high group participants. There was one low group participant with more education. However, considering affective factors, this researcher decided the person with a Ph. D would collaborate better with the low group. I put him with the lower group who were closer in age because I thought they would feel more comfortable working together. In fact, they usually chose to sit together when selecting their seating. The results of the pre-assessment comprehension test showed the high group averaged 2.5 points while the low group averaged only .75 (Table 4.1).

The low and high groups also contrasted sharply in their educational backgrounds on average, which also helped this researcher to establish proficiency groups. The low group consisted of three high school graduates and one person with a Ph.D. They reported the following total number of years of English instruction in descending order: 9, 6, 3, 1, averaging 4.75 years of previous English instruction. In contrast the high group included two university graduates, one university student, and one high school student. They reported nearly three times the amount of previous English instruction as the low group. They reported the following total number of years of English instruction in descending order: 20, 14, 12, 6. Together, they averaged 13 years of English instruction (Table 3.1). The post assessment procedure gathered data similar to that gathered in the pre-assessment procedure, except there were no more questionnaires.

### Post-Lesson Cycle Assessment

Each student performed a test of decoding and comprehension skills at the end of each cycle of LEA lessons. These assessments help answer the research question as it relates to determining if LEA is an effective approach for literacy instruction for EFL students. There were a total of four post lesson assessments given to each of the eight student participants. I collected a total of 32 post assessments. There was a cycle of lessons that was repeated four times. First, participants watched a video. Then they worked together in similar skill groups to write a story in English. There were always two groups, one higher ability group and one lower ability group, which were determined after analysis of questionnaire and pre assessment data. When they completed writing a story about the video in ten to twelve sentences, the first week of the cycle was finished.

During week two of the research cycle, the students received direct instruction and engaged in discussion of grammatical constructions based on errors they made in the first draft of their story. The student generated stories were revised based on this instruction. Also, they previewed, answered, and discussed the comprehension questions that would appear on the post-assessment the following week. They were given opportunities to discuss the grammar of their sentences and the meaning of their stories. When sufficient answers were given by students for each of the comprehension questions and all their questions were answered, that ended day two of the cycle.

The third and final week of the research cycle was the post-assessment. This test was based on revised versions of the stories participants wrote in their groups. The post-assessment included a reading passage for decoding and comprehension questions. The reading passage averaged 97 words for the low group and 128 words for the high group. There were three short answer questions based on Bloom's taxonomy on each test. This cycle of research was completed four times. Students answered a total of twelve

questions over the four cycles. The researcher collected a total of 96 written short answers to comprehension questions and 32 decoding scores.

Reflections on the process and post-lesson test results led to adaptations in procedures, which is a key component of action research (Bell, 1999; Stringer, 1996). For example, in the first lesson of the first cycle, I modeled the process of writing the student-generated story using pre-taught vocabulary in each sentence. As students demonstrated proficiency in creating stories, modeling by the teacher ceased. Also, short-answer questions on the first post-test were limited in difficulty to the more concrete questions according to Bloom's taxonomy. However, many participants achieved high levels of success so post-tests in the last two cycles included a greater number of difficult, abstract questions.

Other examples of reflection and adaptation indicated participants improved in literacy skills, they enjoyed the process of this research, and some struggled with reading fluency. My notes about students as they worked together in groups confirmed the results of the post-tests, indicating that participants were learning English through this process since I heard them asking each other questions and giving answers. Notes about students as they watched the video confirmed that the video was a good choice for a shared experience of the LEA lesson since I saw students smiling and apparently they enjoyed watching it. Observations also told me whether or not participants decoded fluently with proper stress and without untimely pauses.

An analysis of the data shows a high rate of success for all participants on the post-assessment decoding tests and improvement for each group of participants on the comprehension tests. All participants achieved at least 96% accuracy on all decoding post-assessments. The high group's average comprehension test scores improved from 2.5 points on the pre-test to 2.69 on the post-test. The low group showed significantly

more improvement. Their average comprehension test scores increased from .75 points on pre-tests to 2.06 on post-tests (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 compares the gains made by both groups in decoding and comprehension. Decoding scores are presented as percentages of words decoded accurately. Scores of 100% on this table does not necessarily mean the participants read every word correctly because scores were rounded up to the nearest one. For example, an actual score of 99.5% is rounded up to 100%. These scores were rounded up because tenths of percentages are irrelevant for this study. Many times during data collection, this researcher recorded one or two errors on a decoding test yet it doesn't show up on this table due to rounding. Comprehension scores are presented as percentages of correct written answers on the test. There were three short answer questions on each test. See Appendix D for the criterion-based rubric used in assessing comprehension test answers.

#### Connections with other research

Previous research on LEA indicates it is an effective approach for teaching literacy to native-English-speaking pre-reading children (Cooke, 1900; Hildreth, 1965; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; & Moustafa, 1987), K-12 ELLs (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001), and adult ELLs in the U.S.A. (Savage 1992). However, this researcher found no research about using LEA for adult EFL students. Still, I made many connections between this study and other research. Connections were found in the areas of differentiation, literacy instruction, and English as a Second Language.

### Differentiation

In recent years, much has been written on differentiation of instruction ( Gentz 2003; Fullerton, 2002; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999 & 2001; & Tomlinson & Cuningham-Eidson, 2003) suggesting differentiation through grouping, content, process, and product. Two types of groupings were used in this study: similar proficiency groups and whole class instruction. The pre-assessment and questionnaire data indicated differences in participants' readiness. The reason I call the groups "high" and "low" is that those names refer to the readiness levels of each group. Each group received the same stimulus, a video; however, they used different content in the literacy activities, the unique student-generated stories. The process was differentiated because each group analyzed their stories for different grammatical structures. Finally, students produced different products since each group's test questions were different. Another area where this study made connections to previous research was the LEA, a highly touted approach to literacy instruction.

### Literacy Instruction

This study connects with some prior literacy research because the research question of this study seeks to determine if LEA is effective literacy instruction. This research provided support for EFL students to improve their literacy skills through literacy-based activities (Blevins, 2005) related to the LEA method. In this study, LEA provided a meaningful context for literacy instruction. This researcher taught new vocabulary directly (Birch, 2002) and encouraged participants to use those new vocabulary words in their LEA stories.

In this study, I observed that certain students struggled to read and write answers test questions, yet they could verbally produce a correct answer after I verbally asked

them the same questions that they were not answering as they read independently. This could indicate the importance of context that is clearer in speaking and listening than in literacy (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; & Griffin, 1990).

This study used the integrative reading model, which is one of three models of second language (L2) literacy (Birch, 2002). LEA, the approach used in this study, fits into the top down reading model because it uses students' prior experience to create authentic student-generated text. This study also included fluency activities.

LEA research is directly applicable to this study since it was the approach implemented for instructional purposes of this study. This researcher modeled the appropriate stress, phrase boundaries, and intonation normally applied in speech and students practiced it (Hall, 1981).

The following are some distinguishing components of LEA that were applied in this study and were used as part of the original LEA, according to Hildreth (1965).

1. The activity came first. Participants first saw a video. Then they wrote a story about the activities they saw in the video.

2. Experiences with reading were not isolated from instruction in other language skills: oral expression, writing and spelling. Participants integrated listening and speaking about the text with writing and reading in each lesson. We read the text aloud. I taught grammar and spelling concepts applicable to students' LEA stories.

3. The vocabulary of the text was not controlled to conform to a word list of any reading series or standard list. In this study, students were pre-taught vocabulary directly related to what they observed in the video and they used the new vocabulary in writing their stories.

4. The use of experience-related reading was not considered readiness that preceded real reading. In this study, students used authentic language from the beginning of the process to the end as they talked about their observations from the video, wrote stories, discussed their stories, and answered questions about their stories.

5. The experience-related script text was not restricted to materials prepared by the teacher well in advance of a reading session. In this study, students used all the English they knew or could produce with their dictionaries as they developed their own scripts.

On subsequent days after students wrote stories, they engaged in follow-up activities based on their original stories. Each student received a copy of the story. The teacher led students in a discussion about the story. Some errors were corrected, giving students instruction in syntax, morphology, and spelling. Additional reading practice occurred when students read the stories to each other or independently (Hall, 1981; Savage 1992). In the integrative reading model, effective literacy instruction includes meaningful activities and skills-based instruction.

Following is a list of activities used in this research to develop fluency that are also found in Blevins (2005).

1. The teacher modeled reading fluently.
2. The teacher provided direct instruction and feedback to students by allowing students to read a lot and teaching appropriate phrasing and intonation.
3. Students received grammar instruction, which helps students learn phrasing in sentences. For example, the ability to find the subject and predicate of a sentence helps students determine phrase boundaries.

4. The teacher supported readers through providing activities such as choral reading, reading while listening and echo reading.
5. Students were encouraged to read each passage repeatedly.
6. The LEA method provided participants with easy reading materials.

In this present study, a pattern emerged that participants with the better oral language passed the comprehension tests while those participants who struggled with oral language, or were more shy and reticent, also struggled with comprehension tests. I know this from my observations of participants throughout the process of this study.

In Windmueller's (2004) study, ELLs who improved reading fluency attained significant improvement in literacy achievement. Furthermore, oral language skills significantly predicted overall reading, writing, and oral language achievement.

#### English as a Second Language

Transference of a native language (L1) to a second language (L2) may be supported by this research. Literacy skills learned in L1 transfer to L2, although transfer can also cause ELLs to make certain mistakes in their English (Chan, 2004; Doughty & Long, 2003; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; Windmueller, 2004). In this study, all participants achieved high scores on every reading decoding test even though not all were able to demonstrate comprehension. The reason could be that since all participants were literate in Czech, they transferred their knowledge of their own Czech alphabet sounds, which are often similar to English, as they decoded English texts. I noticed that many participants showed difficulty in pronouncing words with past tense / əd / verb endings, the / θ / sound, and the aspirated / p /.

Those students who are not proficient in English may not be able to show all they actually know, especially if they don't have a bilingual teacher (Thomas & Collier, 1997). In this study, this researcher was not bilingual so all instruction was in English. The low group participants rarely, if ever, asked questions. One student said she didn't even know how to ask questions in English. When test time came, some participants didn't know how to answer the test questions so they often spoke to their neighbor about it. One example is during a test time, I observed one of the participants staring at the test for ten minutes, not writing anything. I asked her the test question verbally and she gave me a good answer so I told her to write it down. She knew the answer but did not write it until verbally prompted.

## Discussion

Several themes emerged from the results of this study. The most salient one that emerged was that participants had few problems decoding English. The groups averaged 98 to 100% accuracy in decoding (Table 4.1). However, that is to be expected since all participants were literate in their L1 and their Czech alphabet contains all the letters of the English alphabet. Furthermore, all participants had received previous English instruction, ranging from one to twenty years. On the other hand, there was much difficulty with suprasegmental pronunciation, according to my observations.

A second theme that emerged, building on the first theme, was that LEA is effective as a part of differentiated literacy instruction. The combination of high decoding scores as mentioned above and improvement shown on comprehension post test scores indicate the instruction was successful. The quantitative data showed successful achievement of English literacy skills by the participants. The low and high groups'

post-test comprehension scores averaged 2.06 to 2.69 out of three points possible (Table 4.1). That was a significant improvement from the pre-test scores of .75 and 2.5, respectively.

In fact, the high group participants were so advanced that their English skills compared well with advanced students in other "advanced" classes in the setting where this study was conducted. Three of the four high group participants could be considered advanced because they have large vocabularies and could easily converse in English with good pronunciation and grammar. Those three students would have fit better in the advanced classes. However, they were in this intermediate class so I taught them and included them in this research. In fact, it was this contrast in skills between the low and high groups that led me to my research question for this study.

Finally, qualitative data indicated there was a contrast in reading fluency between the high group and low group. Based on my observations of participants during group work, I noticed that participants with greater reading fluency were leaders in their groups and scored higher on tests while participants with limited fluency skills spoke less frequently, listened more, and produced lower test scores than their more fluent peers. Also, based on my observations, the gap in fluency skills became very clear during decoding tests. The high group students read at a much faster pace than their low group peers. The high group also made more correct stresses and pauses than their low group peers.

This results chapter accomplished three things. First, this chapter presented results of data collected, noting all participants earned high scores on decoding tests and both groups improved on their comprehension test scores. Second, this chapter made connections with other research on topics of differentiation, literacy instruction, and ESL. Finally, this chapter discussed themes that emerged from the data for the purpose of

answering the question: “Is LEA an effective method for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide variety of readiness levels?”

The next chapter is the concluding chapter. It presents this researcher’s reflections, discusses the implications of these results, and suggests topics for future research as it answers the research question of this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to use action research to make the present researcher a better teacher by discovering how effective LEA works as a part of differentiated literacy instruction for adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This study answers the question, “Is the Language Experience Approach (LEA) an effective method for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with a wide variety of readiness levels? The previous chapters described how the results of this study corresponded to the research question, analyzed the data, and connected the results with other research. In this concluding chapter, I reflect on major learnings, address implications of the study, and recommend topics for future research.

### Reflections

The process of this research led to some interesting observations, important lessons learned, and conclusions drawn for this researcher, which contributed to my becoming a better teacher. First, in answer to this research question, LEA *is* an effective method for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with wide varieties of readiness levels. All participants scored high on decoding tests and both groups showed improvement in comprehension test scores. The low group showed significant improvement in comprehension. Their mean test scores increased from .75 out of three on the pre-test to 2.06 on the post-test.

I learned that differentiating instruction using similar-proficiency groups is effective for engaging more students than whole-class instruction alone. I noticed during whole-class instruction, a few of the more advanced students dominated discussions and

presented questions. The less proficient students remained silent unless the teacher called them by name. However, when divided into proficiency groups, other people emerged as leaders. For example, student C dominated discussion in whole class instruction. When that class was separated into two groups, student C dominated the high group discussion while student X emerged as the leader of the low group. Interestingly, student X showed the most improvement of all participants. Student X's pre-assessment comprehension score was only one out of three. In contrast, student X was the only participant of either group who scored a perfect three on all subsequent comprehension assessments. Perhaps her English skills improved or she just learned how to take the test.

I learned that LEA is an effective method for differentiating literacy instruction according to this study and previous research. Much research over more than a century documents the effectiveness of LEA as a method of literacy instruction for beginning readers and English Language Learners (ELLs) (Cooke, 1900; Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Hall, 1981; Heller 1988; Herrel, 2000; Hildreth, 1965; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Savage, 1992). LEA may be used as part of an integrated model of literacy instruction because it provides opportunities to implement effective literacy-based instructional activities (Birch, 2002; Blevins, 2005; Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Windmueller, 2004). Flexible grouping, such as the use of similar-proficiency groups and whole-class instruction used in this study, is a principle of effective differentiated instruction (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003).

Many participants increased in English reading comprehension proficiency through this process according to test scores and observations. Table 4.1 shows the high group averaged 2.5 points on the pre-test and their averages subsequently improved to 2.75 on test three and perfect scores on the last test. The low group also showed

improvements with students W and X raising their scores from one on the pre-test to threes on the last two tests. Also, I saw improvements from observations and notes in the teaching journal. That qualitative data showed benefits to using this approach that cannot be inferred merely from analysis of numerical data such as test scores. Test scores cannot give a complete picture of what subjects from a different culture know about the subject matter being tested so researchers should build into their research design several ways to find out what their subjects understand about their tasks (Griffin, 1990; Jimenez, 2004). In this study, I used multiple sources of data collection: questionnaires, decoding and comprehension pre-tests and post-tests, and a teaching journal. The teaching journal documents observations of some positive results of using LEA as a part of differentiated literacy instruction.

The first benefit I observed with using LEA as a part of differentiated literacy instruction was that some students received bilingual instruction in my classroom even though I am not bilingual. Throughout this study, participants discussed the content of the lessons amongst themselves in their native language (L1). The more English proficient students continually taught the less proficient students in their L1. Research says bilingual education correlates with development of academic language skills in English language learners (ELLs) (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 1997/1998, 2001, 2003). In my journal I commented:

I liked doing the revision with the whole group. Student A spotted many errors immediately. She made many improvements and explained them to the others. So I used her as a teacher to teach the low group in their own language. The low group immediately made improvements in their English. It was quite remarkable. Another positive I noticed was students were implementing skills they learned in previous lessons from the

textbook. For example, last month we studied how to use “have got”. Students applied this knowledge to the LEA story (January 24, 2007).

Students are free to be as creative as they want to be. They can produce as much English as they want. I wrote in my journal: “Overall I’m pleased with the procedure and the results. The best things about this process are: Students produce a lot of English. They like to correct the errors when they see sentences written on the board (February 1, 2007).”

Another benefit of LEA is that it is open-ended so students can put all their prior knowledge into practice. Also, they learn from each other as they collaborate in creating a story. I said in my journal:

I think this project is worthwhile. I think the students learn from each other in their groups as they first write the story. Then they learn from me and each other when we discuss their stories. They get a chance to use everything they learned about English. It’s very open ended. Almost everyone seems very engaged (February 22, 2007).”

This method brought a fresh perspective to learning English for the students and a welcomed change of pace from the textbook-based instruction for the teacher. Some participants in this study felt bored by the textbook used in this class because they had been through the same textbook before. My journal says: “Student B seems bored in the class. I need to think of ways to challenge her. I think I can with this research project (January 31, 2007).” The same student mentioned above showed her creativity and her English abilities through this study in ways that the textbook based instruction didn’t

allow. In my journal I stated: “Student B did a creative thing. She drew a picture to add to her written answer for one (test) question (April 18, 2007).”

The high group students seemed to enjoy taking the tests. Using Bloom's taxonomy, this researcher developed higher order thinking test questions that encouraged participants to break out of the mold of traditional textbook classroom instruction and be creative. In fact, some participants really took advantage of these opportunities to show their creativity. Sometimes I had to tell them to stop writing because time was up and they had sufficiently answered the questions but they wanted to go on and on. I documented in my journal:

I think the test is a good opportunity for the students in the more advanced group. They get to use all their English skills in creative ways to answer higher order thinking questions. It seems to build their confidence too (March 21, 2007).

As part of the reflection and adaptation inherent in action research, I decided to increase the difficulty of the test questions for the low group as well as the high group, with mixed results. Tests three and four included more abstract questions for the low group because I adapted the tests since they all scored two or three out of three on the first two tests. Students W and X met the challenge, with perfect scores on the last two tests; however, students Y and Z scored zeroes on the last two tests with the more difficult questions.

Some of the positive benefits of this study were of an affective nature rather than purely scientific. The group work provided an opportunity for collaboration. Most of the students usually seemed to enjoy working together in groups as they wrote their stories.

My journal states: “These students also seemed to enjoy working together to write this story. They were smiling, laughing and talking” (March 29, 2007).

The video was a good choice as the experience in the LEA because it presented authentic visual content that all participants could relate to regardless of their English proficiency level. Comments in my journal include: “This literacy activity is a good way to teach grammar and vocabulary in authentic situations. The visual (stimulus) of the video provides a good concrete situation in which to use English (February 1, 2007).”

Participants seemed to enjoy the video. They laughed and smiled a lot while they were watching. The video was popular in the culture of the Czech Republic where this study was conducted. The main character was a popular cartoon character that is a cultural icon throughout Eastern Europe. “As the video was playing I looked out at the students. They were all smiling as they watched the video. They always smile when they watch it (March 8, 2007).”

Another lesson learned was that LEA provides an authentic, student-centered approach to literacy instruction (Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Hall, 1981; Heller 1988; Herrel, 2000; Hildreth, 1965; Moustafa, 1987; Savage, 1992). It allows students to practice and use all the English they know. Students produce language in an integrated manner, using speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills simultaneously (Savage, 1992). The only help I gave them for writing the stories was to pre teach some vocabulary. Otherwise, they developed the stories on their own. Each story retold what participants saw in the video. LEA contrasts with the textbook activities that often limit students by eliciting right or wrong answers. Often, the students who scored lower than their peers on tests in this study, seemed to be frozen, as if they feared making mistakes rather than confidently producing language according to my observations. It also provides a way to engage students with effective literacy activities (Blevins, 2005).

LEA student-generated stories are produced using students' language, which reduces the cognitive load for them. It limits the number of unknown constructions that confuse students, preventing comprehension (Savage, 1992). Also, when students produce the language on their own, the teacher is provided with insight into what the students are good at and what mistakes they make. Future instruction can address what mistakes they made. This method could be useful for a teacher meeting a group of students for the first time since it encourages students to use all their English and allows to teacher to assess them without giving a paper and pencil test.

There are many effective literacy-based activities that can be implemented in the context of LEA. For example, we used a video, because it is more effective to use media familiar to the participants, as an instructional tool than that which is unfamiliar for literacy instruction (Griffin, 1990; & Hvitfeldt, 1985). Students collaborated in groups to write a story. Flexible grouping is a hallmark of differentiated instruction (Gentz, 2003; Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Students spent time practicing reading the stories and the teacher modeled reading (Blevins, 2005). Meaningful discussion between students and teacher about the stories integrated the four components of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Savage, 1992; Windmueller, 2004). Students listened to the teacher pre-teach vocabulary and they talked about the stories in small groups. They wrote stories and read them together. They listened to the teacher read the stories and they discussed it. Comprehension assessment questions were based on Bloom's taxonomy. There were also some negative lessons learned from this study.

Some confounding variables may have endangered the validity of this research. Perhaps the level of instruction and assessments were too high for two participants who scored zeros on some tests. Those two participants possessed only a fraction of the prior

English instruction that the others had. They had one and three years of prior education while the participant with the next lowest number of years of English instruction was six years, or, twice as much prior English instruction. Perhaps those two participants did not understand the test questions. Even though we discussed the test questions and answers as a class, perhaps those two students didn't understand the verbal discussion. There is much teachers can do to provide additional support to struggling students.

One way to provide additional support is to use LEA (Cooke, 1900; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001); however, there is a lot more potential support that they did not get in terms of literacy-based instructional activities during the course of this study because of time constraints. For example, the lower group could have benefited from more verbal discussion and activities related to the LEA stories. In fact, at the conclusion of the data collection, one low group participant suggested that we should have done more verbal discussion of the stories. The advanced students did not need additional support; however, I did engage the struggling students verbally regarding the content more often than those who were not struggling.

There are many instructional activities recommended for teaching ELLs that I rarely or never used during the course of this study due to time limitations. I could have modeled reading more often. I could have conducted speed drills. I could have assigned students to mark phrase boundaries in sentences, for example, to find the subject and predicate of sentences. We could have done more choral reading and paired reading. I could have assigned students to read the passages more frequently. I could have shown phrase boundaries on the white board (Blevins, 2005).

In hindsight, I could have assigned some of those literacy activities listed above to the low group and different, more complex activities to the high group. However, doing

so would have required more planning time because it is essentially planning two curricula for one class. I was already devoting a lot of extra time to this project; however, as I become more experienced as a teacher in time, I hope to develop more ideas on how to keep high groups and low groups simultaneously engaged during class. On the other hand, I do not want to track students into a low group. Ideally, the most challenging instruction should be available to all students. However, the reality is that there were gaps in proficiencies and educational backgrounds between students that I may not be able to bridge.

### Implications

This study produced at least nine implications for ESL/EFL teachers and ELLs. First, teachers should use LEA for literacy instruction because it is an effective research-based method for teaching literacy to beginning readers and ELLs (Cooke, 1900; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Hall, 1981; Heller, 1988; Herrel, 2000; Law & Eckes, 1995; Moustafa, 1987; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). However, it will not necessarily raise the proficiency levels of all students to the exact same level. There will probably continue to be a contrast in the proficiencies of the lower and higher students. With that in mind, teachers should purposefully plan for different groupings in the classroom (Heacox, 2002; & Tomlinson & Cunningham-Eidson, 2003). Flexible grouping according to similar proficiency levels was used in the present study.

Second, teachers should view literacy instruction through the integrated model. Some research suggests a combination of top-down and bottom-up models is necessary to help ELLs achieve literacy acquisition (Birch, 2002). The integrative model is based on cognitive-constructivist philosophy (Windmueller, 2004). Those holding the integrative

viewpoint believe the reader is an active participant in the reading process as he or she searches for meaning in the text. A good reader according to the integrative model is one who can make decisions and problem solve using extensive knowledge of the world and language, effective comprehension strategies, and automatic low-level processing strategies to interact with a text efficiently (Birch, 2002). According to the integrative model of reading, bottom-up processing serves top-down processing because automaticity allows the reader to focus more on comprehension of the text.

Third, using the integrated model of literacy instruction, teachers should implement skills based activities within the context of LEA lessons. Students need to learn to use context clues, phonics, and structural analysis to develop word recognition skills (Dixon & Nessel, 1983). Furthermore, word recognition lessons should supplement the basic program of discussion and dictation and should be planned to tie in directly with the words and sentences students use in their dictation. Other examples of skills-based activities include teachers modeling reading, speed drills, marking phrase boundaries in sentences, choral reading, and paired reading (Blevins, 2005).

Fourth, teachers should help students build oral reading fluency because it is the most important component for ELLs' overall literacy achievement. Fluency is a predictor of reading success for ELLs and native English speakers. Furthermore, oral language skills significantly predict overall reading, writing, and oral language achievement. In this present study, lack of fluency among two of the low group participants may have limited their abilities to comprehend. They put so much effort into decoding each word that comprehension may have become too difficult. The low group may not have received enough skills-based instruction to enable them to demonstrate comprehension on the tests. In order to achieve literacy skills, ELLs need exposure to English in multiple ways, vocabulary instruction, and opportunities to practice using

English in meaningful contexts (Windmueller, 2004). Lack of vocabulary is one of the major obstacles for the ELL reader (Birch, 2002).

Fifth, ELLs need much more repetition than native speakers in order to achieve reading fluency. Students should review texts frequently before being tested. The average child needs four to 14 exposures to a word in order to achieve automaticity. ELLs, on the other hand, need 40 or more exposures of a word to achieve automaticity. A lack of fluency produces a slow, halting pace; frequent mistakes; poor phrasing; and inadequate intonation. Automaticity frees a reader's cognitive resources so he or she can put more effort into comprehension (Blevins, 2005; Windmueller, 2004). This repetition should occur in choral reading, echo reading, pair reading, and independent reading. However, there is something that helps ELLs even more than performing hours of research based literacy activities.

Sixth, beginning ELLs need bilingual support. When adequately supported in tasks designed to develop academic English, beginning ELLs show they can successfully handle the task (Chamot, A.U. & O'Malley, J.M., 1994; Early, 1990; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000). In other words, bilingual education or an ESL program that teaches content while students are learning language, are the best programs for ELLs. These are the best options because consistent, uninterrupted cognitive academic development in all subjects throughout students' schooling has been shown to be more important than the number of hours of second language (L2) instruction for successful academic achievement in L2 (Collier, 1989; Thomas & Collier, 1997). In this present study, some participants received bilingual support through their more advanced peers during small group collaboration and whole class discussion. However, even bilingual education may be trumped by natural factors.

Seventh, students' length of prior English instruction predicts reading comprehension success and it doesn't matter whether the instruction was formal or informal. There was a vast difference between the participants with the least and most English instruction, one year compared to twenty years (Table 3.1). Results showed the two students who struggled with reading comprehension in this study had the fewest years of prior English instruction. They had only one to three years of prior instruction. All other participants, who performed well on comprehension tests, had six to twenty years of previous instruction. The participant who scored the best of all participants, with perfect scores on all post assessment comprehension tests had absolutely no previous formal English instruction. However, she did have six years of informal English instruction. Since students vary so much in educational background, teachers must go beyond traditional whole class instruction in order to engage all students.

Eighth, differentiation of instruction is necessary in ESL classrooms. ELLs come from wide varieties of backgrounds so they bring different levels of readiness. Whole-class instruction is designed for the readiness level of average to high students. In whole-class instruction the less proficient students may be left out of the learning process. The more proficient students feed answers to them but they might not grasp the concepts. All students need content, activities, and assessments that challenge them at their level of readiness. LEA is one method that can be used to differentiate literacy instruction as it did in this study through grouping, content, process, and product. Despite students' natural and educational limitations, teachers can help ELLs increase their academic achievement with some simple literacy-based activities such as those listed in the literature review and results chapters of this study.

Finally, teachers should not forget the obvious hurdles involved in teaching ELLs such as students' lack of common phrases, vocabulary and syntax. Students must be

taught how to ask questions. If students do not understand an instruction, they need to have mastered basic phrases such as “Once again, please.”; “I don’t understand.” and “What does it mean?” Also, students need to be taught the question words used on tests, so that when they see a question on a test, they will understand the question. Otherwise, it will be virtually impossible for them to produce the correct answer. In this study, participants who asked questions were those who had the highest English skills. The two participants who scored low on many of their comprehension tests never asked questions. Many positive ideas came out of this study; however, this study is not a bed of roses.

#### Limitations and Future Research

Many factors limited the reliability of this study. First, the teaching journal was a qualitative type of data, producing findings that are not conclusive and cannot be used to make generalizations about the population (Snap Surveys, 2007). Second, eight is a small sample size. Even when considering the more reliable quantitative post-test results, it is not possible to make generalizations about what is effective for teaching ELLs based on such a small sample size. Third, the data gathered from students was limited in its' scope. For example, the questionnaire included only four questions. The decoding tests only measured segmental pronunciation, not suprasegmentals, even though they are an important part of pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). The comprehension tests only asked three questions. Finally, there may have been confounding variables negatively influencing test results, such as the test questions in and of themselves. Maybe participants didn't understand the questions. The results of this study lead to many more questions, which could drive future research.

This study does not explain the contrast in results between two of the low group students and all other participants. Two participants struggled with comprehension and sometimes scored zeros on tests, even though the others seemed to have little or no trouble with the tests. I don't know what caused the low test scores. Was it because those two students had less prior English instruction than the others? Was it a limitation in the method of instruction? Was it lack of time spent on literacy activities? A lot of uncertainty still shrouds the research question, so further research is necessary.

I recommend future research on this same topic of using LEA as a method for differentiating literacy instruction for adult EFL students. Future research could focus more on the grouping as it relates to differentiated instruction. A comparison could be done on the different types of grouping such as similar proficiency groups versus mixed proficiency groups. Future research focusing on teaching literacy could study which literacy activities are the most effective, for example, choral reading versus paired reading. Other interesting questions for study are, "Can LEA be used to lower students' affective filter?" "How can students develop reading fluency?"

LEA can be used as an effective method for differentiating literacy instruction for a group of adult EFL students with wide varieties of readiness levels. This study showed students scored high on decoding tests and improved on comprehension test scores. I would use this method again in the same situation because there are many benefits to using this method, even though some things could be done differently, such as reading aloud more often, or explicitly teaching the question words that appear on tests. The action research method worked well for this study since it produced a more knowledgeable and more confident teacher and students improved their English skills. The results of this study may be useful for researchers or teachers of ESL/EFL students. These results will be communicated through publishing this study in book form and

cataloging it in the Hamline University Bush Library in St. Paul, Minnesota. Also, this study could be presented at an ESL conference.

APPENDIX A  
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

How many years of formal education do you have?

What university degrees do you have?

How many years have you studied English formally?

How many years have you studied English informally?

APPENDIX B

PRE-ASSESSMENT DECODING PASSAGE AND COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Read the article *The Secrets of Sleep* and find the answers.

- a. How many hours a day do babies sleep?
  - b. How many hours should we sleep?
  - c. How many hours do most people sleep?
  - e. Compare the sleep needs of older and younger people.
- 
- f. Write a dialog between you and your friend Pavel, who only gets five hours of sleep a night. include Pavel's reasons for not sleeping more and your reasons for telling him he needs more.

### **The Secrets of Sleep**

Babies do it for up to eighteen hours a day: Mrs. Thatcher and Napoleon both said they only needed to do it three or four hours a night. Sleep. No one can live without it. But how much do we really need?

Research by the National Sleep Foundation in Washington says that we all need eight hours' sleep every night. Scientists have found that people who sleep for less than six and a half hours a night are more often ill than people who sleep for eight hours. Going without sleep also increases the chance of serious illness. "Workaholics" who sleep for less than five hours often die young, and do less well at work.

The scientists found that, on average, adults sleep for seven hours a night, with 32% sleeping less than six hours.

It also says that the idea that we need less sleep as we get older is completely untrue. "People have no idea how important sleep is to their lives," Dr. Thomas Roth, director of the Foundation says. "Good health needs good sleep."

"But not too much of it," says Professor Jim Horne of Loughborough University, "Sleep is like food and drink," he believes: "you would always like to have a little bit more, but that doesn't mean you need it." Professor Horne studied a group of people who could spend as many hours as they wanted in bed: after ten hours they didn't find it any easier to get up in the morning. And people who sleep for more than nine hours a night die younger than people who usually sleep for seven or eight!

Adapted from (Moor & Cunningham, 2001).

APPENDIX C  
POST- TESTS WITH STUDENT-GENERATED STORIES

Name:  
Test 1 Group 1

Date:

1. List things scattered around the car.

2. Why was the mole happy?

3. What things were in the car?

One day a mole went on a trip.

He saw a broken car.

Around the car were a lot of different things.

For example: wrench, a pump, tools, a car battery, a hammer, and especially an open car.

The mole went in the car.

He tried to press buttons.

He pushed a horn, also a radio.

There was music and a car seat tipped forward.

He liked it.

He was happy and he was relaxing.

Name:  
Test 1 Group 2

Date:

1. Compare the big car and the little car.

2. List things around the car.

3. Why was Krtek afraid?

Krtek was in the city and he saw the car for repairing.  
Around the car were a lot of things.  
For example a hammer, wrench, car battery, oil and a canister of petrol.  
He went to the car and tried some control points.  
He was afraid for one moment.  
Then he missed the control point between cars seats and it knocked him out.  
Krtek was lying, smiling.  
There was boy, who smashed the little car.  
It was as little as Krtek.  
The boy went away and Krtek.

## Test 2 Group 1

One day a mole found a destroyed car. He tried to fix it, but he couldn't because the tires still fell. A mouse watched him and smiled at him. The mole was patient and fixed and fixed. Finally he decided to bring the car to a service. There was some machine, which was mending the mole's car. He was satisfied and happy. His car got a key for going. The mole went to the city where there was busy traffic. He weaved all day till evening. When it was dark, he parked the car and went to bed.

1. Describe the car before it was fixed.
2. Where did the mole bring the car?
3. Extend the story by telling what the mole did the next day.



## Test 3 Group 1

A mole, a hare, and a hedgehog lived in a wood. One day they heard a big noise. The animals were frightened. The hare consoled the mole and hedgehog. Hard machines cut the trees and all the trees were away. A helicopter appeared suddenly. The animals saw some men making a ceremony. After the ceremony the men started a big new building. Many bulldozers, trucks, and people constructed new houses. The animals had only a stump. The stump was their house.

1. When did the helicopter appear?
2. Describe the hare.
3. Why did the men have a ceremony?

Name:  
Test 3 Group 2

Date:

Once upon a time there was a big wood with many animals living in it. A rabbit, a hedgehog and a mole. They were living in a hole in one tree. Once in the morning they heard a horrible noise. They saw the trees falling down one by one. What happened? They were frightened, when one of the trees fell down next 2 their home. Also their house was changed to a stump. The mole and the hedgehog cried and the rabbit consoled them. Suddenly a helicopter appeared and 3 men got off. They made a ceremony and then they noticed the crying animals. They gave them AUTHORIZATION LETTER. Next morning bulldozers and other engines came 2 build the new big town. Every time when their home was in danger, the clever animals showed the letter and their home survived.

1. Separate the story into beginning, middle, and end.
2. Design a new home for the three animals. Describe what it would look like.
3. Recommend a plan to the animals for how they can have a happy home once again.

Name:

Date:

### Test 4 Group 1

The animals were sitting on a stump and looked around themselves. Suddenly a roller appeared. A man wanted them to leave this place. The animals showed him the document of the place. The roller went out. Then the police man came to the animals and wanted them also to leave the place. The animals friends refused all them. The police officer came and recommended to transport the stump with the animals into the police office. There in the police office the stump was cut. The animals got in the headquarters. The best officer recommended to build them a new flat of rubber. The animals entertained there, they smiled, jumped. Than they jumped on the window and were surprised of big traffic. Suddenly a phone was ringing and our teacher Shannon stopped TV.

1. When did the animals go to the police office?
2. Extend the story (2-3 sentences).
3. Write a dialog between the animals and the best officer in which the animals argue for the rights to their home.

Name:

Date

The Mole

Test 4 Group 2

Animals' home was in the way of development of the city. They refused to leave home. They showed document with stamps to the builder, the policeman, the cops. Eventually, the animals were transported to police headquarters and they were asked why they didn't want to leave their stump. At the end the top officer offered them cigars, sweets and new home. A few workers arranged a special home for them built only from rubber. The animals were surprised everything looked like real forest but they found out that everything was made from rubber. They entertained themselves, jumping, dinging, when suddenly the phone rang. They got so scared. They were running out of the room and ended in the bathroom. They jumped into a bath and they didn't know if they should laugh or cry.

1. Explain why the animals were transported to police headquarters.
2. Write a new law for South City about where animals should live.
3. Write a dialog between the animals and the big boss in which the animals argue for the rights to their home.

APPENDIX D  
RUBRIC FOR ASSESSING COMPREHENSION POST TESTS

1. The student answers the question completely.
2. The student uses information from the story to answer the question.
3. The meaning is conveyed clearly even if some mistakes are present.

If the scorer answered yes to all three then students showed comprehension and passed the test.

APPENDIX E  
SAMPLE POST TESTS

APPENDIX F  
CONSENT FORM

January 2007

Sbor Cirkve Bratske  
Dubnova 806  
Praha 4 - Haje, Czech Republic

Dear English student:

I am your English teacher. I am also a graduate student working on a Master's degree in ESL at Hamline University. An important part of my degree is a research project. The purpose of this letter is to get your permission for you to participate in my project.

The purpose of my project is to study whether the Language Experience Approach can be effectively used as a part of a differentiated (individualized) curriculum. The benefit of this study is to improve my teaching and students reading achievement. The cost is 20 minutes per class period will be devoted to instruction and assessment of students' native language literacy and English reading skills.

Your participation would consist of ordinary reading activities during the regular class period. This includes tests of reading comprehension.

I may include samples of student papers in my final paper. If your work is selected, your identity will be kept confidential by blocking out names or using fictitious names. I will report my results in graphs or tables. You are free to withdraw from this project at any time without any negative consequences.

I have received approval for my study from the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University and from Jodi Oppenhuizen, administrator of the Sbor Cirkve Bratske English program. My study will be described in my final paper, called a capstone. It will be catalogued and shelved at Bush Library, Hamline University. My results might also be included in an article for publication in a professional journal or in a report at a professional conference. In all cases, your identity will be kept confidential.

Please sign, date, and return this form to indicate your permission for you to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please call me at (420 605 364 014) or email me: [curranshannon@hotmail.com](mailto:curranshannon@hotmail.com). Thank you for your cooperation.  
Sincerely,

Shannon Curran  
English Teacher

X \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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