

Gamebooks for the ESL Classroom

by Mary M. Slechta and Rebecca M. Karli

Turn of Phrase ESL (TOP ESL) is an educational series designed on the principles of game-based active learning to help intermediate- to advanced-level adult ELLs build vocabulary, improve reading comprehension, and sharpen critical thinking skills. Active learning is a teaching framework proven effective in establishing learning outcomes that are significant and robust. In a recent study, researchers found that average grades increased by half a letter, and the results were stable in large and small classes as well as in introductory and upper-level courses (Freeman et al., 2014). Game-based learning is a relatively new subfield in the active learning pedagogy. In practice, students participate in context-based simulations that require action and problem-solving (Shaffer, 2006; Squire, 2008; Squire & Jenkins, 2004). With its gamebook format, TOP ESL can be an effective tool for ESL educators and replace conventional books used in reading units.

The Gamebook Format

The gamebook format relies on readers making decisions as they read. In TOP ESL books, readers encounter “decision points” that test either their understanding of idiomatic expressions or their understanding of situational contexts related to the story. While a reading unit using conventional books might rely on students recalling definitions and story details, TOP ESL goes beyond the surface meanings of words or a linear storyline.

What makes TOP ESL so effective is that the books demand that readers recognize and process a range of narrative cues and syntactic meanings.

Example 1

Betty senses that you are still unsure. “I know this is a lot to think about right now. You’ll get your first mission tonight. Your mother wanted this, David. If she trusts you, then we trust you.” Next to you, the washing machine starts to shift and rock, switching cycles from wash to rinse. Betty leans in closer. “You can really **hold up** this investigation.”

If you think that Betty is saying that you will hinder the investigation, go to **page 40**.

If you think that Betty is saying that you can support the investigation, go to **page 42**.

(Karli, 2015, p. 39)

In Example 1, the dual meanings of the phrase “hold up” are tested. From a usage standpoint, either choice uses the phrase correctly. Instead, readers must decide, based on the context of the scene and their understanding of the characters, which option works best.

Example 2

Suddenly, he pulls up hard, making the tires screech. “Flip,” he says with a quiet edge to his voice now. “I know about Bob and his **silver spoon**.”

If you think that Jim is talking about Bob’s wealthy family, go to **page 30**.

If you think that Jim is talking about the ring on the bearded man’s hand, go to **page 34**.

(Slechta, 2015, p. 29)

In Example 2, readers are tested on their understanding of the phrase “silver spoon.” The phrase itself has a distinct meaning. Within the context of the novel, however, it also has a more

specific meaning. The decision point explores those possibilities and tests whether readers can recognize the shades of meaning presented in the story.

Using TOP ESL in the Classroom

TOP ESL books can be easily integrated into the ESL classroom. Teachers can design a unit around the books using a combination of homework and in-class activities. Examples include:

- **Character study:** Create “character checkpoints” where students stop and evaluate how the characters are changing or developing. Students can also make predictions about how characters will act based on motives.
- **Explore idioms:** Instruct students to select several idioms with dual or multiple meanings and write short scenes using them in the alternative ways.
- **Reading journals:** Ask students to keep reading journals in which they make predictions about the story or characters and then later confirm or reject those predictions. (Night Owls Press, 2015)

Educators can let students set the reading pace and then use class time for more in-depth discussion. The 60-plus decision points in every TOP ESL book offer various entry points for discussion around language choice and literary analysis. Teachers can see what students pick, discuss why one option might be better than another, and monitor how those choices affect the story. Unlike other texts, these books are highly “reusable” as well. Because each book has multiple narrative paths and endings, students can reread a story and see how it changes as they make different decisions and embark on different paths. For educators, this allows for myriad opportunities for creative engagement with the text.

Sustaining interest beyond the books is also easy. Students can explore places and objects mentioned in the stories using web tools like YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr, and Google images; teachers can use any of the TOP ESL books to explore history, geography, culture, science, current events, and more. As an example, for *The Spoonmaker’s Diamond*, students can learn more about the Topkapi Palace or the Grand Bazaar through research.

In the ESL classroom for adults, an effective learning environment is one where enthusiasm can be sustained and where students and teachers can get the most out of the learning material. With more conventional books, this can be a challenge. Designed with the ELL in mind, TOP ESL books simply go beyond a typical class reading experience set around a linear text. They are entertaining, action-filled stories with adventure or mystery elements that have wide appeal. More important, the gamebook format introduces decision-making and promotes active learning.

References

- Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(23), 8410–8415. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1319030111
- Karli, R. M. (2015). *Cleaning house: A chooseable path novel for learning English expressions* (Turn of Phrase ESL series). Portland, OR: Night Owls Press.
- Night Owls Press. (2015). Learning guide for Turn of Phrase ESL [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.nightowlspress.com/learning-guide-turn-of-phrase-esl/>
- Shaffer, D. W. (2006). *How computer games help children learn*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Slechta, M. M. (2015). *The spoonmaker's diamond: A chooseable path novel for learning English expressions* (Turn of Phrase ESL series). Portland, OR: Night Owls Press.
- Squire, K. (2008). Game-based learning: An emerging paradigm for instruction. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 21(2), 7–36. doi:10.1002/piq.20020
- Squire, K., & Jenkins, H. (2004). Harnessing the power of games in education. *Insight*, 3(1), 5–33. Retrieved from <http://website.education.wisc.edu/~kdsquire/tenure-files/32-insight.pdf>
- Turn of Phrase. ESL series published by Night Owls Press. www.nightowlspress.com/turn-of-phrase-esl/.

Mary M. Slechta holds a master's degree from Syracuse University and is dually certified in English and TESOL. She has taught GED, K–12, and university-level students over a thirty-year career in the Syracuse area, and in 2012 retired from Nottingham High School, Syracuse. Her work has appeared in several journals and anthologies, including New to North America: Writing by Immigrants, Their Children and Grandchildren (Burning Bush Publications) and Identity Lesson: Contemporary Writing About Learning to Be an American (Penguin Books). <mmslecta@gmail.com>

Rebecca M. Karli holds a bachelor's in Spanish and economics from James Madison University and a master's in TESOL from American University. She is certified in both secondary English and K–12 ESL, and has 10 years of experience teaching English to a wide spectrum of ELLs, including bilingual kindergarten, K–3 ESL for children of migrant workers in California, language arts for all proficiency levels, and basic literacy for adult learners. Karli currently teaches middle school ESL language arts and science at Williamsburg Middle School in Arlington, Va.. <rebeccamkarli@gmail.com>