

Sample of a packet.

Photo credit: Marisa Squadrito Geisler

As part of the New England Literacy Resource Center's persistence project (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009), I have explored the use of out-of-class "reading packets" as a new learning option for our adult ESOL students. Since their spring 2008 debut, take-home packets have evolved into folders of pleasurable reading materials that high-beginner and intermediate ESOL students explore and react to outside of class. The packets are quite popular with students, and the "packet culture" that the students and I fostered in class has led to a dramatic increase in the amount of time students spend reading English on their own. As one program improvement among many in our ESOL classes over the last few years, packet use has led to a noticeable increase in student self-efficacy. It has also contributed to better student persistence, as shown in hours of class attendance, student completion rates, and goal attainment

rates. Comparing data from classes that used packets in fall 2008 to data from fall 2007, attendance hours went up 16% in one class, completion rates increased by 85% in another class, and both classes increased their goal attainment rates by over 110%. In the two years since the initial implementation of packets, our unpublished program research indicates that free reading has boosted standardized test scores as well.

Because of this success, take-home reading packets have become a permanent part of the class experience for many students in our program, the Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative. We run ESOL classes in five public library systems. Teachers and administrators from other organizations have shown interest in using packets in their classes. From experience, I suggest that teachers who want to do something similar should pay careful attention

Extending Learning: Reading Packets for ESL Students

by Chris Bourret

Chris Bourret is the lead ESOL teacher at Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative, Cranston, RI.

to how the packets are designed, implemented, and modeled, to make sure that students are on board with the goals behind the packets and get the most out of the readings.

Packet Design

When we first came up with the idea of using take-home packets, there was general excitement among other teachers. The question of what the packets should contain was a matter of intense discussion and debate for several weeks. After a few tries, we realized that students preferred to read pleasurable materials at home because they could choose what they wanted to read. In addition, we teachers could easily target each learner's reading level with appropriate materials. This approach reflects Krashen's ideas on "free voluntary reading:" Pleasurable reading can help students develop richer vocabularies and understand complex oral and written language, and it can move learners to higher stages of literacy (Krashen, 2006). Krashen's research explored the effects of free reading on children's literacy skills, but we're applying the same principles to adult learners. Our approach also reflects the work of Purcell-Gates and her team. The work shows that adult learners are more likely to apply new reading and writing abilities outside of school when they learn from specific real-world texts and from activities that are personally important and relevant to them (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2001).

A packet consists of a pocket folder and the following components:

- A copy of *Easy English News* and accompanying two-page quiz

- A reading from *ESL-Library.com* or a book from a pleasurable reading series, for example *True Stories in the News*, *What a Life*, or *What a World*, all from Longman Publishing
- At least one graphic organizer on which students summarize and reflect on the reading
- A time log in which students keep track of how long they have read or worked on activities

Packets are easy to assemble. Tasks and readings are chosen to ensure that cognitive demand is appropriate to the student's level. Since our classes take place in a library setting, we are able to purchase multiple copies of readers that students can borrow, renew, and share. Students take the whole packets home, choose what parts they'd like to do, and hand in their work whenever they are ready. When a packet is returned, I write down the number of hours the student spent on the packet according to the time log, keep a list of stories the student has read, correct the newspaper quiz and any activities from the other readings, and put my comments on the graphic organizer. I usually reflect on opinions the student had about the reading. I may suggest strategies to improve summarizing skills. I then return the folder, with corrected materials and log on one side and new materials on the other. I include new graphic organizers so the student can review other newspaper articles, and I ask him or her to choose a new reading from the same book or a different book checked out from the library. Packets don't require a lot of correction time

from me, turn-around time is fast, and students can turn in packets or parts of packets at whatever rate they want—usually weekly, biweekly, or monthly.

The graphic organizer has proven to be a very effective tool for responding to the readings. It gives teachers a sense of how hard the readings were, based on how many new vocabulary words the learner encountered. The organizer has also proven easy to use for a wide range of advanced beginner and low intermediate students because they can respond to the readings in words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. In addition, it has been a great way to get students accustomed to summarizing. It's important to note, however, that there are many other types of graphic organizers out there. If you are creating packets for more advanced learners, it would probably be better to use an organizer that asked for more detailed responses and made higher academic and cognitive demands. If you're working with low beginners who may not have the skills to summarize or share their reactions to a story, a simpler graphic organizer that requires less language output should probably be considered.

The packets are easy for my students to use. They are also easy for me to correct, so they don't become an extra burden. Teachers could give students answer keys to correct reading activities themselves, but I prefer to correct the quizzes to see how readers are handling the material. Students also enjoy the comments I've made on their graphic organizers. This sparks a dialogue about their reactions and writing abilities.

In terms of compilation, keeping a time log and a list of all they have read during a semester helps students see longitudinally how much more time they are spending learning English than before they started using packets. Some students may see a connection between free reading and an improvement in their language skills. In addition, copies of the graphic organizers are great portfolio items to keep; reviewing them later shows students how much their writing and summarizing skills have improved.

Implementation and Modeling

From experience, I learned that successfully getting students involved with the packets depends on how you implement the project. You need to prepare students to read on their own. When I first started distributing packets, I discussed with students how research has shown that it takes an average of 150 hours to advance one level in English. This set the stage for students to reflect on their own language learning, and for them to see that class participation by itself is not the be-all and end-all of studying.

I then had students brainstorm ways they could practice English skills outside the classroom, and this led to student-generated ideas on practicing speaking and reading more on their own. With some guided questions from me, the students as a group came to the conclusion that reading on their own was a practical skill to work on independently, given their busy lives, work schedules, and general lack of opportunities to speak English outside of class.

The next step was for me to

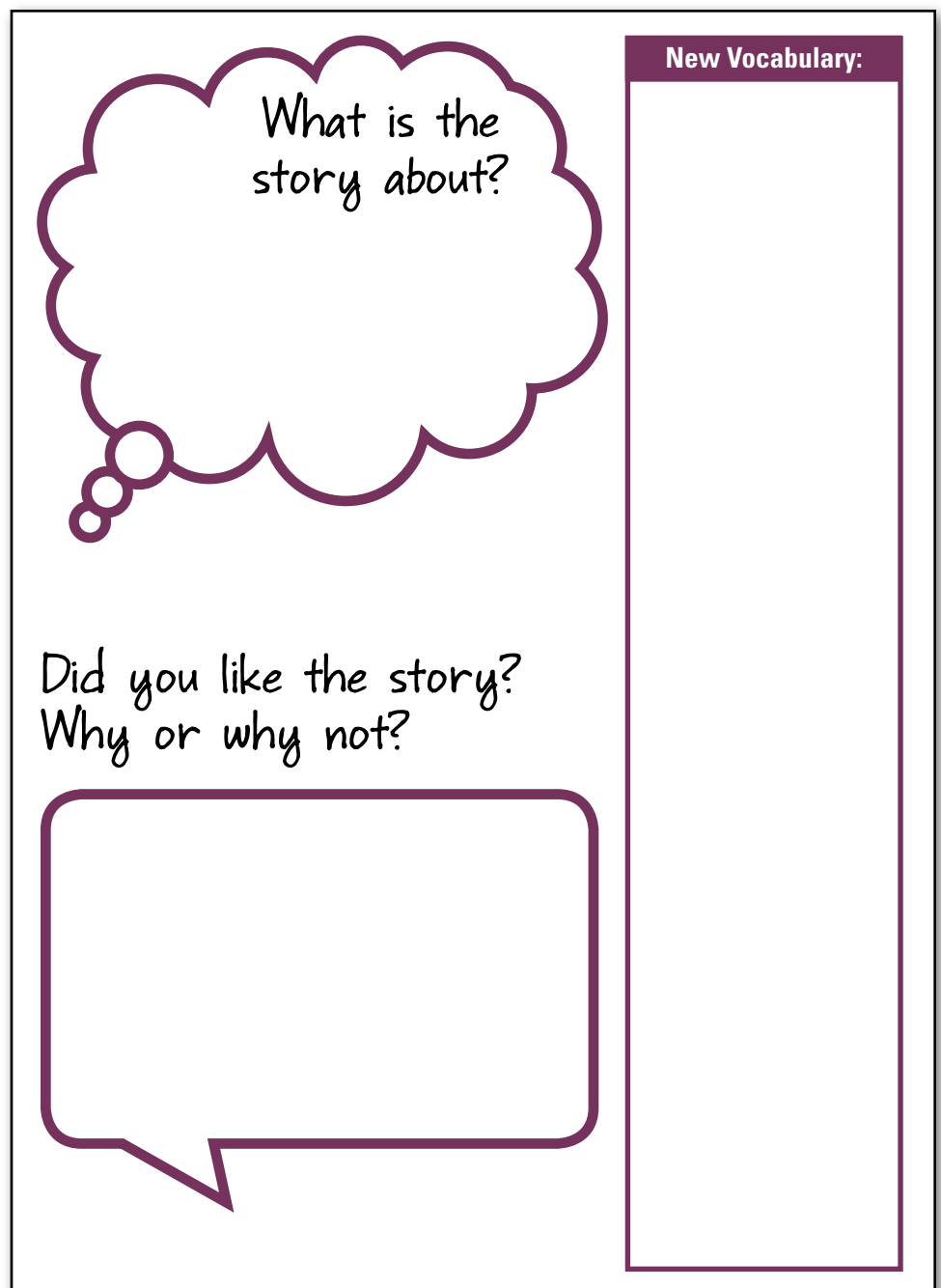


Figure 1. The graphic organizer we include in packets.

pass out the packets and, in a whole class activity, model the graphic organizer a few times, so I could set student expectations. I then had paired students read a short story and create a graphic organizer. We repeated this activity several times over the course of a few days. Then, as a class, we broke down the sections of *Easy English News* so the lower-

level readers weren't intimidated by the long front page pieces that might take too long for them to read. We looked at the second-page articles, usually small paragraphs on holidays or special events connected with that month, as well as the student letters page. Knowing that they were responsible only for reading any article that interested them, no matter

how small, rather than for reading the whole newspaper or completing all of the accompanying quiz really helped build student self-efficacy. They felt a sense of accomplishment when they read something in English and were able to comment on it. It was really important for them to realize that they could choose what they wanted to read, in the newspaper as well as in the reader.

This last point is particularly important when you consider the busy lives of students, many of whom balance work, family commitments, and other responsibilities. It is crucial for teachers to get students to understand the importance of reading outside of class and to encourage them to read in small sessions so it doesn't become too much of a burden. Most of my students work 11 hours a day, six days a week, yet still find time to do the packets at home. Selecting their own readings makes students more likely to read on their own. It seems like something they have chosen to do rather than homework. Other teachers may find, however, that students still won't have the time to complete activities outside of class. Making classroom time available may be necessary to ensure packet completion.

After I began handing out the packets, I had to take steps to create "packet culture." Even though the outside reading was optional, the students and I now had the expectation that pleasurable reading and the accompanying activities—outside of regular classroom work—would be beneficial and a regular and consistent part of class. When students first started to hand in packets, I made it a point to

congratulate each student and get applause from the class. Students started to rally around each other, congratulating those handing in packets, and quizzing and teasing each other about doing the reading. It didn't take long for the packet culture to take hold.

From this experience, I know that the teacher frequently has to be an active facilitator, prompting those students who have finished work to talk about their experiences to the rest of class. Asking students to share what they have done briefly—how long it took them, and what they thought about the packet—models the work for the rest of the class, starts discussion on student feelings about the packets, and provides encouragement and motivation for others.

When students are coming in late, settling in, and looking over their packets before handing them in is a great time for the teacher to allow them to help each other with any problems they have had with packets. The teacher can ask the more advanced students to help those who are having trouble with an article or quiz, or can have students review each other's graphic organizers. It can also work well to facilitate packet interactions at the end of class or right after class.

Except for initial implementation work, my packet interactions with the students have been informal and spontaneous. However, teachers may find it necessary to do specific class activities if students are not taking to packets. This might mean more modeling of graphic organizer use in class, more discussion of how long it takes for students to improve

their English, and planning ways students can commit to practicing English outside of class, especially in small amounts. A teacher will know that packet use is successful when students fully understand what a packet is, what it is for, and why they do the reading.

Student / Learner Impact

In my third semester of doing take-home reading packets, 17 out of 19 students have done them at least monthly, and 14 of those do it weekly or biweekly. When a new student comes into class, experienced students will ask me, "Chris, don't you have a packet for the new student?" and I will have the veterans go over the packet components with the new student and explain why they do the packets. Once packet culture is established, a teacher can use his or her class to sustain it.

Obviously, students wouldn't have bothered with packets if they hadn't found them interesting or helpful to their English language development. Since they contain pleasurable reading, packets may not directly improve specific competency-based CASAS reading test scores (although scores have gone up for many packet users in my class!), but informally you can see students' reading abilities and attitudes toward reading change tremendously. Students now turn in packets regularly; the quality of their reflection, their ability to summarize, and their vocabulary development have all improved since we started using packets. Most students who were at first hesitant and only read short reading selections have eventually done the whole newspaper quiz, and instead of one

graphic organizer per packet, the majority of students now do two or three per month.

Although packets are designed for take-home work, topics or ideas from the reading sometimes spill over into class. For example, many students read an article, "How to Speak When Calling 911," in the newspaper. They expressed an interest in covering the topic in class. From one-on-one student goal conferences, I've also gotten extensive positive feedback from students about how the packets have helped their English. For example, Margarita, a student who has been with the program for two and a half years, said one day, "Oh, this year I have TOO much work, reading and writing, but I LOVE it." She said she really wants to improve her English to find work as a teacher's aide, and so she can help her grandchildren with their English homework when they get older. Some days Margarita can't attend our

morning class because of work, but she still comes in to give me her packet and journal and to pick up the next reading (as well as any class work she has missed).

Mery, another student, told me recently, "Teacher, this year class is excellent. I think the reading and writing is perfect for me." Mery usually asks me for two readings instead of the one I usually give students. Yi Ping, a student in her third year with us, surprised me with a story she told me recently. She is not a very confident student, though not shy about speaking in public. She told me a story about how she was overcharged at a pharmacy in town, and how she had gone back to see a manager. Eventually, the manager gave her a gift card from the store for her trouble. At the end of the story she told me, "Yesterday I told my husband this year the teacher gives us readings and this helps my English so much. I am learning more and more,

and I can understand more." Mery recently found employment and can't attend class, yet she still drops by to pick up and drop off packets. This has given our program the idea of extending packets to "stop out" or completed students like Mery, or even to wait-listed people wanting to get into class—all interesting possibilities.

The student anecdotes illustrate how the packets can build motivation and, more importantly, self-efficacy. Students like Yi Ping feel successful, and suddenly that translates to other language skills and abilities like speaking in a public place or using the library, skills not really addressed in the packets. Most students have maintained the amount of time they devote to reading each week, and the apparent effect on how they learn and the increase in what they are doing at home is quite impressive. That's why the take-home reading packets are a permanent fixture in my teaching now.

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SOME SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR READING PACKETS

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- Blanchard, K., & Root, C. *American roots*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.
- Broukal, M. *What a life! Stories of amazing people* series. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.
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- Claire, E. *Easy English News*, monthly newspaper. Elizabeth Claire, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.elizabethclaire.com>
- Draper, C. G. *All American stories* series. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

- ESL Library.com. Retrieved from <http://www.esl-library.com>
- Gianola, A. *From home to school, Stories plus, Health stories, That's life, Life goes on, and Novel scenes* series. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.
- Heyer, S. *True stories* series. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.
- News for You*, weekly newspaper. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.
- Sokolik, M. E. *Rethinking America* series. Boston, MA: Heinle ELT.