

# Graded liberal arts and sciences for language education

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The liberal arts and sciences (LAS) provide a dynamic framework for developing a systematic curriculum of graded stories that enhance language and whole person education. These LAS stories not only help students develop integrated language skills, but they also introduce to learners the broader curricular goals of liberal education.

リベラルアーツ&サイエンス (教養教育, liberal arts & sciences, LAS) は、言語教育と全人教育の質を高めるグレイデッド・リーダーの意図的かつ体系的なカリキュラムを発展させるダイナミックなフレームワークを提供する。これらのLASストーリーは、学生の統合的な言語スキルを発展させることに役立つばかりでなく、一般高等教育の広範なカリキュラム目標の魅力的な導入としての働きを果たすものです。

**T**HROUGHOUT HISTORY, educators have generally emphasized the liberal arts and sciences in two ways, one philosophical and the other rhetorical. Taylor (2002) traces the philosophical emphasis to Socrates and the rhetorical emphasis to Cicero. This paper explains how language teachers can follow these two emphases to create appealing graded liberal arts content for learners of English. The discussion will (a) briefly state an LAS philosophy for language education primarily in relation to the goals of higher education, (b) explain how teachers can use short and graded LAS stories for language learning, (c) summarize some classroom-based studies dealing with these stories for language learning, and (d) suggest ideas for curriculum development and research related to liberal arts and sciences for language learning. For clarification, the terms liberal arts and sciences are used interchangeably with liberal education and the liberal arts.

## A very short philosophy of the liberal arts

Briefly stated, the liberal arts aim to educate the mind in beauty, goodness, and truth (Taylor, 2002) while being grounded in grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In principle, grammar concerns how we learn factual knowledge, logic concerns how we analyze this knowledge, and rhetoric concerns how we communicate our knowledge and analysis. Philosophically, we can base the



liberal arts in critical realism (CR). In contrast to reductionism or post-modernism, CR lets us enjoy the freedom of various viewpoints (the critical part) while we rest in the confidence that comes from knowing that we are interacting with a real world (the realism part). This philosophy helps us engage with reality around the themes of beauty, goodness, and truth, that is, aesthetical and artistic content, ethical and moral content, and content in the humanities and sciences.

### Short and graded stories in the liberal arts and sciences

Extensive graded reading (EGR) is widely considered a best practice in English language education (Day & Bamford, 1998; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Nation, 1997; Renandya, 2007; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002; Waring, 2006). Day and Bamford (1998, pp. 32-39) summarized the results from 10 of 11 EGR programs where learners successfully developed vocabulary, oral skills, general language proficiency, and positive attitudes about learning language. EGR programs benefit from an abundance of readers published by Cambridge, Oxford, and Penguin. These books are generally graded into levels by lexical frequency and grammatical sequencing. For example, a Level 1 book from the Penguin series limits itself to the 300 most frequent and useful word families and to a small set of grammatical features. For more detailed information, the Penguin Reader website (Grading of Language, 2010) explains how these books are graded. But the key features of these materials are that learners can read books extensively and that they can choose books according to their own interests at a level that is just right for them.

As a variation on graded reading, this author has applied the principles of lexical grading for making stories in the liberal arts and sciences. These stories (many with audio) are available online at BeeOasis.com and are graded into 5 levels using

the BNC lexical profiler (Cobb, 2009; Heatley & Nation, 1994). This website is like an online magazine in the arts and sciences with graded content for English learners. Its purpose is stated simply as “Big things in basic English.” The site maintains high editorial standards; stories are written primarily by this author under various pseudonyms and by guest authors as well, and a separate and highly qualified editor proofreads and edits all stories. Native speaking or near native speaking undergraduates have also written stories for the site after completing a university course in expository writing. There are printable classroom lessons of the stories, which are currently not available publicly, but sample versions can be obtained by contacting the author. These stories have been used with hundreds of English learners in Japan from Keio University, Saint Luke’s International Hospital, and Tokyo Christian University. Moreover, between January 2009 and December 2009, visitors accessed these stories at the website over 80,000 times. The distinctive aspects of these stories are summarized here.

1. LAS texts are short, ranging from 200-400 words. Printed versions can be used as supplementary lessons in one class session, or over a few class sessions. Students also use the texts online or through an email system that sends stories to students’ mobile phones.
2. LAS texts are self-contained. They deal with one topic in one story. A story may have two parts, but one part generally stands on its own, and if interested, readers and teachers can move on to part two.
3. LAS texts are graded into 5 levels based on the BNC, and despite the large word range for each level (1000 for each), students consistently indicate that they can find texts in a particular level that are just right for them. This is explained in more detail below.
4. LAS texts introduce topics in the arts and sciences and also serve the goals of liberal education. They also provide stu-

- dents with comprehensible input for learning English.
5. LAS stories start with LAS themes, rather than being didactically built on a set of vocabulary items to be taught. Stories are almost totally written in high frequency (HFV) vocabulary, so that learning HFV can be a main goal for using these texts.
  6. LAS stories do not replace, nor are they superior to graded readers. LAS texts meet needs that graded readers generally do not meet. They are short and can be finished in one setting. They can be used online and in mobile devices, and most importantly, they promote the goals of the liberal arts and sciences.
  7. The characteristics and goals mentioned here make LAS texts a distinctive and valuable supplement for language classrooms and for programs that use extensive graded reading.

In previous studies, learners have indicated that these LAS stories were enjoyable and motivating, and through a series of tests, learners also showed short-term gains in vocabulary learning (Poulshock & Tuzi, 2009). In these studies, the teacher required learners to read 4-5 pages per day in a graded reader, and students could also get “page credit” for reading LAS stories online. Learners indicated that they were comfortable with the difficulty level of the LAS content. Stories were neither too easy nor too hard, but apparently just right for them. They have indicated this in written surveys and in word-count checks where they count the number of unknown words in a text and calculate the percentage of words that they know. Learners regularly report that they know around 95-98% of the words in these texts, and this is consistent with research that says learners can find a text readable if they know at least 95%-98% of the words in it (Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer, 1989, 1992). This “95% Rule” helps learners guess unknown

words from context without a dictionary (Laufer, 1997; Nation, 1990). According to Waring (personal communication, April 23, 2010), 95% coverage would make a text readable for learners, and 98-99% would make reading more fluent and enjoyable.

### The uses of LAS stories for language learners

Teachers and learners can use LAS stories both extensively and intensively. First, learners can use the online stories extensively for both reading and listening. In the classes mentioned above, learners read and listened to online stories for homework as a part of their extensive graded reading requirement. Second, teachers can use these stories intensively with students in class for improving listening, reading, speaking, and vocabulary. Handouts provide a listening cloze activity as well as comprehension, discussion, and vocabulary questions. Space will not allow for a detailed explanation of the information-gap speaking activities, the inductive grammar study activities, and the various vocabulary study activities that have been done with these texts.

For a third variation, learners focus primarily on listening. The teacher can read a paragraph from a story and then ask the students to answer five True/False questions. The teacher can repeat this for three paragraphs for a total of 15 questions. After this, students can check their answers. The teacher can vary this activity, giving students a written text of the questions, which they can read and answer, or the teacher can give the students an answer sheet that has no written questions, but just a place to tick their answers (see Table 1).

As mentioned above, these classroom activities are apparently popular with students who have indicated through surveys that they find them enjoyable, motivating, and significant for their education (Poulshock, in press). For instance, the listening and grammar activities are not based on discrete random sentences,

Table 1. Variations on listening quizzes

Listening with textual support			Listening without textual support	
Listen to the story; listen to and read the questions below. Choose True or False			Listen to the story; listen to the questions below. Choose True or False. ( <i>No question text.</i> )	
1. Lying is not telling the truth.	True	False	1. True	1. False

but rather these sentences make up an interesting story or part of one. Moreover, the intensive nature of these activities does not detract from the fact that learners primarily interact with these stories on the website, which provides three forms of media: (a) a relevant photograph, (b) the story as text, and (c) an audio recording of the story. Besides this, each story is not a simple and mundane retelling of a liberal arts topic. Rather, as outlined below in the guidelines for content, stories are presented in appealing and memorable ways, and the traditional liberal arts categories are rebranded as in Table 2.

This renaming simplifies the topic areas for learners and aims to inspire interest in these content areas. To capture learner interest, authors often add to each story a relevant ECS; that is, an “emotionally competent stimulus” (Medina, 2008). This ECS is an *attention getter* that can trigger emotions such as humor, fear, sadness, joy, surprise, shock, anger, hate, disbelief, love, or desire. Medina even suggests that the relevant ECS can employ Darwinian imperatives, such as threatening events or appropriately presented events that are related to reproductive fitness. The ECS thus gives a story an *emotional moment* to make it more meaningful and memorable.

Table 2. Renaming the traditional liberal arts

Traditional liberal arts & sciences	Renamed liberal arts & sciences
Philosophy, Ethics, Religion, etc.	Ideas
Economics, Finance, Business, etc.	Biz
Technology and Applied Science, etc.	Tech
Anthropology, Language, Culture, Sociology, etc.	Styles
Physical, Historical, and Behavioral Sciences, etc.	Sciences
Drama, Film, Music, Dance, etc.	Arts
History and Biography	Times
News and Current Events	News

### Guidelines for content development

Thus far, we have considered a theoretical basis for doing LAS education in language classes, and we have seen the general ways teachers and learners can use LAS stories in and outside of the classroom. Now we consider ways to develop an LAS language curriculum that will benefit students holistically and linguistically and that will provide interesting avenues for future research. For curriculum, English learners will be limited by their linguistic abilities, so stories will need to be simple and introductory in nature, especially at the lower levels.

With this in mind, what follows are guidelines for content for developing an LAS curriculum in language education.

1. **Prioritize content.** Choose topics and themes that have historical significance, global or broad cultural impact, or general renown. Thus, for example, we should have stories about Cai Lun and the creation of paper, Francis Crick and the discovery of DNA, and Thomas Edison and the invention of the light bulb.
2. **Make content biographical.** Language learners may find purely conceptual or factual stories difficult, especially at the lower levels; therefore, when we deal with abstract topics such as Marx's Communism or Einstein's Relativity, we can make the stories more interesting and easier by making them biographical.
3. **Make stories short.** We make stories short, between 200 and 400 words so that (a) students can easily read them on a mobile device or web browser and (b) teachers and students can do the classroom versions of the stories in a short time. Longer stories can be split into parts. See Maley (1999) for ideas on the value of short texts.
4. **Include a hook.** As mentioned above, stories should include a relevant "emotionally competent stimulus" or ECS (Medina, 2008). This ECS acts as a hook that can trigger emotional responses (e.g., amazement, amusement, anger, anticipation, anxiety, awe, desire, disappointment, disbelief, disgust, fear, hate, humor, love, joy, pity, sadness, shock, surprise, sympathy, and wonder). The ECS sets a story in an emotional context for learners, making it more appealing, relevant, and memorable.
5. **Be current and relevant.** Even if stories deal with ancient people or events, we aim to show their relevance for today. For example, stories about Mohammed, Buddha, or Confucius can show how these leaders still influence modern people.
6. **Write on enduring themes.** Even regarding current events, we aim to write stories in ways that show their lasting significance. A story about baseball star Ichiro Suzuki might include facts about the records that he has broken that had stood for 80 to 100 years. It might describe his unique practice routines, which can give learners insight into excellence and self-improvement. The goal is to give stories a longer life.
7. **Write stories with clarity and grace.** Besides being accurate in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, stories should be cohesive, coherent, emphatic, and concise. See Williams (2009).
8. **LAS focus.** Stories should educate learners in beauty, goodness, and truth, and teach vital knowledge (facts), critical thinking (logic), and clear communication (rhetoric.)

### Classroom research and ideas for the future

To date, some preliminary research has been done using LAS texts for language learners. This research has focused mainly on vocabulary learning and surveying students regarding their interest, motivation, and attitudes about the educational significance of LAS stories (Poulshock, in press; Poulshock & Tuzi, 2009). Students have also been surveyed regarding their impressions about the ease and effectiveness of reading LAS stories on mobile phones or devices.

To summarize, a small sample of students said that they enjoyed accessing LAS stories on mobile phones and that having stories on their phones positively increased their opportunities to learn English. Moreover, two separate groups of 10 and 24 intermediate level students at Tokyo Christian University (TCU) showed gains in vocabulary learning on achievement tests, and on separate surveys, they found LAS stories to be interesting, motivating, and educationally significant (Poulshock, in press; Poulshock & Tuzi, 2009). These groups were studied separately during two different 10-week semesters.

Most recently, a group of 15 intermediate students at TCU completed two sets of achievement tests in the format shown in Table 1. Students took variations of the same test, but the second test changed two variables to increase difficulty. First, there was a 1-week delay between the first and second test. This should have made it more difficult for learners to remember the content. Second, in the first version, students could read and hear the questions, but to increase difficulty, for the second version, students could only hear the questions.

The question being tested was this. Would students achieve higher scores on the second test, even though it was more difficult? Table 3 summarizes the results. The first set of tests, labeled as “Shoe,” dealt with a story about shoe throwing as a form of protest, and the story labeled as “Disney” was a small biography about Walt Disney. Both the stories were graded in the Step 2 band (95% of the words were in the top 2000 words of the BNC.)

Though the data sample is small ( $N = 15$ ), and the amount of testing is limited (a total of 4 tests), subjects showed a 19.5 percentage point improvement on the second version of the Shoe test and a 12.9 percentage point improvement on the second Disney test. Improvement on the Shoe test is skewed slightly because of one outlier who scored below chance (40%) on the second true-false test. Students improved listening achievement on the second tests after a 1-week delay, even when the second test was more difficult than the first test. This is not a significant research finding. We see a natural and expected result: students did better on the second test. However, a teacher might be encouraged that students achieved higher scores on the second test, after a 1-week delay, after no review, and after the second version of the test was more difficult because students could only hear – and not read – the questions. In any case, the improvement is positive. In the future, it may be interesting to do more comprehensive research dealing with extensive listening to LAS stories to see how it might affect learner listening skills.

**Table 3. Pre-test and post-test achievement scores**

Shoe Pre X/15 Correct	Shoe Pre %	Shoe Post	Shoe Post %	Shoe Increase
9.5	64%	12.5	83%	19.5% points
Disney Pre X/15 Correct	Disney Pre %	Disney Post	Disney Post %	Disney Increase
10	67%	12	80%	12.9% points

Besides researching LAS stories in applied linguistics, for future research, we can also study outcomes related to the goals of LAS education. Though we may accept logical and anecdotal support for LAS education, recently scholars have done empirical studies as well. In one study, Wolniak, Seifert, and Blach (2004) followed 900 students during their first 3 years of study at 16 colleges and universities. The study claimed that students who received strong liberal arts emphases and experiences showed statistically positive outcomes in reading comprehension, critical thinking, scientific reasoning, writing skills, openness to diversity, and challenge. In another study, Seifert et al. (2008) found that a holistic liberal arts experience developed in learners “intercultural effectiveness, inclination to inquire and learn for a lifetime, psychological well-being, and leadership” (p. 123). Likewise, language educators could research how using LAS stories can affect language learners, for example, regarding reading comprehension, critical thinking, scientific reasoning, and an inclination towards a lifetime of learning. Such studies would need to be longitudinal, but existing studies provide a model for this kind of research with language learners.



## Conclusions

The liberal arts and sciences provide an innovative way for doing extensive graded reading and listening. This approach also allows university language educators to create and use content that better coheres with the broader university curriculum, and this can help students see how language study not only relates to their other studies, but how it also impacts their lives as members of a global society. These LAS stories are relatively easy to create, and as shown above, teachers can use them to help learners develop reading, listening, speaking, and vocabulary skills. Moreover, preliminary studies (Poulshock, in press; Poulshock & Tuzi, 2009) have shown promising results that learners find these LAS stories enjoyable, motivating, and educationally significant.

When working with these stories, learners also appear to learn vocabulary, and they seem to make achievement gains in listening as well. As editors continue to develop more LAS graded content, and as more teachers adopt this approach in their language classrooms, researchers will have more opportunities to study the use of LAS stories in language education. The approach discussed in this paper is supported by existing research on extensive graded reading. Therefore, we can be optimistic that using LAS stories for language education can also prove to be a successful way to supplement an extensive grading reading program. Moreover, as we do more research on the empirical effects of liberal education on language learners, this approach may also enhance our ability to educate learners for a life of learning in the real world.

## Bio data

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