

The “To-Do” List

By Allison Jambor

- | |
|--|
| <p>To Do</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bank2. Laundry3. Clean bathroom4. Pay phone bill5. Stamps6. Call about cable,
sister, Ted7. Pharmacy |
|--|

Introduction

We’ve all had lists of things to do. In my survey to find out what kinds of literacy activities the children of my class were experiencing, the ‘To do’ list was part of their literacy worlds. Indeed, as I began my authentic literacy lesson and requested a show of hands to see how many of my kindergarten class had seen their parents write out a list like the one above, almost every hand went up. Even one of my quietest students piped up in her broken English, “I go bank,” showing that she was making connections to the activity, and engaging her existing schema.

My all day kindergarten class is located in a predominantly Punjabi neighborhood, although there are students from several different backgrounds in my class. I have three First Nations students, all of whom speak English as their first language. My other students speak one or more languages at home including Urdu, Punjabi, Spanish, Kanjobal (a Mayan language), Tagalog, and Vietnamese. The range of language skills is as varied as the backgrounds of the students. I have some students who have only spoken their native language at home. Others come to school fairly conversant in English, although with a limited vocabulary and some grammatical issues. Some are fluent English speakers. Needless to say, the range of skills in the class is quite large. Our school is a small school with 97 students in five classes, grades K to 5.

Real-Life Texts

To get a better understanding of what the children of my class experience as literacy practice, I began spending time along the main shopping corridor nearest to the school, looking for environmental print. Here, I met students and their parents shopping. I also noted many shops with prominent signage. Stores such as Blockbuster Video, Starbucks, Dollar stores, Convenience stores, Doctors office, Immigration services, restaurants, and banks and credit unions provided colorful

examples of print. Most of the signage in the area was in English, although some businesses had Punjabi signs, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino (Tagalog). As a kindergarten teacher, I had found a wealth of information for adapting my centers. A restaurant and a grocery store, with associated print use, would figure in my future center-time activities.



I also observed several people reading and writing during my visit to the community:

- Ø A man in a medical clinic was reading a Punjabi newspaper.
- Ø A man was flipping through a magazine.
- Ø Various people were reading menus.
- Ø Shoppers were looking at signs.
- Ø At Starbucks, a woman was reading a book while another was writing a letter.
- Ø At a travel agency, the agent was writing down ticket information while customers read brochures.
- Ø A man was filling in a form for film processing.
- Ø A man was reading a bank slip as he exited the bank.

I also visited the local library which was filled with people of all ages reading and writing, e.g. newspapers in different languages, computer text, gardening books, books on Feng Shui, and picture books

As you can see, the neighborhood alone provides the children with extensive opportunities to see print of many different types, including print in other languages. I took pictures of the print on the various stores and businesses. As well, I sent cameras home with families that volunteered to take pictures of themselves engaged in reading and writing. I used the pictures to make a poster with a sign saying, “Reading and writing are all around us.” This poster generated quite a bit of interest and discussion.

In order to facilitate a bridging between school and home literacy, and to learn more about the print environment in my students’ homes, I sent home a letter with a calendar indicating what our “Letter of the Week” would be each week through to the end of December. I asked that parents send children to school with a sample of text in which their children had found the letter of the week somewhere outside of school. See Appendix F for a sample of this letter.

To kick off the weekly sharing-time activity, I arranged to have a “Print Party” and sent a letter home requesting that parents send in a sample of some kind of print. See Appendix H for a sample of this letter.

While some students brought in items for the “Print Party,” several did not. I helped the students who did not bring in any item from home to find some print on

their clothes, backpacks or food packaging from their lunches. We found print from the following sources:

- Ø A Dora, the Explorer advertisement
- Ø An ad for Halloween costumes
- Ø A Punjabi newspaper, written in Punjabi.
- Ø Hot wheels brand running shoes.
- Ø Barbie shoes.
- Ø A school notice about picture day
- Ø Print on food packaging
- Ø Containers with food prepared at home
- Ø An ad for Pizza Hut. The other students had various clothing items with printing on them, primarily advertisements for other kinds of products.

Those students whose parents did not understand the letter because of language barriers came to understand that the requirement was simple—spot the letter of the week embedded in some type of print text. The students were proud of being able to find the letter of the week and often pointed it out during other times if they saw it on their clothes or on their lunch or snack packaging. This class was much more aware than my previous classes of the ubiquitous nature of print in our lives.

Next I sent home a letter explaining that I wanted to plan some reading and writing activities for the class based on the kinds of things that the children see people reading and writing in their homes and communities. The letter asked the parents to fill out a simple chart that documented who was reading or writing, what the person was reading or writing and why the person was engaged in this activity. I sent the letter and form with the examples so that the families would have an idea of how to record the literacy events.

I also showed the students some samples of things I might read in my home, and that maybe they had seen their parents reading. I showed newspapers, flyers, a phone bill, a post card, a recipe book, and a driver's manual. The phone bill and the post card got the biggest responses, with most students getting quite excited by the post card. As might be expected with a class with many ESL learners, most of the students have relatives in other countries. In spite of the great distance, a number of the Punjabi speaking students travel with their families to India or Pakistan, or have relatives who travel back and forth.

Parents reported a number of texts that are read and written in their homes in addition to my examples like reading the newspaper, writing letters, and reading bills/writing cheques:

Flyers	Bills
Bus tickets	Dictionary
Newspapers	Medical
	Prescriptions
Maps	TV Guide
Games	Puzzle
	Books
Work reports	Homework

To-do lists	Grocery lists
Cards and letters	Calendars
Phone lists	Spiritual books

Authentic Literacy Activity

I chose the 'To do' List as a real-life text around which to base authentic reading and writing with my students. Some families reported using specific 'To do' lists, while others reported using other kinds of lists, such as grocery lists and phone lists. I felt that using the general list genre at this time of the year was appropriate since it was a common text used in the homes, and it would fit in nicely with an authentic reason to use them this early in the school year. While more families cited recipes as a common activity that involved reading or writing in their households, I felt that for kindergarten students in their first term, and with many English language learners, that the genre would be too challenging. I earmarked recipes for a spring unit. In the fall many of my students were still learning the names of some letters, and others had only the beginning stages of sound-letter correspondence knowledge. Thus, I felt that the 'to do' list would be a simple enough genre for them to master.

Since the grocery list was also common in the homes of my students, and it is similar in function (helps us to remember what to get), I expected that most children would know how a list works; we write things down to help us remember what to do, and cross the items off the list as they are completed. As a final check on the familiarity of the 'To Do' list, I asked each child's caregivers if they ever used 'To do' lists. Most families responded that they did, indeed, use them.

Using the whole-part-whole lesson design for teaching skills, I decided that a natural fit with the 'To do' list was to focus on teaching the students to instantly recognize the sight words 'to' and 'do.' We had studied the letter 't' and the letter 'd' but not the letter 'o,' so I felt quite comfortable with using the words 'to' and 'do' as the focus for sight word work. These two words are among the 24 most common words cited as necessary for students to learn (Tompkins, 2006; Pinnell & Fountas, 1988):

a	at	he	it	no	the
am	can	I	like	see	to
an	do	in	me	she	up
and	go	is	my	so	we

Skill Pre-Assessments

In order to assess the effectiveness of the sight word work, I used 10 of these sight words for a pre-test and a post test: *a, at, and, do, I, in, is, it, and, the*. I embedded *to* and *do* in the sight word test to evaluate overall levels of reading fluency as well as for the specific target words for the authentic literacy lesson. To assess the children's knowledge of sight words, I assessed each child individually in class. One at a time, I sat with each child and displayed one sight word flashcard at a time. To receive credit, the student needed to identify the word correctly within 3 seconds. I then

marked down on a checklist which words each child was able to correctly identify. See Appendix I for sight word flashcards that can be used for this assessment.

Embedded Skills Lesson

The list at the side is the one with which I opened my lesson when I introduced the `To do` list to my students.

« « « « « « « « « «

To Do

- Bank
- Laundry
- Clean bathroom
- Call telephone company
- Call sister
- Call Ted
- Pick up Jean at airport
- Dinner Saturday

« « « « « « « « « «

Although I used chart paper when I wrote the list in front of the class, I made sure to act thoughtfully, talking to myself as I generated the list, modeling the thinking I usually use when I make my own `To do` lists. I asked myself what I needed to do and who I needed to call.

I asked for a show of hands to see how many of my students were aware of their families' using print in this way. Most hands went up. I talked to students about the purpose of making a list like this—that it helps us to remember what we need to do.

Bridging School Activities and Integrating Sight Word Lessons

I drew the students' attention to our `Shape of the Day` where we had a list of the activities we would be doing that day. Many of the students could recognize the activity words such as reading, math, science and centers. I suggested to the students that our `Shape of the Day` was really another kind of `To do` list and that we should change the title to `To Do.` I had the students provide the letters `t` and `d,` when I made the initial sound, writing out `To Do` on a piece of sentence strip paper. I replaced the `Shape of the day` sign with the `To Do` sign. I noted that often people cross out the words on a `To Do` list, but that we would simply remove the finished activity from the pocket chart.

Making 'To Do' Lists

The upcoming student-led conferences, in which the families of the students visit the school to learn what their children have been doing, provided a perfect opportunity for the children to write their own 'To Do' lists. I told the students that we do so many things in school that they might forget to show their parents and guardians some of the things, so having a list of what they were going to do would help. We brainstormed all the different things we do in school. Then I modeled writing out a `To Do` list on chart paper using the activities we just brainstormed, so they could see how to put the words `To Do` at the top of their own papers. I included the words that were posted at each of the centers to help them spell the words they needed. I also gave them their math notebooks and journals so that they could use their books as models and to encourage them to show their families all their hard work. Each child generated his or her own `To Do` list to refer to it when their families visited. Because the students were in kindergarten and had never led a conference before, their grade 3 big buddies came in to help them practice using the list so they would feel successful on conference night.

As the students used their `To do' lists on the night of the conference, the communicative nature of written language was reinforced even though some of them needed help figuring out what they had written! The parents, though, were impressed. They could easily read what the children had written. Giving the students clues, reminding them to look at the letters and say the sounds, and getting them to compare their lists with the signs around the room changed the conference from a simple reporting opportunity to a learning situation, where the parents were able to see their child's learning in action. Both students and parents were learning from the situation. The parents learned ways to guide their children, rather than simply providing the word when the children were attempting to read. Several parents commented on how surprised they were that their children understood how to use the list. The children were proud to impress their families. Some parents also mentioned that the students had been coming home and talking about having a `To Do' list at school.

Problem Solving

In addition to using a `To Do' list for the conference, I used the concept again to help solve a problem that came up frequently in the class. Daily Center's time required that the students choose a new activity center each day. By Wednesday or Thursday, many had difficulty remembering which centers they had already done that week, making the choosing time drawn out, and the play time reduced. I discussed the problem with the children and suggested that one way to solve the problem was for them to choose all of their center activities for the week on Monday and write down their centers `To Do' list.

The students seem quite happy with this new system. They cross a center off the list each day and complete the `to do' list with a sense of accomplishment. This was a terrific idea! They improve their reading, having a vested interest in using the words on the list to help them find their center activity for the day. The list has an authentic purpose and function. It is an important choice that they make so they are enthusiastic about using the lists. They get practice with reading and writing and reinforce the target sight words when they put `To Do' at the top of the page.

Skills: Sight Words

In addition to introducing and using the sight words for the list, I have used `to' as a "Word of the Week," and plan to teach `do' in a similar fashion. The word of the week is part of daily calendar activities. The students focus on the word for a quick minute or two. After I demonstrate how to use it in example sentences, the students make up their own. We read the word and use it daily. At the end of the week, I transfer the word to the word wall for high frequency words and we review it regularly. Students are reminded to use all of the words in their writing activities. The word of the week is also the focus for two-minute break activities like read-around-the-room or find-it-in-a-book. The students have begun spontaneously to bring the word of the week to letter sharing time, and to point it out any time they see it written somewhere.

Skill Post Assessments

The pretest showed that most students did not recognize either of the target words before the lesson. The posttest showed that most students recognized `to,' although `do' was not yet part of their sight vocabularies. Some of the other test

words were previously 'word of the week' and few of them were recognized as readily as 'to.' The use of (a) introduction in an authentic context, (b) direct teaching of the word, and (c) repeated use in context appeared to be a winning combination. Indeed, after having 'do' as word of the week, and using the word at the top of their weekly centers 'to do' lists, the students were retested. All students recognized both of the target sight words, including students who were struggling readers and writers.

From Here

My students will continue to use their 'To Do' lists for centers and other occasions

Occasions to write lists

- School or class tours
- Field trips: what to bring, what to see
- Students forgetting gym shoes, library books, snacks or other necessities
- Centers activity plan
- Science experiment procedures
- Personal copy of shape of the day/to do today

such as up-coming field trips. I am also hoping that I will have future problems that may be solved by using the 'to do' list. Ideally the students themselves will be able to suggest the use of the list to help solve the problem. Perhaps our upcoming trip to science world where there is "so much to see and so little time" will provide just such a scenario.

Reflections

With future classes I think I would spread out the use and introduction of several 'To Do' lists over a longer period of time. There were a few students who were confused by which list they were supposed to refer to. I might have them call the lists more than just a 'to do' list. For example, I think I will add 'today' to the 'To do' list that replaced the 'shape of the day,' so it will read, "To do today." I might add "Centers" to the centers 'To do' list. Introducing the centers list first, and following later with the conference list would give

the students more authentic practice with the list and its format before having them write and read the list to use with their parents.

Although the things that are on the 'to do' list for these activities are school activities, they are activities that the children enjoy spending time doing. The function of the list was true to form, helping the students to plan, organize and remember what they felt was important for them to do with their parents. The centers list was a solution to a real problem, not being able to remember what they had done, and benefited them directly by providing more time at centers, and helping them to plan what to do for the week. The students were writing with themselves as the audience, and were engaged in reading with a definite purpose. The activities increased their self-confidence, helping them to see themselves as readers and writers, and urged them on with their understanding of the purpose and usefulness of written language.

References

Tompkins, Gail E. (2006). *Literacy for the 21st Century: A Balanced Approach*. New Jersey: Pearson.