Research Base for *What’s Next?*

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**About *What’s Next?***

*What’s Next?* is a phonics-based ESL program designed for today’s new American. With 55% of ESL students enrolled in beginning-level classes (Department of Education, 2002), *What’s Next?* is ideal for meeting the varied language needs of this growing population through its explicit, systematic instruction of basic literacy skills. Preliterate English students to graduates of foreign universities enrolled in literacy and beginning ESL classes can benefit from the presentation of the foundational literacy skills presented in *What’s Next?*

Many of today’s new Americans require basic ESL instruction, though little information is available on the actual number of literacy-level adults (those with six or fewer years of schooling) among them. Anecdotal evidence does show that this literacy-level population is having a significant impact on ESL programs across the country. Current educational blogs, such as NIFL-ESL, as reported by Florez and Terrill (2003), discuss the prevalence of these learners around the country and the challenges they present to ELL programs and teachers who are ill-equipped to deal with the unique language and educational needs of these learners.

While specifically targeting the unique needs of the literacy-level population, *What’s Next?* gracefully blends and builds foundational literacy skills, creating a balanced literacy curriculum ideal for all ESL learners at the literacy and beginning levels. *What’s Next?* provides multilevel, research-based materials grounded in essential life-skills themes that accommodate diverse learners with fully integrated phonics, phonemic awareness, tried and true reading strategies, vocabulary building exercises, and writing workshop techniques while easily aligning with grammar instruction and authentic life-skills practice.

*What’s Next* offers a balanced-literacy approach by integrating the four language modalities (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), phonics, phonemic awareness, and reading comprehension strategies within culturally relevant life-skills themes. The multilevel components of *What’s Next?* allow teachers to meet the varied language needs of their diverse learners—including the preliterate/emergent readers—invariably present in each adult ESL class.

**Content**

The core of *What’s Next?* are readings at the literacy and beginning levels that feature Samsam and Adam, Somali immigrants who have recently arrived in the U.S. Books 1 and 2 focus on short vowels and follow Samsam and Adam as they learn to navigate the phone book, directions, school registration, daily routines, shopping, and the classroom while adjusting to life in the U.S. Books 3 and 4 focus on long vowels and follow Samsam and Adam as they adapt to the weather, customs, family changes, employment, housing, and health care in their new home.
Each lesson focuses on one target vowel sound, several consonant sounds, and ten sight words. The life-skills based readings present the sounds and sight words in context. Reading comprehension exercises also require critical thinking. Cloze or writing exercises offer a chance to practice phonics words, sight words, and sentence writing. Skills assessments measure acquisition of lesson elements through phonemic awareness, phonics, sight-word spelling, and dictation exercises.

Because *What’s Next?* is designed for multilevel classrooms, the same culturally relevant story is presented at both the literacy level and the beginning level. At the literacy level, the story is presented one sentence at a time and is supported with illustrations to aid beginning readers. In each lesson, the same phonics focus, grammar point, and life-skills practice are presented at both levels. The two levels share a common set of comprehension questions so that students in the multilevel class can discuss the story together, preserving the unity of the class by including even the lowest-level learners.

**Pedagogy**

*What’s Next?* is based on ESL instructional strategies that have been proven both in the classroom and by educational research. These strategies include an integrated instructional approach (Parrish, 2004), the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (2000), writing workshop techniques, and multilevel classroom management techniques (Bell, 1991, reprinted 2002).

*What’s Next?* utilizes what Betsy Parrish in her book, *Teaching Adult ESL* (2004), defines as an integrated approach to teaching ESL, by identifying the language purpose and targeting the skills and competencies needed to meet that purpose. Furthermore, each lesson is contextualized, which Parrish describes as modeled, practiced, and produced in real-world contexts.

Since the focal point of each lesson is the reading, the teaching of reading strategies, like those recommended by the National Reading Panel (2000), were incorporated. The illustrations and questions that precede each story activate prior knowledge, while questions that follow the readings at both levels measure general comprehension and promote higher-level thinking skills.

The whole-parts-whole approach and embedded phonics in these readings were inspired by the author’s ESL learners. Other ESL materials made no sense to these students, so the author followed the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (2000) which said that teaching phonemic awareness and phonics improved reading comprehension, decoding, and spelling. The whole-parts-whole phonics approach involves teaching phonics methodically with continual reinforcement. Once a phonics element is demonstrated, it must be integrated into reading material that is relevant and central to the teaching context.

Previous successes using the writing workshop model in the classroom with low-level ESL students led the author to include aspects of this model in *What’s Next?* A reproducible journal template and writing topics for each lesson are included in the Teacher’s Guide.

The inspiration for the multilevel student texts and the multilevel lesson planner strategies were the principles of Bell (1991, reprinted 2002) and its focus on a common life-skills theme for all levels and its varying of learner groupings during instruction.
Endorsements

Betsy Parrish, Professor/Coordinator, Adult and TEFL Certificate Programs, Graduate School of Education, Hamline University, St. Paul, MN, author of Teaching Adult ESL (2004)

Far too many phonics-based materials include de-contextualized word lists of minimal interest to adult learners. *What’s Next?* tells the story of an immigrant family in familiar, useful contexts. The books introduce low-literacy level students to sounds of English through simple, accessible stories and build their skills through numerous sight word, minimal pair, and writing practice activities. While building basic literacy skills, students also work on life-skills competencies related to their daily needs. The series is particularly geared to those students who have a certain oral proficiency level but limited formal schooling. Many literacy level texts can still be too advanced for this audience. As a practicing teacher who has struggled to meet the needs of her low-literacy level learners, Ms. Conklin has developed and tested these materials with her learners in mind, and with great success!

Patsy Vinogradov, M.A., adjunct faculty member, Hamline University, Graduate School of Education, St. Paul, MN

*What’s Next?* serves to fill in a huge gap in the ESL world: contextualized, high-interest, systematic phonics instruction for adults. These stories are meaningful, relevant, and level-appropriate for adult beginning students of English. It is astounding how little there is available for these students, especially materials that will hold their interest, respect their age and dignity, all while steadily supporting their reading development. *What’s Next?* will have a tremendous impact on the learners and teachers who discover it.

Bella Hanson, PhD, Consultant in Adult Education

These instructional materials (What’s Next?) for low-literacy, second-language learners are greatly needed. There is a dearth of materials in phonemic awareness and decoding at this ESL level.

Andrea Poulos, Academic/Workforce Coordinator and ELL Instructor, Lincoln Adult Education Center, Minneapolis, MN

Lia (Conklin) and I have met together as part of a Minnesota Literacy Council Research Group. In this group, many of us are teachers and administrators working with adult immigrants and refugees who have low literacy skills and are beginning learners of English. We have discussed many times the problem of the lack of appropriate published materials for these learners. The current published materials are typically too high, move too fast, and include themes and units which may not be relevant or meaningful for these learners. Lia has presented her materials to the group on a number of occasions and they have always been greeted by participants with enthusiasm and excitement. Lia understands the needs and backgrounds of the learners, and she brings her knowledge of research to materials development. For example, she presents phonemic awareness activities integrated into content, and provides plenty of recycling of meaning-based information, sight words, and phonics. It seems that there would both be a market for this type of material, and that these materials are of strong quality and interest to meet that market.
Bibliography


Research shows that anxious states of mind can cause individuals to display greater ego-centric thinking and behaviors. When a person feels the mounting pressure of uncertainty, the ensuing anxiety biases their view of the world so that they see only themselves and their own distress. Equally detrimental, research shows that anxiety degrades our ability for perspective-taking. In other words, we fail to see things from another\textsuperscript{\textquotesingle}s point of view. Sadly, to survive a crisis or transition, our minds reject or ignore the very things that would allow us to feel grounded and connected. These judgements aren\textsuperscript{\textquotesingle}t what publishers do – that\textsupersingle{s not our job \textquotesingle{ unfortunately it is what parts of the research community do. For example, academic appointment committees and grant award committees have done this for years and often continue to do so. And this in turn affects the behaviour of researchers when submitting their draft articles \textquotesingle{ in our author survey last year (completed by over 70,000 authors from all disciplines and regions) a journal\textsuperscript{\textquotesingle}s Impact Factor was rated as one of the top four criteria when choosing where to submit a draft article, alongside a journal\textsuperscript{\textquotesingle}s reputation, releva