

# LETS— Learn English Through Stamps

by Jason B. Alter

For some time, I've been working on a technique called LETS—Learn English Through Stamps. Stamps are ubiquitous, in all cultures, so no student need feel intimidated. The variety of stamps is endless. Best of all, using stamps to teach ESL is a subtle way to introduce American culture and to expatiate thereon.

If you're into gadgetry, and are blessed with the necessary countermeasures, you can show the given stamp on an overhead projector. Or if the stamp is not too "crowded," you can sketch it on the blackboard. Or you might even xerox a facsimile for each of the students.

Let's get down to LETS, by looking at a rather new fifteen-cent stamp that bears the likeness of W.C. Fields. He's decked out in his trademark top hat and a bow tie, on the left, major portion of the stamp. On the right, he's shown juggling, wearing white gloves. At the bottom of the stamp appear the words "Performing Arts."

My trusty *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* has this to say about our LETS persona: "Fields, W.C. Original name, William Claude Dukenfield. 1880-1946. American actor in vaudeville and motion pictures."

This stamp is especially apropos in this election year of 1980 when one of the leading aspirants for the presidency of the USA was once a movie actor himself. How would a candidate with a theatrical background go over in other cultures? Discuss. What about the status of actors in other cultures? Stereotypes can be examined. The stamp can serve as a departure point for group discussions, composition assignments, and debating topics.

Fields had a reputation for being bibulous. There is said to be a problem with teen-age drinking in the USA now. This is another fertile "field" to talk about. This brings to mind the (structural) minimal pair: (a) "I suggested toast" and (b) "I

suggested a toast." Next, one could elaborate on the variety of the latter: "Here's looking at you," "Cheers," "Bottoms up."

Now it is incumbent upon us to probe into the wording on the stamp in question. What's the plural of "Fields"? "Fieldses" is not all that easy to pronounce. Compare: (a) "They had lunch in the fields"; (b) "They had lunch with the Fieldses"; (c) "They had lunch at the Fieldses' house." Is there anyone out there in TESL land who wants to prescribe this spelling: "Fieldses"? Not likely, and even less likely would be an advocate of the pronunciation of the extra "s."

I am reminded of part of a lyric from a popular song "strawberry fields forever." One can irreverently speculate on whether

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Fields chose to go by his first two initials with humor aforethought. Students from British-English backgrounds know "W.C." as "water closet."

Students can be asked to volunteer other names with "W": "Walter," "Wilma," "Wendel"; or with "C": "Carol," "Charles," "Christine." More challenging is to ask for two consecutive words that make sense, the first beginning with "w" and the second beginning with "c": "will call," "won't cry," "walking closer." Other students can be asked to fit these into self-generated sentences.

Compare: (a) "The farmer was out-standing in his field"; (b) The farmer was standing out in his field"; (c) "The farmer was out standing in his field." You can do

a lot with vocabulary that is well within the students' range, tempering your delivery as you see fit.

If homonyms are one of your things, consider "Fields" and "field's." (The field's full of farragoes)—not bad for alliteration, either.) How about using "fields" as a verb? ("He fields better than he hits.") What is more American than our national game, baseball; and don't say "Mom and apple pie." In my work here in the People's Republic of China, I am using my patented blitzkrieg approach—touching all the bases, as it were. Another example from baseball: "He flied out"—an unusual past-tense form, to say the least.

Remind students that (as in "Fields") the "i" tends to come before the "e," except after "c." But there are other exceptions: "seize," "counterfeit," "weird," etc.

This particular stamp is worth fifteen cents. You can compare "fifteen" and "fifty," a pronunciation pitfall. You can elaborate on "cents"/"sense"/"scents." You can talk about what else "c" can be an abbreviation for: (lower case) "circa," "catcher," "carat"; (upper case) "Celsius," "Celtic," "Congress."

In "Performing Arts," is "Performing" a gerund or a participle—and does it really matter, as long as the student can use the form adroitly? A perfunctory familiarity with the nomenclature is *de rigueur*. What other prefixes can be attached to "-form": "reform," "inform," "deform." Mention some of the other performing arts: "dancing," "singing," "fiddling."

Compare "arts" and "art." Rearrange the letters of "arts" to make "rats" or "star." If you chanced to spy an earlier article of mine in the *TESL Reporter*, you may have perceived that "arts" is a lexinym for "rats"—but where in the dickens is the meaning connection between the two? Well, suppose you just heard from the dean that you will not be able to get your Bachelor of Arts degree this semester because you are three credits short. You might be apt to say, "Oh, rats!" (You might be more

apt to say something a lot stronger, too, but this is a family journal.)

Actually, the true-blue lexinym category is a mite sparse, so let's open it up, shall we? To wit, the letters to be switched need not be adjacent. Then, "star" and "arts" could fall within this genre. Here, the meaning connection is less obtuse: "She's in the arts, and has her sights set on becoming a star."

It's readily apparent that we have bled Ol' W.C.'s stamp dry, or have we? (For some reason, the word "dry" doesn't accommodate him.) It's up to the TESL practitioner to adjudge how far and how long to carry on with all this. You yourself have to assay what the traffic will bear. I would posit, though, that these language-learning peregrinations ought not to be pooh-pooed as gimcracks. (Compare "philatelist" and fatalist.)

The stamp shows Fields wearing a bow tie. Note that this "bow" is a heteronym for the "bow" in "Bow twice." Fields is juggling—compare "juggler" and "jugular." What about: "he was juggling the accounts"? Ask for other words that have a double "g": "ragged," "bigger," "squiggle." Go on to sentences and contexts.

Talk about Fields' gloves. Mention:  
(a) "We handled him with kid gloves";  
(b) "The iron fist in the velvet glove";  
(c) "That dress fits her like a glove."

We haven't even touched upon any of the biographical data on Fields, but this could be a homework assignment. Why did he change his name from Dukenfield?

This remark has been attributed to Fields: "No one who hates dogs and kids can be all bad." Was he speaking tongue-in-cheek?—I ask you. (Compare "ask you" and "askew," which is how the stamp shows Fields' top hat.)

You might opt to use LETS to warm up a class. I see LETS as a zesty way to nudge your students along on that long, hard road (not a primrose path at all) toward acculturation. LETS abets!