

Supporting Adult ESOL Literacy Learners  
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Objectives:

Teachers of ESOL literacy learners will be able to...

- Explain the steps required in learning to read and write
- Identify strengths and challenges of these learners
- Understand the differences in preliterate, non-literate, and semi-literate learners
- Identify practical ways to shape their instruction to best reach these learners
- Consider how to apply this information to their own classroom contexts.

What is literacy?

- Typically seen as a functional skill - can you read and write to function in society?

Literacy is a skill with a purpose. Children learn to read with storybooks, but adults generally learn to read because they need it now.

Literacy allows people to gain information, express opinions, take independent action, and pursue further education, training, and future steps (National Institute for Literacy)

In American culture, reading allows access to information and helps the reader take further steps into the future. For example, an illiterate person may have to continue renting, but a literate person can gain access to information on buying a home. An illiterate person may be stuck with only one medical opinion, but a literate person may seek out other options. This also allows for independence - the literate person can find out information for him/herself, while the illiterate person is more dependent on others. If a person is coming from a society in which there is no literacy, this was never before an issue, but now, in this completely different context, it can be a great difficulty.

- Difficult to measure in adult learners because of variety of tests and problems in retention of students

Programs that teach literacy to adults often have quite low retention rates. Adult learners may not feel comfortable in school, or may have had bad experiences with it. They may feel stupid or ill-equipped. They also may not have the luxury of a lot of time to devote to school, needing to care for family, pay bills, and continue working towards self-sufficiency. While it is true that they can find better jobs if they are literate, it is also true that they may not have the time or energy to put towards pursuing literacy.

Adult literacy is also difficult to measure because most of the literacy measurements available are related to children's school reading levels, and this just isn't accurate for adults, who need to read different types of materials. Adults' needs are extremely practical.

What are all of the things you read today? (traffic signs, grocery store labels, weather report, library entrance...)

What is required in learning to read?

- Sound, word, phrase manipulation
- Awareness of separateness of words and sounds
- Understanding of how print works
- Understanding that print conveys meaning...any meaning

When we think about how children learn to read, we often think about sounding out words and telling what sounds letters make, and that's definitely part of it! However, there is a huge amount that comes before this. In order to learn to read, you first need a lot of conceptual understanding that, in the U.S. and other heavily literate societies, children begin absorbing from a very young age.

When we do rhymes and word games, like "anna-anna-bo-bana-banana-nana-fo-fana...", we are helping kids learn to segment sounds. This is important to learn how to take words apart and put them back together, which is how you learn to sound out words. It also helps them to understand that the words in a sentence can be separated and manipulated; they aren't just one string of sounds that go together.

Why is this important? Because many cultures without writing systems don't have this concept. If you only ever speak the language, you may not consider how words can be taken apart - they might seem like longer strings to you. Someone told me that when she was living in Africa, if she asked someone to repeat just part of the sentence in her language, the speaker couldn't do it - she didn't know how to separate out the parts, because it wasn't part of how she thought about language. Language is so abstract in the way that it works, and if you've never studied it, you probably won't have this awareness.

There's also the necessity of understanding the point of print. Learners have to understand how print works - in English, that the individual symbols make sounds, and they make the words you can sound out that correspond with the words you speak. The learners might think that each word functions like symbols in Chinese do, with an individual picture for each word. For example, in a study of illiterate Arabic-speaking adults in Morocco, when one subject was shown the phrase "the three goats," she thought each word represented a goat, rather than that the letters made the sounds in the words "the three goats." In the same study, many of the adults thought that only true things could be written down; they would reject the ability to write down "when pigs fly," because it can't happen.

These things might seem simple to you - but it made me look at literacy in a whole new way. When I taught literacy to kindergarteners, I expected them to lack some of these concepts, but it can be hard to think that adults could also lack these concepts. We have to remember that isn't a lack of intelligence, even though our society has so ingrained in us that intelligent people read. So now we are going to talk a bit about who these learners are and their strengths and challenges.

## Strengths and Challenges of Adult ESOL Literacy Learners

Who are literacy learners?

All of these learners might show up in a class you might have, so it's important to be aware. If you're unsure of the category your student falls into, I'm always happy to help you with researching a

background or finding an interpreter, if necessary, so you can talk to your students and find out more.

- Preliterate - no written language (or quite recently developed) in home culture
  - Distinction: is there a common national written language?

Preliterate learners likely entirely lack the skills we talked about before in understanding how print carries meaning, how letters represent sounds, and how sentences and words can be broken apart. Many students from eastern and central Africa come from languages in which there is no writing system, or that the writing system was pretty recently developed. You may also find learners who speak indigenous languages from Mexico or other parts of the world to be preliterate, as well. The important thing to note is that their society as a whole is built upon oral language, rather than the written language that English is so dependent upon, so the culture itself is formed by that.

However, some preliterate learners have still had exposure to a written language and might have some understanding of how it works. For example, speakers of indigenous languages in Africa may have seen writing in French or Swahili, even if they've never learned it, and may have some understanding about literacy from that.

- Nonliterate - there is a written language, but the learner was never able to study it

Similarly, nonliterate learners cannot read and write, but their language's reading and writing system is pretty widespread, so they may have picked up some understanding of it from watching other people read and write, hearing written words read aloud, or otherwise being exposed to it. Many women who come from the Middle East are non-literate, but they've seen men around them reading and writing and they have some understanding of how it works.

Our focus today are these two groups of learners, but we will briefly discuss the others, because your classroom may contain all of them.

- Semi-literate - the learner learned to read and write to some degree, but not very well

Many learners may be semi-literate in their first languages, because their education was interrupted due to poverty, war, illness, or cultural expectations. They have the foundational skills of literacy, but can't read and write much.

- Non-Roman alphabet literate - the learner can read and write in another alphabet (e.g., Cyrillic, Arabic, Thai)
- Non-alphabet literate - the learner can read and write in a language that doesn't use the alphabet (e.g. Chinese)

Some learners are literate in other languages that don't use our alphabet, like speakers of Arabic, Russian, and Thai, or they may be literate in a language that uses characters, like Chinese (although Chinese does also have a more phonetic alphabet that came into use more recently)

What strengths do they bring?

- Cognitive maturity
- Problem-solving abilities
- Enthusiasm and gratitude
- Learning through hearing, speaking, and watching

Discussion: Are there any others you'd add to this list?

How could you leverage these strengths?

Literate and Non-Literate Learners' Strengths and Learning Styles

Literate Learners	Non-Literate Learners
Learn from print	Learn by doing and watching
Tend to be visually oriented	Tend to be aurally oriented
Make lists to remember	Repeat to remember
Spend years learning to read	Have a limited time for learning to read
Know they can learn	May lack confidence in their learning ability
Learn best when content is relevant to their lives	Learn best when content is relevant to their lives
Can distinguish between more important and less important points	May accept all content as being of equal value
From What Non-Readers or Beginning Readers Need to Know, The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning, 1999	

Take a moment to look at this chart. What stands out to you? How might you need to adapt your instruction for learners from non-literate backgrounds?

What specific challenges do adult ESOL literacy learners face?

1. Some oral language must be learned first before taking on literacy.
2. Phonemic Awareness - manipulating words and sounds "in the dark"
  - a. Ability to break down language into phrases, words, word parts, and sounds
3. Phonics - letter-sound relationships

- a. Meanings in symbols (letters, line drawings, pictures)
  - b. Concept of print (letter shapes and directionality of print; print carries meaning)
- 4. Reading relevant texts with known concepts
  - a. Example: cardinal directions
- 5. Writing
- 6. Adjusting to the classroom environment
  - a. Notes, organization, homework, sitting, self-monitoring

The written Thai language looks like a lot of funny squiggles to most of us. However, we are familiar with the concept of writing in general. We know that the symbols probably stand for sounds, or they could even be individual words, but probably not, since they don't seem to all be distinct.

It's hard to grasp the idea of not understanding the symbolism of pictures, symbols, or letters - but we need to try. In order to help these students, we really need to understand where they're beginning.

### Implications

Whenever possible, it's ideal to create separate learning tracks for learners with and without first language literacy skills.

When separating learners into different classes is not possible, teachers must find ways to create different learning expectations within the classroom. For example, learners may need to work in mixed-ability groups, with one learner writing, another searching for the desired information, and a third speaking.

No foundational skill is too simple - teach the meaning of photographs and drawings

- Progression: real object → photograph → drawing → symbol

### Teaching Practices

### Guiding Principles

- Teacher as facilitator and encourager
- Focus on skills to master rather than schedules to keep, when possible
- Teach skills in meaningful contexts with real-world applications
  - This requires knowing your students and their needs and interests
  - "Literacy activities become meaningful to the extent that they are needed in interactions with others and with the content to be learned..." (Askov)
- Group work

## Language Experience Approach

Basic premise: using real-world experiences, done as a class, to generate language that is written down and used for language practice.

Step 1: Class experience. The class does something together - a field trip, a cooking or science experiment, an art project, etc. The teacher or an assistant takes pictures while the class does this. During the experience, teachers/assistants are talking about what is happening.

OR Teachers may ask students about experiences they have all had. This may be difficult in very diverse classrooms, but certain topics may be possible, such as the weather or the city where you live.

Step 2: Use the pictures to create a story. The learners look at the pictures together and say what is happening in each one. The teacher writes the students' words, forming them into sentences.

Step 3: The students read the story together. The teacher may copy the story, or allow students to copy it down (if time and students are able).

Rereading techniques: teacher reads, students listen; teacher and students read together; teacher reads, students repeat each sentence after the teacher; students read silently

Step 4: The class uses the story for a variety of activities: retelling the story, working on vocabulary, answering questions about the story, fluency and intonation practice, word order practice, and more.

### Why use the Language Experience Approach?

- Appeals to diverse backgrounds and learning styles
- Creates reading material that is interesting and relevant to the learners and is on their level; the teacher may choose to add or change vocabulary or grammar to specifically target students' learning needs
- Recommended Resource: "Building Literacy with Adult Emergent Readers" video from New American Horizons: [www.newamericanhorizons.org](http://www.newamericanhorizons.org)

### Practical Tips in the Classroom

#### Begin with Needs Assessments

- It is vital to know where your students are coming from in order to know how to help them!
- Try to ascertain the learner's needs through talking with him/her (if possible) or friends and family of the learner. You may also be able to take clues by the learner's length of time in the country and workplace environment.
- Simple needs assessment: give a basic form with the most common questions
- Determining needs:

- Show pictures of common community locations, such as stores in the neighborhood, offices the students might often visit, etc.
- Train volunteers to watch students - where are they looking? How fast are they writing, if at all?

### Teaching Oral Language

- Begin with concrete items and actions - concrete is much easier to build upon
- Rely upon listening and repetition at the start - do not use the written word at first!
- Activities: dialogues, role plays, games using realia and picture cards, drawing and discussing pictures, total physical response, demonstrated response (learners listen and respond with nonverbal signals), songs, chants, and poems
- Phonemic awareness: rhyming, discriminating same and different sounds (including minimal pairs), identifying initial, ending, and vowel sounds in words, and sound blending - this is also listening and pronunciation practice and can be targeted to difficult sounds
- Be aware of how we rely upon written language
  - E.g. homophones - ate/eight; flour/flower; for/four
- Don't teach language that is too tightly related - this may lead to confusion. Use themes instead.
  - E.g. teaching all the colors at once
- Use concrete objects to differentiate between words.
  - E.g. stones, picture cards
  - Learners can listen to two similar sentences and indicate the word that changes (e.g., "I like apples. I like oranges.>").
  - Learners may also receive picture cards with known objects and sort the cards based on the beginning sounds of the words (e.g., cards with car, corn, cat, pen, pencil, paper).
  - Teachers may begin with concrete objects to demonstrate the separateness of words in sentences. For example, the teacher might say, "I want two apples," laying down a small stone for each word in the sentence. The learner can repeat the sentence with the teacher, pointing to each word in turn, and then identify words from the sentence out of order by pointing to the individual stones. This may be later expanded to placing word cards with each stone, so that learners can make the connection between the words and the individual sounds and further manipulate, add to, or change the words in the sentence. In a further progression, when writing on the board, teachers may color-code words to help learners grasp parts of speech patterns within sentences.

### Teaching Reading

**\*\*Note:** this comes AFTER significant time with oral language instruction!

- Be aware that as soon as the written word is introduced, it will claim all of the student's attention.
- Connect letters and sounds to real-life words. Avoid nonsense words; these work for children who already have a broad basis in vocabulary, but will be confusing for learners who are striving to understand each word.
- Sight word instruction - commonly used words (exit, bus), words that can't be sounded out

(the, said). Combine words with pictures, when possible, and use them for memory, board, and bingo games.

- Encourage learners to “collect” words.
- Put together this simple vocabulary into sentences.

When typing the printed word:

- Sans serif font (Arial, Helvetica) that looks like handwriting
- Print text in larger sizes
- Lots of white space on the page
- Use both upper-case and lower-case letters
  
- Teaching concepts of print (through repetition)
  - Directionality of print
  - How to hold the book and turn the pages
  
- Before reading a new text:
  - Pre-teach vocabulary and concepts
  - Brainstorm what learners already know about the theme
  - Take a picture walk
  - Connect to real-world events

Teaching Writing

- Start with the skill itself: holding a pencil, using it to create shapes, patterns, and letters
- Discover handedness and show learners how to orient selves to the paper on the table
- Practice making letter shapes in tactile ways: wooden or plastic letter shapes, writing in sand or shaving cream, tracing over own names (use online generator)
- From shapes, progress to words, then sentences, then longer writing
- Writing should always be working towards useful, relevant purposes to communicate a message.

Teaching Cognitive Strategies

Learners without backgrounds in education will need instruction in how to study and use American educational critical thinking strategies.

- Making predictions about texts



- Sounding out words
- Identifying main idea and details
- Using prefixes, suffixes, and root words
- Using dictionaries
- Self-monitoring (do I need more help with this, or do I know it?)
- Organization of materials
  - Color-code handouts, number pages, show how to practice at home

Key Points: What Do We Take Away?

- Awareness of each student's unique background
- Complexity of literacy
- The importance of oral language instruction
- Make sure language is connected to real words and concepts
- Move step by step towards literacy