

The Challenge of Teaching Non-Literate ESOL Adult Learners

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Definitions

Pre-literate - Learners from a culture where the language is not written. Eg
Bantus from Somalia

Non-literate – Learners from a culture where the language is written but they
never learned to read or write

Semi-literate – Learners who had some schooling and can read or write a little in
their first (or another) language

Non-Roman alphabet literate – Learners who are literate in languages that don't
use our alphabet – such as Chinese, Thai, Korean



Somalia
Eritrea
Ethiopia
Asian
Hispanics } → Columbus Ohio

Who are Non -Literate Learners?

1. Amina grew up in rural Somalia and never had the opportunity to go to school.
2. Lee can read a little Vietnamese but is struggling with the Roman alphabet.
3. Miguel is from Mexico where he only attended school for 2 years. He can read simple Spanish but cannot read or write in English.

How do I know if a student is non-literate?

1. Observe the student - can they hold a pencil, form letters, write their name and address, copy a sentence, point to letters, read a simple sentence?
3. Are they unable to take the BEST literacy test? Did they get a low score on the BEST oral? Could they fill out the registration form?

Don't confuse lack of literacy with learning disabilities. There may be learning disabilities – but being illiterate isn't necessarily a sign of LD.

What Skills Does a Pre-Literate Learner Need to Know?

How to hold a pencil, tracing and making shapes, left to right progression, top to bottom orientation, trace and make letters and numbers, write on the line, difference between upper case and lower case letters, sounds of the letters, put letters together to make words, spaces between words, important sight words...

Tips for working with Non-Literate Learners

- Create a special class if possible. They need more time, different types of instruction and special attention. Choose teachers who work best with this level. Limit numbers if possible. If it is not possible to have a separate class, try a subgroup in a larger class. Bilingual aides may help.
- Start with speaking skills first but introduce writing soon after. Then you can develop the four skills at the same time.
- Use both methods - whole language and phonics. Teach sight words (*woman, exit, danger*) (especially the important words), and at the same time, help students learn the sounds of the letters, the alphabet and sound symbol relationships. Teach word families.
- Teach the students how to hold a pencil, form the letters, left to right progression and top to bottom. Teach printing or manuscript, not cursive.
- Don't treat adults as children. Children learning to read already know the language. Adults need to learn the vocab and grammar first. Adults have life experiences to draw upon. Use Kindergarten workbooks with care.
- Go slowly. Remember the 3 R's - review, revisit, repetition. Students appreciate extra time. Teach skills as a spiral.
- Utilize volunteers - train and support them.

- Build on learners' experiences. Make learning relevant and contextualized. Use realia and lots of visuals
- Be aware of different learning styles – visual (pictures, highlighters, colors, flashcards), Auditory (music, chants, repetition, clapping), Kinesthetic (use sponge and plastic letters, tracing, drama, role play)
- Teach the most important skills first, e.g. filling out a form and reading signs.
- Direct teaching works best. Develop vocabulary by extensive direct teaching and plenty of practice.
- Make your own materials based on student need. Use a big font that is easy to read like *Comic Sans*.
- Always model an activity before starting it. Students often do not know how to do matching, fill in the blanks etc.
- Incorporate classroom routines such as sign in sheets, sentences on the board.
- Create a warm and relaxed atmosphere.
- Teach organizational skills and provide notebooks and binders if possible.
- If you have access to a digital camera, take photos of the students to use for speaking and writing.

Whole language or phonics?

It is best to use both methods. Teach the sounds of the letters (consonants before vowels), the names of the letters (upper case then lower case), syllables, and words. At the same time, teach important sight words (Exit, Men, Stop, Danger, Name, Address...). Later you can use the sight words for phonics skills.

Materials

Pictures, flashcards, alphabet cards, colored index cards, magazines, catalogs, colored pens, colored dry erase markers, flip chart, colored paper, real life signs and text, clock, food items, calendar, maps, money, simple matching games, construction paper, scissors, glue, tape.

Activities

Use movement to teach alphabet (big and small flashcards)

*- 3 letters per lesson/week
Teach letters that are easier first (e, i)*

TPR – total physical response

Copying – Gives practice in forming letters and words and sentences.

Language Experience Approach – Once students have some reading skills.

Circle Dialogs or line dialogs – develops oral skills, later use for reading.

Conversation Grids and class surveys

NAME	SWIM	DRIVE

what's your name?
Can you _____?

Interviews

Picture Stories – from text or make your own

Skits and dialogs (greetings, simple questions)

Develop vocabulary with pictures, matching, labeling, bingo

Computers - but use judiciously to avoid frustration. Integrate with class work.

Cloze Exercises (N__ME) and dictation (one word)

Scrambled words and scrambled sentences. -keep it simple

Matching activities - match word and picture, memory (word and picture)

Take a field trip to then talk and write about.

Word Wall, individual word envelopes with flashcards.

Alphabet card

Alphabet book - one page

Aa Apple



Resources

Digests

Burt, Miriam and Peyton, Joy "Reading and the Adult English Language Learner" available at www.cal.org/ncl/digests/reading.htm

Cunningham Flores, MaryAnn and Terrill, Lynda (2003) "Working with Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners" available at www.cal.org/ncl/DIGESTS/litQA.htm

Gunn, Margaret "Opportunity for Literacy? Preliterate Learners in the AMEP" available at <http://www.ncltr.mq.edu.au/prospect/18/MGUNtrash.htm>

Haller, Lee "Modeling Class Activities for Low-Level Literacy Learners" at www.sabes.org/resources/fieldnotes/vol10/f02halle.htm

Holt, Grace Massey "Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners" NCLE Digest EDO-LE-94-07, available from <http://www.cal.org/ncl/DIGESTS/HOLT.htm>

Curriculum/Training

The ESOL Practitioner's Toolkit available at

www.cal.org/caela/tools/program_development/elltoolkit/CombinedFiles1.pdf

The Tacoma Community House Training Project "Making it Real" available at www.tchtrainingproject.com/pdf/prelit.pdf

Textbooks

Cunningham Florez, MaryAnn LifePrints ESL for Adults Literacy (New Readers Press 2002)

Nishio, Yvonne Wong Longman ESL Literacy (Longman 1998)

Saslow, Joan Literacy Plus A and B by (Longman 2003)

Templin-Imel, Garnet The Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary Literacy Program (Oxford University Press 1996)

<http://humanities.byu.edu/elc/teacher/sectionfour/sectionIV.html> (lessons for literacy classes)

<http://www.cal.org/ncl/millennium.htm> (research on low-literacy learners)