IV-C. Study Circle on Teaching Beginning Levels

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Study Circle on Teaching Beginning Levels

Facilitator Guide

Introduction

The purpose of this study circle is to read and discuss research and information about instructional strategies for working with beginning-level learners, especially literacy-level learners (i.e., those who are not literate in their native language). Participants will read two CAELA articles that discuss effective strategies for literacy-level classes and provide examples of activities that support these strategies. Using the articles as a guide, they will discuss the implications of the research for their own classroom practice, implement at least one new research- or theory-based strategy in their teaching, and reflect on the impact of that experimentation on their thinking and practice.

Readings

- *Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners*, by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez and Lynda Terrill, describes literacy-level learners and the skills they need to develop. www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/litQA.html
- *Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners*, by Grace Massey Holt, provides information on how to identify and assess the instructional needs of adults learning to become literate in a second language. www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/HOLT.html

Session Lengths

Session 1: 2 hours

Session 2: 1.5 hours

Session 1: Preparation

Participants should be sent information about the study circle well in advance of the first session so that they can plan their schedules and do the presession reading, *Working with Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners*. The accompanying assignment asks them to make note of the strategies that resonate with their experiences working with beginning-level learners. At the beginning of Session 1, they will describe their experiences with beginning-level learners and briefly talk about something in the reading that stood out for them.

1. Opening (5 minutes)

- Welcome the group and introduce yourself.
- Review the purpose of this study circle.
- Review logistical details such as the schedule, breaks, and the location of the bathrooms.
- Check that all participants have both readings.

2. Participant introductions (15 minutes)

Format: Whole group

Participants introduce themselves, briefly describe their experiences with beginning-level learners, and mention one strategy they have already used with their beginning-level students. Remind participants that they have only 1 or 2 minutes each for this sharing. There is no discussion during this time; discussion will follow in smaller groups.

3. Reviewing the research (20 minutes)

Format: Small groups

Break the group into three small groups, each of which will focus on one of the three sections of the reading: Who are literacy-level learners? What skills do literacy-level learners need to develop? What are effective practices in the literacy class? Each group should have flipchart paper and a marker. Their task is to read their section and then create a chart on the flipchart paper such as the one below, filling it in with information from the reading and from their own experience:

Research Findings	Related Strategies

4. Sharing strategies (25 minutes)

Format: Whole group

After the groups have posted their flipchart papers on the wall, ask participants to walk around and review what other groups have written. When everyone has seen all the charts, discuss aspects of your own experience with literacy-level learners that relate to the research. As a whole group, discuss the following questions: Do you see all of these research findings commonly addressed in practice? Are there any that challenge common practice? Are there population- or context-specific applications to these research findings?

5. Self-assessment (25 minutes)

Format: Individual and small group

For this activity, divide the group into small groups of three or four. Half of the groups will focus on needs assessment strategies, and the other half will focus on classroom strategies. Try to divide participants by interest area, but ask volunteers to move if the groups are too unevenly split. The needs assessment group will focus on sections from both readings: "What Are Effective Needs Assessment Activities for Literacy Learners?" (Florez and Terrill) and "Assessing the Needs of Low-Level Learners" (Holt). The classroom strategies group will also focus on sections from both readings: "What Additional Activities Are Effective With Literacy-Level Learners?" (Florez and Terrill) and "Techniques for Working With Adults" (Holt).

Explain to the groups that they will be reflecting on their own use of these instructional strategies. Ask participants to read over the suggested strategies in both readings and use the Self-Assessment Form to make note of those that stand out for them. Have participants place a plus sign next to three strategies or activities that they use frequently in their own classrooms or that they especially like, and a minus sign next to three that they use infrequently or do not like.

When everyone in the group is finished, instruct participants (still in their small groups) to do the following (write the instructions on a flipchart so that participants can refer back to them):

- Go down the lists and discuss the most popular and least popular strategies. Discuss any patterns you notice. Share any specific techniques you have used to implement the strategies and any barriers you have encountered in trying to implement the strategies.
- Discuss the relevance of suggested strategies for various ESL populations. Identify strategies that you haven't used before, and describe how you might implement those strategies in your classroom.

6. Sharing strategies (10 minutes)

Format: Whole group

After the small groups have finished, ask them to briefly share with the whole group some of the strategies that they would like to try with their students and explain why they think these strategies might work well with their students.

7. Considering application (10 minutes)

Format: Individual and pairs

Ask participants to look over the strategies listed on their self-assessment pages and to reflect on which strategies they would like to experiment with between sessions. Then have them pair up with a partner and explain what they chose and why: What do they hope will happen or change?

After they have talked through their ideas, have them fill out the New Activity Planning Form. Encourage participants to consider peer observation in their plans if there are co-workers in the study circle. (See the Peer Observation Form and also the guide on Peer Coaching and Mentoring.)

Note which strategies participants are trying out so that you can prepare a flipchart with this information for the next session.

8. Closing (5 minutes)

Remind participants of the next meeting. Review the intersession assignment and the page they will use for their notes.

9. Evaluation (5 minutes)

Do a quick evaluation to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the session by asking participants the following:

- What was the most useful aspect of today's session?
- What might we change if we do this study circle again?

Session 2: Preparation

Post on the wall a flipchart with participants' chosen activities or strategies written on it and the charts that the groups created during the last session .

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Welcome the group back and ask them how their activities went.

2. Debriefing the activities (20 minutes)

Format: Pairs or small groups clustered according to a similar focus of activities or strategies.

Ask participants to refer to their New Activity Notes as they debrief by answering the following questions:

- What did you try? What happened? What factors impacted your implementation?
- What did you conclude from implementing this new activity or strategy?
- What advice would you have for other practitioners about implementing this strategy?

Write the answer to this last question on a sticky note and put it up next to the strategy. This advice will be typed and sent to participants.

3. Reflecting in writing (15 minutes)

Format: Individual

Now that participants have tested a new strategy, talked about it with colleagues, and heard about others' activities, they need to consider what is next. Ask them to write for 10 minutes about what they discovered through their experimentation, what they learned from others in the group, and what they see as their next steps. Then invite volunteers to read their writing.

4. Classroom materials (25 minutes)

Format: Individual and small groups

There is one section of the readings that the group has not yet discussed—the section in Holt entitled, "Selecting Appropriate Classroom Materials." For this activity, divide the group into groups of three or four. Explain that they will be reflecting on their own use of the materials listed in the reading. Ask participants to read the list and check off those that they have used successfully with their students. When they have gone through the whole list, they should put a star by one or two materials that they really like or use frequently. They should then add any materials that they use that are not on the list.

When everyone is finished, have participants discuss in their small groups the materials they have used in class. They should share the one or two materials that they really like, describing

how they have used these materials with their students. These can be materials from the list or materials that they have added to the list.

5. Strategy sharing (10 minutes)

Format: Whole group

When the small groups are finished, each group will report on one or two of the materials and how they have used them.

6. Planning next steps (5 minutes)

Format: Whole group

Invite participants to consider how they might continue to support each other as a group. Does the group want to meet again or stay in touch in other ways? If the group wants to continue to meet, make sure that there is a clear purpose and focus for the meetings.

7. Closing (5 minutes)

- Make sure that you have contact information so that you can send participants the promised notes. Ask permission to also disseminate a group contact list (and give people a chance to opt out).
- Draw participants' attention to other resources available on the topic of teaching beginning levels (see Appendix A for additional resources).
- Thank the group for their work.

8. Evaluation (5 minutes)

Ask participants to fill out the Evaluation Form, which asks for feedback about the entire study circle. If there is time, provide an opportunity for volunteers to comment on their experiences in the study circle.

Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners

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July, 2003

Many adult English language learners in the United States are placed in literacy-level classes. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of adult English language learners at this level across the variety of program contexts that offer adult English instruction (e.g., volunteer literacy groups, libraries, adult education programs, family literacy programs, community colleges, community-based or faith-based organizations). Furthermore, the percentage cited (55%) of beginning-level participants in state-administered adult English as a second language (ESL) programs includes those enrolled in regular beginning classes as well as those in literacy-level classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Anecdotal information, such as postings on Internet discussion lists and requests for training, suggest that teachers are not confident in their abilities to address the needs of literacy-level learners. (NIFL-ESL, 2003). Federally funded programs must demonstrate learner progress yearly, according to the National Reporting System (http://www.nrsweb.org/). Practitioners are concerned that sufficient progress is difficult to achieve with literacy-level learners. The Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project, which developed ESL curriculum and assessment instruments for Southeast Asian refugees in the early 80s, posited that it takes from 500-1,000 hours of instruction for adults who are literate in their native language but have had no prior English instruction to reach a level where they can satisfy their basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited social interaction in English (MELT, 1985). For adults without a literacy background, it may take longer.

Research on effective interventions with this population in the United States is limited. The American Institutes for Research and Aguirre International conducted a 6-year What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students, supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) and the Planning and Evaluation Service. The study focuses on adult English language learners who lack literacy skills in both their native language and English. Although the final report was not available at publication of this paper, background information about this study and preliminary findings are available online (Condelli, 2001; Wrigley, 2002).

This paper describes literacy-level learners and the skills they need to develop. It discusses effective practices for literacy-level classes and gives examples of activities and techniques that support these practices.

Who are literacy-level learners?

Literacy learners are generally those with 6 or fewer years of education in their native countries who need focused instruction on learning to read and write English. The population participating in literacy-level classes is diverse: These classes may include men and women with different native languages, ages, length of time in country, life and language learning goals, and access to previous education (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000; Shank & Terrill, 1997). Literacy learners also have a wide range of oral skills in English. (For a more detailed description of the varieties of first language literacy and effects on second language literacy, see Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003.) The learners are further differentiated by their experiences. Many have experienced trauma related to events in their native countries and to resettlement in the United States, and this trauma may affect the speed and facility with which they learn English (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999). The following learners might attend the same literacy class:

- **Preliterate** (The native language does not yet have a writing system.) Wanankhucha, a Bantu from Somalia, entered the class as a recent refugee. She knows her native Af-Maay only orally, as a written form of the language is just now being developed. Furthermore, as a refugee, Wanankhucha shows evidence of trauma.

- **Nonliterate** (The native language has a written form, but the learner has no literacy.) Trang is a young, single mother from rural Vietnam who grew up without access to education. Here in the United States, she lacks many of the educational and cultural supports earlier Vietnamese refugees enjoyed.

- **Semiliterate** (The learner has minimal literacy in native language.) Roberto attended a rural school in El Salvador for 3 years. Although he wanted to continue, his family needed him to work on the family farm.

- **Nonalphabet literate** (The learner is literate in a language that is not alphabetic.) Xian is a retired minor bureaucrat from China. He is highly literate in the Mandarin script, but he is unfamiliar with any alphabet, including Roman.

- **Non-Roman alphabet literate** (The learner is literate in an alphabetic language other than Roman.) Khalil comes from Jordan. He completed 2 years of secondary school and is literate in Arabic.

- **Roman-alphabet literate** (The learner is literate in a language that is written in the Roman alphabet). Alex is a senior from Russia. As a young man, he studied French. Even though he was a professional (engineer) in his own country, he does not want to move to a higher level class.

Others who may benefit from a literacy-level class are individuals with learning disabilities or individuals who, because of age, physical or mental health issues, or family situations, find that the slow and repetitive pace of such a class better meets their needs and goals (Holt, 1995).

What skills do literacy-level learners need to develop?

At the most basic level, literacy learners need to understand that texts have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that English is read from left to right and from up to down; and that written words can represent a story, just as pictures do. They need to be ready to learn, to see patterns, and to associate symbols with objects.

Then, they need to be able to develop four key reading skills: phonological processing, vocabulary development, syntactical processing, and schema activation (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Relating to these four skills, learners need to be able to do the following (Brod, 1999; Florez, 2002; Van Duzer, 1999):

- **Phonological processing**. Recognize and reproduce letters and other graphic symbols related to the language; manipulate sound-symbol correspondences efficiently.
- **Vocabulary development**. Develop a vocabulary bank.
- **Syntactical processing**. Understand and apply grammar and usage conventions; identify and use structural and organizational features common to English.
- **Schema activation**. Initiate appropriate strategies for reading comprehension (e.g., identify a purpose for reading, use pictures and graphics, predict, and skim/scan or develop a piece of writing by brainstorming, outlining, drafting, using feedback, and editing).

Preliterate learners may find two-dimensional graphic literacy-letters, maps, graphs, charts, even pictures-difficult to interpret (Hvitfeldt, 1985). All non-English speakers will be challenged to hear and replicate the sounds of English, a necessary element in the sound-symbol correspondence skills deployed in successful reading (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Because of the difficulty some learners experience with these basic tasks, instructors may be tempted to spend all the classroom time working to master these skills. However, in order to apply literacy skills to real tasks, such as reading and understanding a note from a child's teacher, a work schedule, or safety stickers on a medicine bottle, instruction must balance basic skills development with the fostering of higher level comprehension skills (Brod, 1999; Van Duzer, 1999).

What are effective practices in the literacy class?

Utilize the principles of adult learning

Malcolm Knowles' (1973) principles of adult learning are applicable to planning instruction for adult English language learners: Adults are self-directed, practical, and problem solving; they have reservoirs of experience to help them learn new things; and they want to know why something needs to be learned and how it will be applicable to their lives.

Integrate the four language skills

Literacy-level classes vary because of program type (general, family, workplace, or corrections); intensity; and learner needs and goals. Yet, no matter the context, in real life, language tasks involve integrating the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. For example, a trip to the health clinic includes reading and filling out health forms, explaining symptoms, and understanding the doctor's response. Furthermore, research suggests that for beginning readers of a second language, oral proficiency in the target language is key to developing reading ability (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003).

Ask learners what they want to learn

Learners have many purposes for developing English literacy. Needs assessment assures learners a voice in their instruction and keeps content relevant to their lives and goals. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to learn what skills learners bring to class and which ones they feel they need to strengthen (Brod, 1999; Shank & Terrill, 1997).

Connect to the outside world

There should be opportunities in literacy-level classes to connect learning to real-world practices. For example, class field trips to a library, post office, supermarket, or museum provide a venue to practice speaking and reading skills while the learner is engaged in real-life activities (Brod, 1999; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000; Florez, 2002; Holt, 1995; Wrigley, 2002).

What are effective needs assessment activities for literacy learners?

Suggested activities for needs assessment with literacy-level learners include the following:

- Ask learners to look through their textbooks or picture dictionaries and place five Post-it notes on pages with information they think is most important to learn.
- Practice a pictorial strip story about a non-English speaker who has three specific needs for learning English (Ivan needs to learn English for work, to listen to music, and to make friends); then ask learners to brainstorm and substitute why they need to learn English.
- Have learners complete a simplified or pictorial checklist of what they want to read or write, e.g., grocery lists, job applications, notes to child's teacher, etc. (Holt, 1995; Shank & Terrill, 1997).

What additional activities are effective with literacy-level learners?

Once learner needs are determined, there are a number of activities that provide meaningful, relevant practice:

- **Dialogues with related activities.** Oral dialogues can be springboards for literacy-oriented activities such as cloze or substitution where learners supply the missing words in written dialogue or exercise where learners substitute different vocabulary words in structured dialogues, sentence strips, role plays, or dictations.
- **Vocabulary-building activities.** For literacy-level learners, matching pictures to words is key for vocabulary development. Flash cards, concentration games, labeling, vocabulary journals, picture dictionaries, and bingo activities can be used to practice vocabulary.
- **Class surveys** One type of class survey requires learners to ask the other students one or two questions, such as "What month were you born? or "What is your last name?" and record the answers on a form. The class can debrief the answers to make a chart or graph. If learner names were gathered, the list can be used for alphabetizing practice. A second kind of survey asks learners to find "someone who likes soccer" or "someone who comes from Bolivia." To find the information, learners need to ask questions such as "Do you like soccer?" and record the information on a form. Class surveys are useful for community building as well as for practicing the four language skills.
- **Language Experience Approach (LEA).** The teacher records text that learners generate from a shared picture or event, drawing out vocabulary that is relevant to the learners. Other activities based on the learner-generated text follow, such as vocabulary development, phonics exercises, choral reading, or dictation.
- **Phonics exercises.** Exercises such as minimal pairs (e.g., hat/cat, pan/fan) or identifying initial word sounds are important components of literacy-level lessons. Relating such exercises to the vocabulary being taught in a lesson contextualizes the learning and makes it relevant. Whenever possible, use authentic materials (flyers, schedules, advertisements, bills) to connect literacy development to real-world tasks.
- **Dictations of students' names, phone numbers, and addresses.** These activities can provide interesting, meaningful content while developing encoding skills. Tactile activities such as drawing the letters in sand with the fingers, coloring letters, or manipulating plastic cutouts of letters may offer some variety (Brod, 1999; Florez, 2002; Holt, 1995; Moss, Shank, & Terrill, 1997; Tom, Tiller, & Bigelow, 1998; Wrigely, 2002).

What does an effective literacy lesson look like?

Following is a sample lesson that employs activities to develop the four key reading skills *(phonological processing, vocabulary development, syntactical processing, schema activation):*

1. As a class, learners brainstorm vocabulary on a specific topic, such as food shopping *(schema activation)*.
2. Flashcard practice (whole group and pair) familiarizes learners with food vocabulary *(vocabulary development)*.
3. The class groups food words that begin with similar sounds, *e.g., cheese, chicken,* and *cherries (phonological processing)*.
4. Learners practice a three-line scripted dialogue ("I am going shopping." "What do you need?" "I need bread, beans, and chicken.") first as a whole group, then acted out by volunteers, and finally as pairs where learners substitute other food vocabulary *(vocabulary development)*.
5. Learners complete cloze worksheets, inserting words that have been deleted from the dialogue or, alternately, learners can create pair dictations of the dialogue *(syntactical processing)*.
6. For homework, learners create their own shopping list of five items they actually need; they can copy new food words from packages, etc. *(vocabulary development; schema activation)*.

How can learner progress be assessed?

Learner assessment keeps both the teacher and learners informed of what has been achieved and what still needs work. Teachers can use many of the activities in this paper to assess learner progress (e.g., cloze exercises, substitution drills, and role plays). Ongoing teacher observation is also part of assessment. For learners, progress assessment provides a venue to develop self-reflection and self-evaluation skills. Learners can engage in self-assessment by completing checklists (e.g., indicating skills they feel they have improved: " X I can read the safety signs at work"). Meetings between teachers and individual learners to discuss progress are also helpful (Florez, 2002; Holt, 1995).

Conclusion

Literacy-level learners "may be beginning learners, but they are not beginning thinkers" (Brod, 1999, p. 5). Like all learners, they bring diverse strengths and needs to the adult ESL classroom. Teachers need to provide instruction that acknowledges and addresses these strengths and needs, engages learners in challenging and relevant topics, and provides them with tools they can use to meet their responsibilities and goals.

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Additional Selected Teacher and Learner Resources

Bell, J., & Burnaby, B. (1984). *A handbook for ESL literacy*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/Hodder and Stoughton. (Available from Pippin Publishing, 1-888-889-000, www.pippinpub.com)

Gramer, M. F. (1994). *Basic Oxford picture dictionary.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hands-on English. Published 6 times a year, for teachers and tutors of adult ESL. (Available from Hands-on English, PO Box 256, Crete, NE 68333, www.handsonenglish.com)

Mrowicki, L. (1990). *First words in English.* Palatine, IL: Linmore.

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Nishio, Y. W. (1998). *Longman ESL literacy* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.

Shapiro, N., & Adelson-Goldstein, J. (1998). *Oxford picture dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shapiro, N., & Genser, C. (1994). *Chalk talks*. Berkeley, CA: Command Performance Language Institute.

Silliman, A., & Tom, A. (2000). *Practical resources for adult ESL*. Burlingame, CA: ALTA Book Centers.

The following online resources demonstrate the scope, strategies, and activities for successfully working with literacy-level learners:

Arlington Education and Employment Program. (2003). *The REEP ESL Curriculum For Adults*. Provides information about needs assessment, goal-setting, course and lesson planning, and offers sample lessons on health and work. (To find curriculum for literacy level-learners, go to "Resources," click on "Lesson Plans," and look for "Level 100.")

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. *ESL for Literacy Learners* and ancillary materials. Defines ESL literacy and suggests appropriate methodology.www.language.ca/display_page.asp?page_id=255

Department of Education (MA). *Framework for Adult ESOL in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (1999/2002). Offers basic principles for working with adult learners www.doe.mass.edu/acls/frameworks/esol.pdf or www.doe.mass.edu/acls/frameworks/esol.doc

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Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners

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California Department of Education
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Prior to the late 1970's, instructional methods and materials for adults learning English as a second language (ESL) assumed the presence of literacy in a first language (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). After 1975 the United States experienced an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia. Many had minimal or no experience in reading and writing in their native languages and, as the learners joined ESL classes, educators saw that existing methods and materials were not appropriate for these learners. Ten years later, during the implementation of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), educators were again faced with teaching adult learners who had little or no schooling in their native countries.

What has the field learned about offering instruction to literacy level (low or beginning) adult ESL learners? This digest provides information on how to identify and assess the instructional needs of adults learning to become literate in a second language; it discusses general techniques that facilitate instruction for these learners; it provides a sample procedure for combining some of these techniques; and it describes classroom materials appropriate for low-level adult ESL learners.

Low-Level Learners

There are several categories of adult ESL learners who can benefit from the approaches and techniques used in instruction for low-level learners (Crystal, 1982; California Department of Education, 1992; Savage, 1993). These categories include the following:

- learners who are nonliterate and have had little or no prior schooling in their native language;
- learners, such as speakers of Chinese, Arabic, or Khmer, who may not be familiar with the Roman alphabet;
- learners who may have learning disabilities; and
- learners who are literate in their native language but who may want (for various reasons such as age, health, family situation) to participate in a slower-paced class and who would benefit from classroom activities that characterize a literacy class.

Assessing the Needs of Low-Level Learners

Assessing the needs of learners who may not speak even minimal English and may not read or write in any language can be difficult. Holt (1994), Crystal (1982), and Bell (1988) offer suggestions, recommending a variety of ways to assess learners orally, through reading and writing, and through classroom observation.

Assessing Orally

Educators who speak the native language of the adult learners should ask them about their educational backgrounds. Persons with three or fewer years of formal education will probably be nonliterate.

Assessing Through Reading

Reading readiness tasks can be used for literacy screening. For example, learners can be asked to complete the following tasks. (The literacy skills being assessed appear in parentheses.)

- Complete an alphabet cloze (for example, A B__D__F G H__J), supplying the missing letters. (familiarity with Roman alphabet)
- Copy a sentence. (speed and ease in forming words)
- Read two simple sentences. (basic sight vocabulary in context)
- Point to letters corresponding to the sounds made by the teacher. (simple consonant sounds not easily confused)
- Read several unfamiliar or nonsense words. (blending sounds)

A learner who can recognize basic sight words or use a knowledge of phonics to approximate the sounds of unfamiliar words probably does not need basic literacy instruction.

Assessing Through Writing

The completion of a simple application form on which learners are asked to fill in basic information such as name, address, phone number, date, social security number, birth date, birthplace, age, and gender is a quick way to determine reading and writing ability, especially when a large number of learners have to be assessed in a short period of time. Someone who has difficulty filling out the form could probably benefit from basic literacy instruction.

A writing sample in the learner's first language is useful in determining the literacy level of the learner in his or her native language.

A writing sample in English, done at intake, can be used to compare later writing samples and to monitor the progress of each learner's writing.

Assessing Through Classroom Observation

Informal assessment through classroom observation can continue to assist the teacher in determining an individual learner's needs. Attention should be paid to how learners hold their pencils (awkwardly? too tightly?) and their books (upside down?), how they move their eyes (Do the eyes move to follow words?), how quickly they write (Do they hesitate? take time? labor over each letter?), and how they interact in large and small groups (Do they offer to help each other? Are they comfortable in groups?).

Techniques for Working With Adults

Knowles and other educators maintain that adult education is most effective when it is "experience centered, related to learners' real needs, and directed by learners themselves" (Auerbach, 1992, p. 14). Bell and Burnaby (1984), Holt (1988), Holt and Gaer (1993), and Wrigley and Guth (1992) list techniques that involve beginning level learners as active participants in selecting topics, language, and materials.

1. Build on the experiences and language of learners. Invite them to discuss their experiences and provide activities that will allow them to generate language they have already developed.

2. Use learners as resources. Ask them to share their knowledge and expertise with others in the class.

3. Sequence activities in an order that moves from less challenging to more challenging, such as progressing from listening to speaking, reading, and writing skills. Move from language experience activities to picture-word connections to all-print exercises.

4. Build redundancy into curriculum content, providing repetition of topics. This will help overcome problems related to irregular attendance common in adult classes.

5. Combine enabling skills (visual discrimination of letters and words, auditory discrimination of sounds and words, spacing between letters and words, letter-sound correspondences, blending letters to sound out words, sight vocabulary) with language experience and whole language approaches.

6. Combine life-skill reading competencies (reading medicine labels, writing notes to the children's teachers, filling out forms) with phonics, word recognition, word order, spacing words in a sentence, reading words in context, and reading comprehension.

7. Use cooperative learning activities that encourage interaction by providing learners with situations in which they must negotiate language with partners or group members to complete a task (See Bell, 1988).

8. Include a variety of techniques to appeal to diverse learning styles. For example, merge holistic reading approaches such as language experience with discrete approaches such as phonics.

An Integrated Approach to Literacy Instruction

The language experience approach (LEA)—which uses learner experiences as lesson content—is a way to introduce multiple activities that appeal to learners' diverse backgrounds and preferred learning styles while offering instruction in language that is both comprehensible and interesting (Taylor, 1992). The following is an example of a modified LEA lesson that could be used with low-level learners.

1. A shared experience, such as a field trip, a common situation, or a meaningful picture is a stimulus for class discussion.
2. Learners volunteer sentences about the experience and the teacher writes the sentences on the chalkboard.
3. The teacher reads each sentence aloud, running her finger under words as each is pronounced, verifying that she has written what the student has said.
4. When the story is completed, the teacher reads it aloud.
5. Learners are encouraged to join in a second and third reading of the story.
6. A number of activities can follow at this point:
    - Learners copy the story;
    - Learners underline all the parts they can read;
    - Learners circle specific words (e.g., words that begin with a designated sound, common sight words such as *the*);
    - Choral cloze: The teacher erases some words, reads the story, and asks learners to supply the missing words;
    - Writing cloze: The teacher types the story, leaving out every fifth word. During the next class the teacher passes out the cloze and asks learners to fill in the missing words;
    - Scrambled sentences: The teacher types the story. During the next class the teacher distributes copies of the story to the class. Each learner cuts the story into strips so that there is one sentence on each strip of paper. Learners scramble the sentences and rearrange them in the proper sequence;
    - Scrambled words: More advanced learners can cut sentences into words, scramble the words, and rearrange them in order.

Selecting Appropriate Classroom Materials

Using concrete but age-appropriate materials with adult learners enhances instruction by providing a context for language and literacy development. A basic kit of materials might consist of the following objects, games, and materials.

1. Realia: clocks, food items, calendars, plastic fruits and vegetables, maps, household objects, real and play money, food containers, abacus, manual for learning to drive, and classroom objects;
2. Flash cards: pictures, words, and signs;
3. Pictures or photographs: personal, magazine, and others;
4. Tape recorder and cassette tapes, including music for imagery and relaxation;
5. Overhead projector, transparencies, and pens; video player and videos;
6. Pocket chart for numbers, letters, and pictures;
7. Alphabet sets;
8. Camera for language experience stories to create biographies and autobiographies;
9. Games such as bingo and concentration: commercial or teacher-made;
10. Colored index cards to teach word order in sentences, to show when speakers change in dialogue, to illustrate question/answer format, and to use as cues for a concentration game;
11. Cuisenaire rods to teach word order in sentences, to use as manipulatives in dyad activities, and to teach adjectives;
12. Colored chalk to teach word order, to differentiate between speakers in a dialogue, and to illustrate question and answer format;
13. Poster, butcher, and construction paper;
14. Felt-tipped pens, colored pencils, and crayons;
15. Scissors, glue, and masking tape; and
16. Children's literature: for learning techniques for reading or telling stories to children (See Smallwood, 1992, for ideas on using children's literature with adults.).

Conclusion

Providing instruction to adults acquiring ESL literacy is a challenge. When approaches, techniques, and materials are suitable for adults, are related to their real needs, and promote involvement in their own learning, there is a greater chance of success.

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IV-C. Study Circle on Teaching Beginning Levels

Participant Handouts

Readings

- *Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners*
  www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/litQA.html

- *Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners*
  www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/HOLT.html

Description

This study circle will be reading two pieces that discuss working with beginning-level learners, especially literacy-level learners (i.e., those who are not literate in their native language). *Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners* describes literacy-level learners and the skills they need to develop. *Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners* provides information on how to identify and assess the instructional needs of adults learning to become literate in a second language. Both articles discuss effective strategies for literacy-level classes and provide examples of activities that support these strategies. The study group begins by reading and discussing research on literacy-level learners and then moves to instructional strategies. Participants are expected to implement at least one research-based strategy between sessions and to reflect on the implementation.

Where:

When:

Study Circle Preparation

Before the first meeting of the study circle, prepare by reading *Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners*.

Task: As you read this piece, please take note of ideas that stand out for you or questions it raises for you. Think about your own experiences working with beginning-level learners. Highlight or make notes about the theories that resonate with your experience. During the first session of the study group, you will be asked to talk about something from the reading that stood out for you and to describe why (in 1 or 2 minutes).

Self-Assessment on the Use of Needs Assessment Strategies

From *Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners*

- Ask learners to look through their textbooks or picture dictionaries and prioritize topics of interest.
- Use a pictorial strip story to elicit learner needs.
- Have learners complete a simplified or pictorial checklist of what they want to read, study, or write.

From *Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners*

- Conduct an interview in the learners' native language to find out about educational backgrounds.
- Have learners complete an alphabet cloze (for example, A B __ D __ F G H __ J), supplying the missing letters.
- Have learners copy a sentence.
- Have learners read two simple sentences.
- Have learners point to letters corresponding to the sounds made by the teacher.
- Have learners read several unfamiliar or nonsense words.
- Have learners complete a simple form asking for basic information.
- Have learners do a writing sample in their native language.
- Have learners do a writing sample in English.
- Use classroom observation to determine learner needs.

Self-Assessment on the Use of Classroom Strategies for Literacy Learners

From *Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners*

- Dialogues with related activities
- Vocabulary-building activities
- Class surveys
- Language Experience Approach (LEA)
- Phonics exercises
- Dictations of students' names, phone numbers, and addresses

From *Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners*

- Build on the experiences and language of learners.
- Use learners as resources.
- Sequence activities in an order that moves from less challenging to more challenging.
- Build redundancy into curriculum content, providing repetition of topics.
- Combine enabling skills with language experience or life-skill reading.
- Use cooperative learning activities that encourage interaction.
- Include a variety of techniques to appeal to diverse learning styles.

New Activity Planning Form

1. What research finding, theoretical principle, or strategy are you planning to implement in your classroom in a specific activity or strategy?

2. Why did you choose this activity or strategy? What impact or outcomes are you hoping to see?

3. What contextual factors (e.g., class size, student levels, content focus [e.g., reading/writing or listening/speaking; general ESL or workplace]) will you have to take into account as you plan your activity or strategy?

4. How will you implement this activity or strategy? What will you do?

5. What signs will you look for to know if the activity or strategy is having an impact on your students?

Peer Observation Form

1. What are you are looking for?

2. What do you observe?

Discussion of observations with teacher

New Activity Notes

1. Describe the activity or strategy you implemented. What happened? What did you observe?

2. What struck you as interesting about what happened? How did it compare to what you expected?

3. What impact did you see the activity or strategy have on the students or on the program?

4. Did the activity or strategy give you the information you were looking for? What else might you try to get additional information?

5. What did you learn about the research, theory, or strategy you were testing?

6. What did you get out of the experience of applying theory and research to your practice?

Evaluation Form

1. How useful did you find the study circle material? Please explain.

2. How useful did you find the study circle meetings? Please explain.

3. How useful did you find the new activity or strategy (including the documentation)? Please explain.

4. What tools or ideas are you taking away that you will continue to use in your practice?

5. In what ways are you going to continue to apply research in your practice?

6. If this study circle is offered again, what advice would you give the facilitator?

7. On what other topics would you like to have a study circle?

Working With Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners

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Lynda Terrill, National Center for ESL Literacy Education
July, 2003

Many adult English language learners in the United States are placed in literacy-level classes. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of adult English language learners at this level across the variety of program contexts that offer adult English instruction (e.g., volunteer literacy groups, libraries, adult education programs, family literacy programs, community colleges, community-based or faith-based organizations). Furthermore, the percentage cited (55%) of beginning-level participants in state-administered adult English as a second language (ESL) programs includes those enrolled in regular beginning classes as well as those in literacy-level classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Anecdotal information, such as postings on Internet discussion lists and requests for training, suggest that teachers are not confident in their abilities to address the needs of literacy-level learners. (NIFL-ESL, 2003). Federally funded programs must demonstrate learner progress yearly, according to the National Reporting System (http://www.nrsweb.org/) . Practitioners are concerned that sufficient progress is difficult to achieve with literacy-level learners. The Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project, which developed ESL curriculum and assessment instruments for Southeast Asian refugees in the early 80s, posited that it takes from 500-1,000 hours of instruction for adults who are literate in their native language but have had no prior English instruction to reach a level where they can satisfy their basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited social interaction in English (MELT, 1985). For adults without a literacy background, it may take longer.

Research on effective interventions with this population in the United States is limited. The American Institutes for Research and Aguirre International conducted a 6-year What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students, supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) and the Planning and Evaluation Service. The study focuses on adult English language learners who lack literacy skills in both their native language and English. Although the final report was not available at publication of this paper, background information about this study and preliminary findings are available online (Condelli, 2001; Wrigley, 2002).

This paper describes literacy-level learners and the skills they need to develop. It discusses effective practices for literacy-level classes and gives examples of activities and techniques that support these practices.

Who are literacy-level learners?

Literacy learners are generally those with 6 or fewer years of education in their native countries who need focused instruction on learning to read and write English. The population participating in literacy-level classes is diverse: These classes may include men and women with different native languages, ages, length of time in country, life and language learning goals, and access to previous education (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000; Shank & Terrill, 1997). Literacy learners also have a wide range of oral skills in English. (For a more detailed description of the varieties of first language literacy and effects on second language literacy, see Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003.) The learners are further differentiated by their experiences. Many have experienced trauma related to events in their native countries and to resettlement in the United States, and this trauma may affect the speed and facility with which they learn English (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999). The following learners might attend the same literacy class:

- **Preliterate** (The native language does not yet have a writing system.) Wanankhucha, a Bantu from Somalia, entered the class as a recent refugee. She knows her native Af-Maay only orally, as a written form of the language is just now being developed. Furthermore, as a refugee, Wanankhucha shows evidence of trauma.

- **Nonliterate** (The native language has a written form, but the learner has no literacy.) Trang is a young, single mother from rural Vietnam who grew up without access to education. Here in the United States, she lacks many of the educational and cultural supports earlier Vietnamese refugees enjoyed.

- **Semiliterate** (The learner has minimal literacy in native language.) Roberto attended a rural school in El Salvador for 3 years. Although he wanted to continue, his family needed him to work on the family farm.

- **Nonalphabet literate** (The learner is literate in a language that is not alphabetic.) Xian is a retired minor bureaucrat from China. He is highly literate in the Mandarin script, but he is unfamiliar with any alphabet, including Roman.

- **Non-Roman alphabet literate** (The learner is literate in an alphabetic language other than Roman.) Khalil comes from Jordan. He completed 2 years of secondary school and is literate in Arabic.

- **Roman-alphabet literate** (The learner is literate in a language that is written in the Roman alphabet). Alex is a senior from Russia. As a young man, he studied French. Even though he was a professional (engineer) in his own country, he does not want to move to a higher level class.

Others who may benefit from a literacy-level class are individuals with learning disabilities or individuals who, because of age, physical or mental health issues, or family situations, find that the slow and repetitive pace of such a class better meets their needs and goals (Holt, 1995).

What skills do literacy-level learners need to develop?

At the most basic level, literacy learners need to understand that texts have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that English is read from left to right and from up to down; and that written words can represent a story, just as pictures do. They need to be ready to learn, to see patterns, and to associate symbols with objects.

Then, they need to be able to develop four key reading skills: phonological processing, vocabulary development, syntactical processing, and schema activation (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Relating to these four skills, learners need to be able to do the following (Brod, 1999; Florez, 2002; Van Duzer, 1999):

- **Phonological processing**. Recognize and reproduce letters and other graphic symbols related to the language; manipulate sound-symbol correspondences efficiently.
- **Vocabulary development**. Develop a vocabulary bank.
- **Syntactical processing**. Understand and apply grammar and usage conventions; identify and use structural and organizational features common to English.
- **Schema activation**. Initiate appropriate strategies for reading comprehension (e.g., identify a purpose for reading, use pictures and graphics, predict, and skim/scan or develop a piece of writing by brainstorming, outlining, drafting, using feedback, and editing).

Preliterate learners may find two-dimensional graphic literacy-letters, maps, graphs, charts, even pictures-difficult to interpret (Hvitfeldt, 1985). All non-English speakers will be challenged to hear and replicate the sounds of English, a necessary element in the sound-symbol correspondence skills deployed in successful reading (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Because of the difficulty some learners experience with these basic tasks, instructors may be tempted to spend all the classroom time working to master these skills. However, in order to apply literacy skills to real tasks, such as reading and understanding a note from a child's teacher, a work schedule, or safety stickers on a medicine bottle, instruction must balance basic skills development with the fostering of higher level comprehension skills (Brod, 1999; Van Duzer, 1999).

What are effective practices in the literacy class?

Utilize the principles of adult learning

Malcolm Knowles' (1973) principles of adult learning are applicable to planning instruction for adult English language learners: Adults are self-directed, practical, and problem solving; they have reservoirs of experience to help them learn new things; and they want to know why something needs to be learned and how it will be applicable to their lives.

Integrate the four language skills

Literacy-level classes vary because of program type (general, family, workplace, or corrections); intensity; and learner needs and goals. Yet, no matter the context, in real life, language tasks involve integrating the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. For example, a trip to the health clinic includes reading and filling out health forms, explaining symptoms, and understanding the doctor's response. Furthermore, research suggests that for beginning readers of a second language, oral proficiency in the target language is key to developing reading ability (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003).

Ask learners what they want to learn

Learners have many purposes for developing English literacy. Needs assessment assures learners a voice in their instruction and keeps content relevant to their lives and goals. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to learn what skills learners bring to class and which ones they feel they need to strengthen (Brod, 1999; Shank & Terrill, 1997).

Connect to the outside world

There should be opportunities in literacy-level classes to connect learning to real-world practices. For example, class field trips to a library, post office, supermarket, or museum provide a venue to practice speaking and reading skills while the learner is engaged in real-life activities (Brod, 1999; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000; Florez, 2002; Holt, 1995; Wrigley, 2002).

What are effective needs assessment activities for literacy learners?

Suggested activities for needs assessment with literacy-level learners include the following:

- Ask learners to look through their textbooks or picture dictionaries and place five Post-it notes on pages with information they think is most important to learn.
- Practice a pictorial strip story about a non-English speaker who has three specific needs for learning English (Ivan needs to learn English for work, to listen to music, and to make friends); then ask learners to brainstorm and substitute why they need to learn English.
- Have learners complete a simplified or pictorial checklist of what they want to read or write, e.g., grocery lists, job applications, notes to child's teacher, etc. (Holt, 1995; Shank & Terrill, 1997).

What additional activities are effective with literacy-level learners?

Once learner needs are determined, there are a number of activities that provide meaningful, relevant practice:

- **Dialogues with related activities.** Oral dialogues can be springboards for literacy-oriented activities such as cloze or substitution where learners supply the missing words in written dialogue or exercise where learners substitute different vocabulary words in structured dialogues, sentence strips, role plays, or dictations.

- **Vocabulary-building activities.** For literacy-level learners, matching pictures to words is key for vocabulary development. Flash cards, concentration games, labeling, vocabulary journals, picture dictionaries, and bingo activities can be used to practice vocabulary.

- **Class surveys** One type of class survey requires learners to ask the other students one or two questions, such as "What month were you born? or "What is your last name?" and record the answers on a form. The class can debrief the answers to make a chart or graph. If learner names were gathered, the list can be used for alphabetizing practice. A second kind of survey asks learners to find "someone who likes soccer" or "someone who comes from Bolivia." To find the information, learners need to ask questions such as "Do you like soccer?" and record the information on a form. Class surveys are useful for community building as well as for practicing the four language skills.

- **Language Experience Approach (LEA).** The teacher records text that learners generate from a shared picture or event, drawing out vocabulary that is relevant to the learners. Other activities based on the learner-generated text follow, such as vocabulary development, phonics exercises, choral reading, or dictation.

- **Phonics exercises.** Exercises such as minimal pairs (e.g., hat/cat, pan/fan) or identifying initial word sounds are important components of literacy-level lessons. Relating such exercises to the vocabulary being taught in a lesson contextualizes the learning and makes it relevant. Whenever possible, use authentic materials (flyers, schedules, advertisements, bills) to connect literacy development to real-world tasks.

- **Dictations of students' names, phone numbers, and addresses.** These activities can provide interesting, meaningful content while developing encoding skills. Tactile activities such as drawing the letters in sand with the fingers, coloring letters, or manipulating plastic cutouts of letters may offer some variety (Brod, 1999; Florez, 2002; Holt, 1995; Moss, Shank, & Terrill, 1997; Tom, Tiller, & Bigelow, 1998; Wrigely, 2002).

What does an effective literacy lesson look like?

Following is a sample lesson that employs activities to develop the four key reading skills *(phonological processing, vocabulary development, syntactical processing, schema activation):*

1. As a class, learners brainstorm vocabulary on a specific topic, such as food shopping *(schema activation)*.
2. Flashcard practice (whole group and pair) familiarizes learners with food vocabulary *(vocabulary development)*.
3. The class groups food words that begin with similar sounds, *e.g., cheese, chicken,* and *cherries (phonological processing)*.
4. Learners practice a three-line scripted dialogue ("I am going shopping." "What do you need?" "I need bread, beans, and chicken.") first as a whole group, then acted out by volunteers, and finally as pairs where learners substitute other food vocabulary *(vocabulary development)*.
5. Learners complete cloze worksheets, inserting words that have been deleted from the dialogue or, alternately, learners can create pair dictations of the dialogue *(syntactical processing)*.
6. For homework, learners create their own shopping list of five items they actually need; they can copy new food words from packages, etc. *(vocabulary development; schema activation)*.

How can learner progress be assessed?

Learner assessment keeps both the teacher and learners informed of what has been achieved and what still needs work. Teachers can use many of the activities in this paper to assess learner progress (e.g., cloze exercises, substitution drills, and role plays). Ongoing teacher observation is also part of assessment. For learners, progress assessment provides a venue to develop self-reflection and self-evaluation skills. Learners can engage in self-assessment by completing checklists (e.g., indicating skills they feel they have improved: " X I can read the safety signs at work"). Meetings between teachers and individual learners to discuss progress are also helpful (Florez, 2002; Holt, 1995).

Conclusion

Literacy-level learners "may be beginning learners, but they are not beginning thinkers" (Brod, 1999, p. 5). Like all learners, they bring diverse strengths and needs to the adult ESL classroom. Teachers need to provide instruction that acknowledges and addresses these strengths and needs, engages learners in challenging and relevant topics, and provides them with tools they can use to meet their responsibilities and goals.

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Additional Selected Teacher and Learner Resources

Bell, J., & Burnaby, B. (1984). *A handbook for ESL literacy*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/Hodder and Stoughton. (Available from Pippin Publishing, 1-888-889-000, www.pippinpub.com)

Gramer, M. F. (1994). *Basic Oxford picture dictionary.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hands-on English. Published 6 times a year, for teachers and tutors of adult ESL. (Available from Hands-on English, PO Box 256, Crete, NE 68333, www.handsonenglish.com)

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The following online resources demonstrate the scope, strategies, and activities for successfully working with literacy-level learners:

Arlington Education and Employment Program. (2003). *The REEP ESL Curriculum For Adults*. Provides information about needs assessment, goal-setting, course and lesson planning, and offers sample lessons on health and work. (To find curriculum for literacy level-learners, go to “Resources,” click on “Lesson Plans,” and look for “Level 100.”)

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. *ESL for Literacy Learners* and ancillary materials. Defines ESL literacy and suggests appropriate methodology.www.language.ca/display_page.asp?page_id=255

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Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners

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Prior to the late 1970's, instructional methods and materials for adults learning English as a second language (ESL) assumed the presence of literacy in a first language (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). After 1975 the United States experienced an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia. Many had minimal or no experience in reading and writing in their native languages and, as the learners joined ESL classes, educators saw that existing methods and materials were not appropriate for these learners. Ten years later, during the implementation of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), educators were again faced with teaching adult learners who had little or no schooling in their native countries.

What has the field learned about offering instruction to literacy level (low or beginning) adult ESL learners? This digest provides information on how to identify and assess the instructional needs of adults learning to become literate in a second language; it discusses general techniques that facilitate instruction for these learners; it provides a sample procedure for combining some of these techniques; and it describes classroom materials appropriate for low-level adult ESL learners.

Low-Level Learners

There are several categories of adult ESL learners who can benefit from the approaches and techniques used in instruction for low-level learners (Crystal, 1982; California Department of Education, 1992; Savage, 1993). These categories include the following:

- learners who are nonliterate and have had little or no prior schooling in their native language;
- learners, such as speakers of Chinese, Arabic, or Khmer, who may not be familiar with the Roman alphabet;
- learners who may have learning disabilities; and
- learners who are literate in their native language but who may want (for various reasons such as age, health, family situation) to participate in a slower-paced class and who would benefit from classroom activities that characterize a literacy class.

Assessing the Needs of Low-Level Learners

Assessing the needs of learners who may not speak even minimal English and may not read or write in any language can be difficult. Holt (1994), Crystal (1982), and Bell (1988) offer suggestions, recommending a variety of ways to assess learners orally, through reading and writing, and through classroom observation.

Assessing Orally

Educators who speak the native language of the adult learners should ask them about their educational backgrounds. Persons with three or fewer years of formal education will probably be nonliterate.

Assessing Through Reading

Reading readiness tasks can be used for literacy screening. For example, learners can be asked to complete the following tasks. (The literacy skills being assessed appear in parentheses.)

- Complete an alphabet cloze (for example, A B__D__F G H__J), supplying the missing letters. (familiarity with Roman alphabet)
- Copy a sentence. (speed and ease in forming words)
- Read two simple sentences. (basic sight vocabulary in context)
- Point to letters corresponding to the sounds made by the teacher. (simple consonant sounds not easily confused)
- Read several unfamiliar or nonsense words. (blending sounds)

A learner who can recognize basic sight words or use a knowledge of phonics to approximate the sounds of unfamiliar words probably does not need basic literacy instruction.

Assessing Through Writing

The completion of a simple application form on which learners are asked to fill in basic information such as name, address, phone number, date, social security number, birth date, birthplace, age, and gender is a quick way to determine reading and writing ability, especially when a large number of learners have to be assessed in a short period of time. Someone who has difficulty filling out the form could probably benefit from basic literacy instruction.

A writing sample in the learner's first language is useful in determining the literacy level of the learner in his or her native language.

A writing sample in English, done at intake, can be used to compare later writing samples and to monitor the progress of each learner's writing.

Assessing Through Classroom Observation

Informal assessment through classroom observation can continue to assist the teacher in determining an individual learner's needs. Attention should be paid to how learners hold their pencils (awkwardly? too tightly?) and their books (upside down?), how they move their eyes (Do the eyes move to follow words?), how quickly they write (Do they hesitate? take time? labor over each letter?), and how they interact in large and small groups (Do they offer to help each other? Are they comfortable in groups?).

Techniques for Working With Adults

Knowles and other educators maintain that adult education is most effective when it is "experience centered, related to learners' real needs, and directed by learners themselves" (Auerbach, 1992, p. 14). Bell and Burnaby (1984), Holt (1988), Holt and Gaer (1993), and Wrigley and Guth (1992) list techniques that involve beginning level learners as active participants in selecting topics, language, and materials.

1. Build on the experiences and language of learners. Invite them to discuss their experiences and provide activities that will allow them to generate language they have already developed.
2. Use learners as resources. Ask them to share their knowledge and expertise with others in the class.
3. Sequence activities in an order that moves from less challenging to more challenging, such as progressing from listening to speaking, reading, and writing skills. Move from language experience activities to picture-word connections to all-print exercises.
4. Build redundancy into curriculum content, providing repetition of topics. This will help overcome problems related to irregular attendance common in adult classes.
5. Combine enabling skills (visual discrimination of letters and words, auditory discrimination of sounds and words, spacing between letters and words, letter-sound correspondences, blending letters to sound out words, sight vocabulary) with language experience and whole language approaches.
6. Combine life-skill reading competencies (reading medicine labels, writing notes to the children's teachers, filling out forms) with phonics, word recognition, word order, spacing words in a sentence, reading words in context, and reading comprehension.
7. Use cooperative learning activities that encourage interaction by providing learners with situations in which they must negotiate language with partners or group members to complete a task (See Bell, 1988).
8. Include a variety of techniques to appeal to diverse learning styles. For example, merge holistic reading approaches such as language experience with discrete approaches such as phonics.

An Integrated Approach to Literacy Instruction

The language experience approach (LEA)—which uses learner experiences as lesson content—is a way to introduce multiple activities that appeal to learners' diverse backgrounds and preferred learning styles while offering instruction in language that is both comprehensible and interesting (Taylor, 1992). The following is an example of a modified LEA lesson that could be used with low-level learners.

1. A shared experience, such as a field trip, a common situation, or a meaningful picture is a stimulus for class discussion.
2. Learners volunteer sentences about the experience and the teacher writes the sentences on the chalkboard.
3. The teacher reads each sentence aloud, running her finger under words as each is pronounced, verifying that she has written what the student has said.
4. When the story is completed, the teacher reads it aloud.
5. Learners are encouraged to join in a second and third reading of the story.
6. A number of activities can follow at this point:
    - Learners copy the story;
    - Learners underline all the parts they can read;
    - Learners circle specific words (e.g., words that begin with a designated sound, common sight words such as *the*);
    - Choral cloze: The teacher erases some words, reads the story, and asks learners to supply the missing words;
    - Writing cloze: The teacher types the story, leaving out every fifth word. During the next class the teacher passes out the cloze and asks learners to fill in the missing words;
    - Scrambled sentences: The teacher types the story. During the next class the teacher distributes copies of the story to the class. Each learner cuts the story into strips so that there is one sentence on each strip of paper. Learners scramble the sentences and rearrange them in the proper sequence;
    - Scrambled words: More advanced learners can cut sentences into words, scramble the words, and rearrange them in order.

Selecting Appropriate Classroom Materials

Using concrete but age-appropriate materials with adult learners enhances instruction by providing a context for language and literacy development. A basic kit of materials might consist of the following objects, games, and materials.

1. Realia: clocks, food items, calendars, plastic fruits and vegetables, maps, household objects, real and play money, food containers, abacus, manual for learning to drive, and classroom objects;
2. Flash cards: pictures, words, and signs;
3. Pictures or photographs: personal, magazine, and others;
4. Tape recorder and cassette tapes, including music for imagery and relaxation;
5. Overhead projector, transparencies, and pens; video player and videos;
6. Pocket chart for numbers, letters, and pictures;
7. Alphabet sets;
8. Camera for language experience stories to create biographies and autobiographies;
9. Games such as bingo and concentration: commercial or teacher-made;
10. Colored index cards to teach word order in sentences, to show when speakers change in dialogue, to illustrate question/answer format, and to use as cues for a concentration game;
11. Cuisenaire rods to teach word order in sentences, to use as manipulatives in dyad activities, and to teach adjectives;
12. Colored chalk to teach word order, to differentiate between speakers in a dialogue, and to illustrate question and answer format;
13. Poster, butcher, and construction paper;
14. Felt-tipped pens, colored pencils, and crayons;
15. Scissors, glue, and masking tape; and
16. Children's literature: for learning techniques for reading or telling stories to children (See Smallwood, 1992, for ideas on using children's literature with adults.).

Conclusion

Providing instruction to adults acquiring ESL literacy is a challenge. When approaches, techniques, and materials are suitable for adults, are related to their real needs, and promote involvement in their own learning, there is a greater chance of success.

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