

A Taxonomy of Strategies for Adult Non-literate Learners

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Some Definitions

We are teaching a huge variety of students. Some may be able to communicate their needs orally but not read and write in English. Others may be a beginner in all skills. In order to better identify where to start and what approaches will work with students, we need to find out who our students are and what their history is with the written word.

Every student is going to have varying experiences and this affects the materials you select, your instructional focus, and the rate of your students' progress. Beginning literacy can be viewed as a continuum.

PRE-LITERATE: Students from an oral language tradition, native language is not written

NON-LITERATE: Non-literate students come from a culture with a written language, but they have had little or no exposure to literacy in their first or second language.

SEMI-LITERATE: Semi-literate students have some but minimal literacy in their own language. They may be very nervous and hesitant and lack confidence in their literacy skills.

NON-ROMAN ALPHABET LITERATE: Students are fluent in literacy in a language that does not use a Roman alphabet.

Some Differences

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 limited time for learning to read
Know they can learn	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 important and less important print	May accept all content as being of equal value

*From Brod

Strategies

#1 Needs Assessment

While we always want to develop curriculum around students' needs, finding out what they are for non-literate students is more challenging. Using photos/pictures of real places helps students express the places they may need to use English. Conducting some assessment of level is helpful in the classroom.

- 1 Can my students write their names in English?
- 2 Can my students identify any basic sight words or symbols from cards?
- 3 When pointing to letters of the alphabet, do my students have a concept of what sounds they make?
- 4 Can my students complete an English alphabet cloze exercise?
- 5 Can my students copy sentences in English?
- 6 Can my students read simple sentences in English?
- 7 Can my students write simple dictated sentences?
- 8 Can my students find a random page number in a book when told?
- 9 Can my students hold a pen, make shapes, know the place to start on the paper?
- 10 What are my students' educational backgrounds?

#2 Begin with Listening and Speaking

Students need to be able to express some personal information and simple needs in very short learned phrases or sentences before starting to read. Only ask students to read something they have spent time practicing orally.

#3 Start with Real Words

Use student-generated material as a basis to learn sight words. Student-generated material avoids issues of comprehension as the students have given you the oral text such as in the Language Experience Approach. Use teacher generated material to reinforce and practice the new sight words. Include important words students find in their environment or in forms/documents.

#4 Create a System to Record and Recycle new Sight Words

Create a literacy rich environment of words your students can read; use a sight word wall or a target letter chart. Develop a system for individual students to record their new words; record the words on a list or set of index cards for frequent review.

#5 Teach Word-attack Skills

Students need to learn the sounds that letters make so eventually they will be able to read words that are not sight words. Start with some consonants and short vowels. Build into word families (/a/, /n/ . /a/ +/n/= an, /c/+ an= can, /m/+ an= man, etc)

#6 Use a Combination of Top-down and Bottom-up Processing Strategies in Every Lesson

Students need to grasp whole chunks of written language through exposure to whole but simplified texts. In addition, students need help to sound out combinations of letters and sounds in words they encounter. Include both reading for meaning and work on sounds and letters in each lesson.

#7 Help students See Patterns in Language and Literacy

Our students are learning to read in a language that is not their best. Help students see patterns so they can chunk words together and use strategies such as predicting.

#8 Help students apply and notice literacy in the world around them

It is exciting to see the word 'the' on a real poster or recognize a word, letter or short phrase in a real document. Help students apply their learning and celebrate success.

#9 Teach study skills and spend time organizing paper work

Non-literate students have little experience organizing paper work. Number and date pages, color code important handouts and sort paper work regularly.

#10 Be intentional about planning literacy instruction and capitalize on 'found' literacy moments

Literacy students need regular exposure to literacy at their level. This needs to be planned especially if most other students are already literate. Also, opportunities arise in listening and speaking activities where students encounter a literacy moment. Instead of having non-literate students copy the dialogue from the board, allow the literate students to copy while you provide a copy for non-literate students and use it to do something more level appropriate. Circle sight words that are known, notice letters and letter combinations, match pictures to the words or have students shadow read with you.

Useful Resources

Books for classroom use

Lifeprints: ESL for Adults

Grognon, Allene and Crandall, Jodi, editors. New Readers Press. www.newreaderspress.com

Picture Stories: Language and Literacy Activities for Beginners

Ligon, Fred and Tannenbaum, Elizabeth. Addison-Wesley / Longman. www.aw-bc.com

Literacy Plus A and B

Saslow, Joan. Longman. www.longman.com

Personal Stories: Book 1 Koch, Kamla. Linmore Publishing. www.linmore.com

Sam and Pat: Beginning Reading and Writing. Hartel, Lowry and Hendon elt.thompson.com

Longman ESL Literacy – 2nd Edition Nishio, Yvonne Wong. Addison-Wesley / Longman. www.aw-bc.com

Teacher resources

- A Handbook for ESL Literacy, Bell, J and Burnaby, A
- *What Non-Readers and Beginning Readers Need to Know: Performance-based ESL Adult Literacy Brod, Shirley. Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning. www.spring-institute.org
- Making it Real: Teaching Adult Pre-literate Refugees. Croydon, Alysian. LiteracyNow.info

