

# Highlighting highlighters: A simple but effective ESL literacy teaching technique

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## Abstract

This Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) funded adult ESL Literacy Project of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board is in the midst of piloting a new delivery model of adult ESL Literacy instruction based on the 2016 *ESL for Adult Literacy Learners* (ESL for ALL) document. The Literacy Researcher guided four team members through intensive ESL Literacy training in the first year of the project. Now, these instructors are running specialized classes that target specific learning strategies ESL Literacy learners need in order to be successful participants in their classes, with PBLA and in their daily lives.

Our TESL Ontario Conference poster presented the learning strategy of highlighting specific information required to answer WH-questions. This article describes the process that the instructors went through in identifying the need for this strategy as well as the steps taken in teaching it. It underscores the importance for instructors to question their assumptions in order to address their learners' needs; in particular, explicitly walking ESL Literacy learners through a strategy that instructors may have assumed to be self-evident. These observations and methods can be used to teach a variety of learning strategies that can empower ESL Literacy learners and break through barriers caused by their literacy challenges, both in the ESL classroom and the real world.



## A New Approach to ESL Literacy Project - Background

In 2018, St. Charles Adult and Continuing Education Centre at Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board received grant funding from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) to research and develop alternative and innovative ESL Literacy programming.

This three-year project is based on the *ESL for ALL* document, published by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB). Our team of four instructors, working together with our ESL Literacy Project Researcher, explore best practices in ESL Literacy instruction, teacher training, and program delivery models. Our goal is to operationalize the guidelines given in the *ESL for ALL*, within the parameters of PBLA, to make ESL Literacy instruction more explicit with improved, tangible outcomes for learners, ESL instructors, and programs.

The project takes a multi-phased approach: In the initial phase, the four ESL Instructors were trained in targeted ESL Literacy instruction techniques. The ESL Literacy Researcher adapted and expanded the CCLB online *ESL for ALL* training course with supplementary face-to-face workshops to allow for an intensive engagement with the issues and challenges of ESL Literacy. We are currently in the second phase of the project; the now-trained instructors practice their newly gained ESL Literacy expertise in two separate instructional environments. The first model is dedicated ESL Literacy classes with learners from Pre-Foundation Literacy (PFL) to CLB 2 Literacy (CLB 2L). These classes contain 8-10 learners from 18-80+ years of age with a variety of cultural backgrounds. The other model is a weekly, one-hour one-on-one tutoring session. Literacy learners who participate in these sessions come from classes that are not dedicated Literacy. These learners have CLB 2L to 4L and are recommended for tutoring by their instructors.

The teaching experience of these seasoned ESL instructors ranges from 10 to 30 years. All of them have previously taught ESL Literacy learners. The ESL Literacy training they received through the project challenged them to re-think their traditional instructional practices and engage new ideas with open hearts and minds. Early on in the training phase, each had an epiphany, an *Aha! Moment*, and became acutely aware of how their past teaching practice often did not support ESL Literacy learners and learning. The instructors were also sometimes skeptical that suggested new techniques would work or were necessary. This combination of epiphany and skepticism led the team to realize that they had to push beyond their previous beliefs and expectations about ESL Literacy learners and instruction. As a result, they chose to adopt a motto, which has guided the project to this day: *Make no assumptions, leave nothing to chance*. The team continually reflect on their training in journals and at their weekly meetings. They ask themselves and each other two key questions: *Am I taking my instruction for granted? What is the missing piece to*



*the puzzle?* In effect, they ask themselves: *Do my assumptions interfere with my ability to address my learners' needs?* Defaulting to our motto helps the instructors identify and address their learners' needs in a pro-active and concrete way that cuts through confusion, dispels misconceptions, improves instruction, and moves ESL Literacy learners forward with dignity and effect.

Through the application of our motto, the team have become aware that literate learners, including themselves, can decode text by accessing simple strategies by rote, without explicit attention or thought. These strategies are often completely foreign to an ESL Literacy learner. The *ESL for ALL* states that ESL Literacy learners “may need explicit guidance [...] to locate specific features of text” (p. 112), but it is up to the instructor to operationalize exactly which strategy to teach and how to teach it. Such strategies need to be presented, modelled, and rehearsed with ESL Literacy learners through a variety of activities and are crucial to ESL Literacy learners' success. One such strategy is using highlighters. We have unpacked this seemingly simple and straight forward tool to operationalize it as an effective learning strategy, one that has empowered our ESL Literacy learners and provided them with a way forward that they can use in all their learning.

## Why We Need to Teach Highlighting

*ESL for ALL* presents the use of colour-coding and highlighting in a general way as effective ESL Literacy learning strategies. Teaching highlighter-use helps learners:

- Stay on task and focus on what is important
- Build their vocabulary
- Recognize language components, such as question words and instructions
- Decode text and recognize spelling patterns
- Understand forms and schedules
- Build reading comprehension and other strategic competencies like skimming and scanning

When the team started teaching after their training, they began to use this strategy consistently with their students. However, they soon had two *Aha! Moments*. The instructors initially assumed that the technique was self-evident and a simple demonstration would suffice. They quickly realized the extent to which their ESL Literacy learners had difficulty isolating the targeted information. Watching their learners struggle with the task, the instructors realized that guidance needed to be much more granular than they had assumed. The learners needed repeated, explicit step-by-step modelling and demonstration in *how*



to make connections between key words, *how* to focus in on the appropriate information. Second, the instructors discovered that many learners did not know how to *use* highlighters. Highlighters, familiar to literate writers, were unknown to our ESL Literacy learners. Some learners commented that they had seen peers in their other classes use them, but they did not know what they were or why to use them. We had assumed that the learners would know what highlighters are and this led to our second *Aha! Moment*: we had to teach how to manipulate highlighters.

Here we can see how fraught and confusing a classroom environment can be for ESL Literacy learners. In many ESL programs, these learners are combined in classes with literate learners. In addition, instructors are not trained in explicit ESL Literacy diagnosis and techniques. ESL Literacy learners can be lost in their class. Their instructor can be unaware of the nature of their confusion and consequently be unable to adequately address the problem. The project instructors understood, as a result of their training, that they needed to make no assumptions and leave nothing to chance about their learners. They came to understand that, for their ESL Literacy learners, the task of highlighting is itself daunting, and the tool needed to perform the task is unfamiliar. The instructors realized that their learners not only needed instruction on how to isolate targeted information with highlighters but also needed explicit instruction in how to actually use the highlighters themselves. This was a great opportunity to focus on a deceptively simple strategy that would help make ESL Literacy learners more independent and aware of their learning.

## Teaching the Strategy

For the poster, we chose as our example a 2L class where the instructor had observed that her learners were having difficulty answering WH-questions. The task was a Skill-Using activity with the Real-World Goal of reading an invitation to a party. During the oral run-through of the activity, the instructor saw that, in spite of her guidance, the learners were not able to connect *where* to location, *when* to time, etc. She took a step back from her instruction and remembered our motto: *Make no assumptions, leave nothing to chance*. She understood that she could not assume that her learners could easily isolate answers to WH-questions. Although she had slowed down her instruction and broken down the task of identifying the corresponding answer to the WH-question, her learners were still struggling. She thought the task was relatively straightforward and that she had been clear and explicit, but her learners' confused faces told her otherwise. She had an *Aha! Moment* and saw that her approach, which assumed her learners were easily able to identify the referent of the WH-question word, was not going to work in this situation. She needed to dig down and revisit the Skill-building phase of her lesson plan. Using her knowledge of the *ESL for All's* recommendations for the use of highlighting and colour-coding, she decided to use highlighters to help her ESL Literacy learners process visual information.



For a PBLA lesson, the learners each had a copy of an invitation to a housewarming party with a separate sheet of WH-questions. The instructor put a flip chart sheet on the board with the WH-question words: *WHAT? WHERE? WHEN?* She then highlighted each WH-question word in a different colour; for example, *WHAT?* in blue, *WHERE?* in red etc. She elicited the meaning of each WH-question word by asking the class to explain what they meant using the invitation. On the flip chart sheet, beside *WHAT?* she wrote: *Party* and highlighted the phrase in blue to show its connection to *WHAT?*. She did the same for the other two WH-question words. Next, she ensured everyone had the same three colours of highlighters. She asked them to pick up the highlighter whose colour corresponded to the WH-question word, *WHAT?*. On their worksheet, she had them highlight the *WHAT* question word in that colour. The instructor went through all WH-questions words in the same way. Each time she brought their attention back to the flip chart sheet on the board as an example of what to do. In this way, the learners could build the connection between two separate pieces of paper, worksheet, and invitation, and understand the purpose of the task. The instructor went slowly, only moving on to the next WH-question word when each learner had highlighted the correct answer. This seemingly simple task proved daunting for some learners and the instructor had to repeatedly model for them. When her learners understood the task, their *Aha! Moment* was palpable: they exclaimed with pleasure at the connections they had made and how the highlighters had helped them. They saw that the process of understanding how to complete the task was in itself a skill to be learned and one that advanced their reading skills.

It was at this point the instructor realized that many of her learners struggled to use the highlighters effectively. Some could not angle the nib to get a strong highlighting line and failed to put the cap back on securely. She had another *Aha! Moment*: She realized that she had assumed that her learners could effectively manipulate a highlighter. Remembering our motto, she interrupted her teaching to give a mini lesson on highlighters. It was illuminating to our instructor just how much time it took to teach the learners how to hold the highlighter at the correct angle. This ability of the instructor to reflect on her assumptions and adjust her teaching had the result of greatly reducing the students' frustration as well as her own.

As many ESL Literacy instructors can attest, their learners often lack basic tools such as pencils, erasers and notepads. However, excited by this new strategy and encouraged by their instructor, many learners took the initiative and went to purchase their own highlighters. Even when you think you have made no assumptions and have left nothing to chance, there is often an aspect you cannot foresee. Unfortunately, instead of buying highlighters, they bought white board or regular markers. The instructor realized yet another layer of assumptions she had to cut through: It was not enough for her to tell her learners that they could buy highlighters in a dollar store. She had to consider many possible scenarios and anticipate her



learners' potential difficulties. This is an example of washback, where the instructor realized she needed to revise her lesson plan and include teaching the difference between different kinds of markers.

By practicing this task together as a group, the instructor could ensure everyone had a chance to be successful. Some learners helped their peers with this strategy, which provided a benefit for both involved. Having the learners practice on their own created autonomy and ensured that this is a strategy they will use in different learning situations. With regards to the PBLA lesson, the learners were able to complete the party invitation activity using this new strategy. This successful skill-building exercise, which developed as a result of making no assumptions, contributed to the completion of the PBLA Assessment Task: all achieved success. The affective consequences of this learning strategy cannot be underestimated. The learners not only gained confidence and awareness of their learning, but they were also proud of themselves and really felt they had made immense progress in their learning. Indeed, one ESL Literacy learner brought his highlighters to his mainstream class. He demonstrated the technique to his classmates and proudly told his ESL Literacy instructor: "I used to ask others for help. Now students come to me".

## Another Highlighting Strategy

The team has since broadened the use of highlighters to a wide variety of activities. Understanding instructions, a key Real-World Competency, can be a challenge even in one's first language. How many of us have handed out a worksheet to learners who quickly proceed to complete it without reading the instructions? Albeit, in some cases, ESL literacy learners do not understand the purpose of the words and sentences above an exercise. In our project, before beginning any worksheet activity, Foundation Literacy (FL) learners have been taught to write their name and the date, highlight the instructions, and put their pencils down. The instructor then elicits the instructions from the learners. She does not ask them if they understand the instructions; she has them show her what they are to do. By using highlighters to focus their attention, the learners notice the purpose of the words: They are there to tell them what to do. This allows learners to proceed to the task from a place of understanding. This routine of highlighting instructions builds Textual Knowledge by helping ESL Literacy learners understand that there is a format and an order to reading a text (CLB 2012).

This strategy will benefit our ESL Literacy learners greatly outside school. They know how to seek out key words, locate references in a text, and understand format. They will be able to navigate doctor's appointments, visits to government offices, and any other place they need to go that has instructions on how to proceed, take a number, or present identification. Ultimately, this is our goal. We need to provide our learners not only with the language to navigate their new life but the strategies how to do so in a community that may be very different from the one they lived in before coming to Canada. There are endless possibilities



for the use of highlighting as a learning strategy: finding information on a graph or schedule, isolating prices on grocery store flyers, and understanding prescription or nutrition labels, to name a few.

## Conclusion

The activities that led to our poster presentation were significant for causing *Aha! Moments* for both our ESL Literacy Team and their learners. ESL Literacy learners can often operate in the dark without the baseline strategies and knowledge sets that literate learners can take for granted. We discovered that we cannot assume that ESL Literacy learners understand our instructional techniques however clear or slow we may think they are. We cannot assume that making the connections between words and their meanings (WH-question words or instructions) is a linear process for our ESL Literacy learners. It is not enough to ask, instruct, or even show these learners how to make connections; we must build the connections with them, through the explicit teaching of learning strategies, repeated modelling, and mindful exploration of our assumptions. Even a small detail like explicitly telling learners to snap the cap back on the highlighter tightly needs to be verbalized, modelled, and reminded. As a result of our focused use of highlighters, our learners have discovered that there are explicit strategies they can use to make sense of a text and feel empowered in their own learning. All four instructors have introduced this strategy to their mainstream classes. It has been surprising to see how many literate learners appreciate this strategy as a new tool in their learning.

To underscore the significance of our motto, and the importance of drilling down into a learning strategy such as highlighting, we would like to share some *Aha! Moments* from visitors to our Poster Presentation:

- *I never thought about the need to teach highlighting but it makes sense. I will try this with my class.*
- *Wow, I now realize there are many strategies I take for granted. I need to slow down my teaching.*
- *I am going to share this with the other Literacy instructors. What other strategies should we be teaching?*



## References

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### Author Bios



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