

# Quick tips for teaching literacy

---

By Zainab Almutawali, Canada

These tips and guidelines are meant for instructors and volunteers who are new to the field of literacy and intend to work with adult literacy learners. I have come up with these tips based on my experience with literacy students, other teachers' experiences and observations, and also my learners' feedback that I always consider when planning my lessons. This is based on experience teaching literacy students from diverse backgrounds and various levels of literacy.

## Background

Understanding the background of literacy learners and their needs is the first step to a fruitful learning experience. Many of our literacy learners are individuals who have never been to school before, have had limited education (one to two years of schooling) in their home countries, or quit school many years ago (received up to nine years of education). As a result, besides lacking any knowledge of the English language, they may also lack reading and writing skills and learning strategies in their first language, which leaves them with no transferable skills to refer to when learning the new language. Many of the learning strategies that we take for granted are not familiar to them and need to be taught alongside the language itself. Such skills may include: using pictures to make meanings, answering comprehension questions, matching words to pictures, filling out a form, unscrambling words, and even forming letters by writing on a line. Understanding the background of literacy learners and how they are different from mainstream learners helps both teachers and learners in many ways; for example, teachers set more realistic expectations and goals that learners are able to work up to, like the number of new vocabulary words introduced, taught and reviewed in a certain period of time. For learners, acknowledging their literacy background results in them becoming more patient and understanding of the time needed to show progress in English. Indeed, many of my learners realize that fact. They compare themselves to other students who went to school in their home countries and can learn English.



## Student attendance

Despite literacy students' limited education, they decide to come to school. Why? For many reasons, such as getting a job, communicating with their children's school, and becoming self-reliant in order to solve practical problems in everyday life. The lack of English skills, and especially reading skills, creates obstacles in these learners' daily lives. To encourage regular attendance, one good practice is to remind students of their objectives of attending English class. It motivates them to remember their ultimate goals and the better future they are working toward. Another useful exercise is to ask them if they use English in their daily life, and if so, when and where they use it. Sharing success stories helps learners realize how much progress they have made, which encourages them to continue learning English. It also informs educators of the context students need English for. I appreciate the fact that these adult learners attend class, and to show my appreciation, I try different ways to help them benefit from each hour they spend in class. Accomplishing something every day no matter how small, whether it is learning a couple of new words, being able to answer a question correctly, or reading a short text by themselves motivates students to continue attending class regularly because they see achievement happening immediately. On the other hand, if literacy learners are overwhelmed by too many new words and longer texts, they will feel helpless and that they are not making any progress, which discourages them from attending class the next day, especially if this happens many months after enrolling in the class.

## Best practices to help literacy learners acquire the language

### Understanding and accommodating students' individual needs

Literacy learners may seem to have similar language needs; most of the time, however, they come with various individual needs that should be considered when teaching a lesson. For example, one learner can have good writing skills but poor pronunciation skills. Another student can have decent oral skills but poor reading skills. A third one can have issues with short-term memory and needs a lot of repetition to retain the newly-learned language. Some health issues may keep another student away from class. A fifth student may have joined the class recently and needs an orientation. As a result, it is almost impossible to successfully teach everyone the same materials at the same pace. With this approach, only a small percentage of the class will be able to benefit from the lessons, and the rest may feel confused and discouraged and will eventually drop out.

On the other hand, if each student is given the attention and instruction needed, and if they get one-on-one support, then I believe that the learners will make remarkable progress in both their language skills and learning strategies. I feel that literacy learners should work at their own pace and should not be rushed



through activities or lessons. I like to remind my fellow instructors that literacy classes equip learners with language skills that will prepare them to successfully join mainstream English classes. Therefore, that should be kept in mind when deciding on the amount of vocabulary and information introduced, language of instruction used, and handouts provided. The method of teaching and the materials used should be accommodated to suit literacy learners' abilities. Literacy instructors should definitely not use complex language for instruction or materials with their literacy students. For instance, educators can use simple sentences, slow speech, visuals, and modified materials.

To ensure that each student's needs are met, it is recommended that the teacher get help in the class from teaching assistants or volunteers. Here are some of the advantages of students working at their own pace and benefitting from one-on-one supervision.

- Educators can ensure that each learner acquires the newly-learned vocabulary because the teacher can teach and assess students one at a time.
- Students are better able to practice reading since other students in the class are busy doing other work and therefore they will not take the turn of slow readers.
- Students feel confident because the teacher is watching them doing the task. I have often noticed that the students prefer to have the teacher observe them while completing a worksheet or answering questions because at this level they are not confident in their knowledge and skills, for the simple fact that they are doing these tasks for the first time. If the teacher is not available though, learners tend to copy from a partner. One-on-one support is essential at this level until learners become confident and more certain of their capabilities. It takes quite some effort and time from the teacher until the learners become confident in their skills, but it is rewarding eventually. Once the students are familiar with completing tasks and worksheets, they will be less dependent on the teacher and will require less one-on-one attention.
- Working at their own pace allows the students to improve certain skills that they may lack that others in the class have. For example: spacing out words evenly in a sentence, positioning letters properly on the line, reading fluently, and improving pronunciation.
- Also, having close supervision enables the teacher to learn how much each student has learned from a lesson, whether the material is level-appropriate and interesting for the learner or what gaps the learner needs to fill in their language skills. Feedback from learners at this level is helpful to assess if topics are not relevant to their daily life, if the vocabulary and information introduced is excessive, and if the language of instruction is overwhelming.

## Repetition

I cannot stress enough how important repetition is at this level. To begin with, new language learners need to encounter newly-learned vocabulary seven times at intervals to retain the new vocabulary. For our literacy students, their lack of educational background and other factors like age, stress, and family commitments result in retention becoming more challenging. I find that it takes about two weeks to teach a topic which means that we go over the same vocabulary for about 10 days. By the end of the second week, the students have retained the key vocabulary and are able to read, write, and use them in speech. For



instance, when teaching about family relations, choose no more than 10 family relations vocabulary terms and design numerous activities and tasks around these words, such as: matching words to pictures, copying words under pictures, spelling words, unscrambling words, solving puzzle problems, playing bingo games, doing class survey about family, talking about family pictures, practicing writing names and ages of family members, filling out forms with family information, reading family ID cards, reading family trees, talking about own family, drawing own family tree, listening to and retelling a picture story about a family's daily routine, and writing short sentences about family. My students appreciate repetition because it allows them to see their progress. When starting a new theme, the teacher can recycle the activities used in the previous topic, such as surveying, filling out forms, matching, sorting, storytelling, and so on. This saves time and reduces the teacher's need to reinvent the wheel with each new theme.

### **Start from prior knowledge**

Instructors need to always build on students' prior knowledge to help advance their lessons. Introducing new concepts that don't relate to students' lives will easily confuse literacy learners and add to their confusion of the language itself. Teachers have to be careful when introducing abstract ideas and new concepts because students might not have had experienced these in their home countries. These may include food sections in a grocery store, food groups, credit cards, bank accounts, and so on. Related to this point are the materials and worksheets used. The vocabulary in the worksheets should not be totally new for the students. The students should be familiar with most of the vocabulary in spoken form. New vocabulary should be introduced gradually and in small doses to ensure retention.

### **Similar Ideas**

Avoid introducing two similar ideas at the same time because students can easily get confused, for example, introducing cardinal numbers and ordinal numbers, or introducing food sections in a grocery store and food groups.

### **Addressing challenges and issues**

Address any issues or challenges when they come up and do not let them accumulate. There might be something that hinders student learning, such as family problems, vision issues, difficult class materials, or pressure from peers. It is important that learners are open and share their feelings about learning and coming to class. It helps the teacher better guide the students, and it helps the students understand their challenges. It also builds a trust relationship between the teacher and the learner.



## Amount of new information

Due to their lack of educational background, words and script do not carry any meaning for illiterate individuals because they have not had to read or decode language in written form their entire lives. Presenting loads of vocabulary and information and handing out many worksheets will overwhelm them. We need to start with a minimum number of vocabulary items, most of which are familiar to our learners in verbal/spoken form.

## PBLA

### Needs assessment

- When a student first arrives in the class, we should assess their needs by asking them the following questions.
- Have you ever been to school before? How many years?
- Have you ever studied English before? What did you learn? Do you know the letters of the alphabet?
- Can you read or write in your first language?
- Why do you want to learn English?
- When and where do you use English in your daily life?
- What topics do you want to learn about? (I show them pictures of 12 themes to choose from).

### Class expectations

Then, I give students some idea as to what to expect from my class. I explain to them that:

- In this class, we learn about different themes and topics that will help them integrate into Canadian society. We practice four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, even if their main goal is to improve their listening and speaking skills, they should expect to do reading and writing activities, as well.
- It is very important to be able to complete tasks independently. While it is okay to ask for help from their classmates, at some point during the session, they are expected to transition from using help from teachers/volunteers/peers to completing assignments and tasks independently. They will be constantly observed and assessed based on their ability to complete worksheets with minimum help.
- Attendance and participation are required to fully benefit from the English classes and to show progress in their English skills. Absences are allowed only for legitimate reasons.
- They will be assessed based on their daily attendance, class participation, ability to follow classroom instructions and complete work independently, as well as assessments that are given throughout the session.

In conclusion, although working with literacy learners can be challenging, it is a rewarding experience and one that is unforgettable. To reach that end, as instructors, we need to understand students' needs and capabilities and use level appropriate materials and assessments in order for our learners to make progress

in their language acquisition. Following these guidelines has made my classes enjoyable. No matter how long the day is my students and I always look forward to our next learning experience.



### Author Bio

---

My name is Zainab Almutawali. I have been working in the field of LINC and ESL teaching since 2010. The level of literacy intrigues me because of its uniqueness, unpredictability, and constant demand for creativity. When I am not working, I like to spend time with my family, hike in the woods, or make healthy snacks.

