

Working with Limited Literacy Learners

ANOTHER CHALLENGING SITUATION is working with learners who have limited literacy in English and/or their native languages. Often EL learners whose literacy is limited in their first language and who also speak little or no English make slow progress in class, much slower than those who have higher native language literacy. However, if the teacher is patient and he/she has a good set of tools, this problem can be mitigated. The ability that the learner gains in navigating his or her day-to-day life can be more than enough reward for both the learner and the teacher.

The teacher may encounter learners with all levels of literacy issues, from those who merely don't know the English alphabet, to those who are not literate in their native language. (See Cunningham-Florez & Terrill, 2003 for a more specific list of the different levels of illiteracy.) For each level, it will be important to break the teaching down into increasingly smaller steps. Those learners who are not literate in their native language are likely to provide the greatest challenge. Since they are probably not educated in their first language, they will need to work to achieve even basic literacy skills. Studies have shown that it is often more effective to teach pre-literate learners to read in their native languages before teaching them English literacy skills. However, given limited program resources, such an approach is not always practical.

According to Cunningham-Florez & Terrill (2003):

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... Preliterate learners may find two-dimensional graphic literacy-letters, maps, graphs, charts, even pictures-difficult to interpret ...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.

It will probably be necessary to do some activities such as using flashcards to help the learners understand which letters represent which sounds; mechanical practice of copying letters; and possibly even teaching the learner how to hold a pencil or pen. There may be a temptation to only engage in these low-level activities. However, such a practice might not be satisfactory to either the instructor or the student in the long run. It is important to balance basic literacy skills with

global comprehension skills and authentic practice, such as recognizing common types of written documents (forms, letters, signs, etc.), and even “whole-language”-type approaches, where the instructor helps the students to transcribe texts based on their own experiences (Peyton & Crandall, 1995). To this end, it is important to incorporate authentic materials as early as possible, even if it is as simple as giving the learner a postmarked letter and asking them to point out specific letters on the front (Burt, Peyton & Adams, 2003).

Please remember that, though your learner may have limited or no literacy skills, he or she is not a child and is facing common adult concerns of daily survival. Therefore, everything that has been said earlier about working with the adult learner is even truer in working with this group. A balance must be struck between the long-term goal of teaching the learner to read and his/her more immediate survival needs in a literate society.

FURTHER READING

Online

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