

Learning for LIFE

An ESL Literacy Handbook



Building a Classroom
of Excellence

Support Document

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BUILDING A CLASSROOM OF EXCELLENCE: PROMISING PRACTICES

Promising practices in ESL literacy are based on what the research supports, what works for instructors, and most importantly, what proves to be effective for ESL literacy learners. Bow Valley College has identified six key characteristics of a classroom of excellence in *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook*.

LIFE: Learners with Interrupted Formal Education

The term LIFE is used for any ESL learner with literacy needs. LIFE have had between zero and ten years of formal education, often interrupted by war, political unrest, famine, displacement, or poverty. For some learners, this education is interrupted before they even begin.

These promising practices are recommendations to instructors, program coordinators and all other stakeholders in ESL literacy.

Learning must be Learner-Centred, Meaning-Based, and Linked to Community

A classroom of excellence is learner-centred and connects learning to the day-to-day life of the learner. Although LIFE (Learners with Interrupted Formal Education) generally have limited experiences in the classroom, they have a wealth of knowledge and survival skills. As one researcher writes, “Teachers need to provide instruction that acknowledges and addresses these strengths and needs, engages learners in challenging and relevant topics, and provides them with the tools they can use to meet their responsibilities and goals” (Florez, 2003). Connecting literacy to the learners’ lives and experiences is paramount to effective literacy delivery (Wrigley, 1993). Instead of progressing from the alphabet to syllables to words and finally to sentences, a classroom of excellence introduces print in meaningful ways right from the first day.

Using authentic material found in the learners’ lives is one way of making literacy meaningful. The use of realia instead of simple line drawings helps make the connection for the learners. They can see, touch, and manipulate the object, thus invoking multiple learning strategies. Jangles Productions (2006) states that literacy learners need to manipulate physical items such as coins for counting and flashcards for matching. Wrigley (1993) strongly advocates the use of authentic material, such as flyers, photographs, and magazines, in order to connect learning to the real world.

Another way to make learning meaningful is to go outside the classroom and into the community on field trips and walks. Experiential learning and field trips are important for ESL literacy learners. Learner stories are another important way to reach LIFE. The use of personal stories emerging from classroom activities is identified as a promising practice by Jangles

Productions (2006). A survey respondent reported, "We do everything we can to help our students learn. We go on local field trips and follow a hands-on approach."

A classroom of excellence connects the classroom to the real world, through the use of authentic materials, realia, field trips, and learner stories. When teaching LIFE, it is important to think outside the box to try to connect the learning with the learners' prior learning and the real world (Folinsbee, 2007).

Learning is Repeated and Recycled

A classroom of excellence recycles the material and concepts each day and over time, thus enabling the learners to fully incorporate this new knowledge and make it their own. LIFE, especially those at Foundation Phase and Phase I, have fewer resources to enable them to learn independently. In addition, they need repeated exposure to learning strategies. The Ontario Literacy Coalition (2007, p. 64) states that, because of the learners' slow acquisition rate, the same lesson needs to be re-taught in a multitude of different ways. The ongoing challenge for the instructor is to come up with different ways to present the same concepts and the same materials without the class becoming mundane and boring. One survey respondent talked about teaching in tiny, baby steps, recycling materials every day.

Holt (1995) suggests designing redundancy into the curriculum. This allows LIFE to encounter the materials multiple times. Andrews (2004) emphasizes the importance of repetition by stating that the instructor is the learners' textbook and study guide as well as their teacher. Since learners cannot review on their own, the instructor must repeat and recycle language and outcomes.

There is a Large Dedicated Classroom for Each ESL Literacy Class

A classroom of excellence is a space dedicated solely to the teaching of ESL literacy, especially at Foundation Phase and Phase I where the learners simply need more room. Because of the nature of ESL literacy, Jangles Productions (2007) recommends large rooms which are not shared spaces. The report further recommends that the room have plenty of wall space in order to create a print-rich environment and have non-fixed seating so that it can be changed to suit the activity. Because of the high concentration of manipulatives and realia needed in teaching Foundation and Phase I literacy, these classrooms need to have enough space to keep it all organized. A bigger room allows for a special area for a listening centre so that learners have the time and guidance to learn to use technology, such as a CD player. A big room also allows the lower level ESL literacy learners to get out of their chairs and do clapping or movement games.

Class Size is Limited

The literature and the survey are unified in their quest for small classroom numbers for LIFE. One source argues that “such learners require an individualized approach that makes great demands on teacher time and effort inside the class...” and thus recommends a class size of ten learners (McPherson, 2007, p. 4). Jangles Productions (2006) concurs with this recommendation. Bow Valley College finds that ESL literacy instruction is most effective in smaller groups with individualized instruction (2002c). A classroom of excellence needs to be small enough to address the demands of these learners who have limited ability to work independently; large numbers render this impossible.

There is Specific Oral and Vocabulary Development

Intuitively, one might think that the sole focus of an ESL literacy class should be reading and writing. However, it is clear that learners also improve their reading skills through their continued oral development. Because LIFE are oral learners, it is important that they have oral control over the material before it is introduced in writing. In order to comprehend a reading, the learner’s oral proficiency has to be at an equal level to the text the learner is expected to read (Holisky, 1985). In a classroom of excellence, the instructor continues to develop learners’ oral skills using a variety of methods. Learning is done first in the oral before it moves to the written.

LIFE, like all second language learners, have much smaller vocabularies than native speakers. Repeated exposure to new vocabulary assists in retention, so it is imperative that the instructor recycle this vocabulary through explaining, repeating, drawing, and rephrasing it throughout all aspects of instruction (Indiana Department of Education, n.d., p. 7). This will provide the learners with many opportunities to hear, say, read, and write the new vocabulary in different meaningful contexts.

Singing and chanting are also effective ways to improve fluency and increase oral development. Several respondents from the survey discussed their use of song, rhymes, and drama in the classroom to increase oral development. The literature supports this approach: “Learners from highly oral cultures have a set of well-developed strategies for oral learning, so allowing opportunities for clapping, memorization, chanting, story-telling, and repetition will aid in their learning” (Achren & Williams, 2006).

There is a Focus on Strategies for Reading, Writing, and Learning

In a classroom of excellence, the instructor explicitly teaches strategies for reading, writing, and learning, and spirals them throughout the learning. The strategies vary according to where LIFE are on the literacy continuum, but all classrooms of excellence use the appropriate strategies consciously and continuously, modelling them time and time again until they become habit for the learner. Strategies can range from something as simple as asking the instructor for help when needed to word-attack strategies to brainstorming ideas before writing. Leong and Collins of Bow Valley College argue that “teaching students to use strategies helps them become more effective language users and learners...many learners, especially literacy learners, need help to break down the processes of reading, writing, learning language, and taking tests. Teaching learners to use specific strategies helps them become more successful in each of these areas” (2007, p. 125). Strategies give learners the tools to read, write, and learn effectively.

CLASSROOM OF EXCELLENCE CHECKLIST

ESL literacy classrooms of excellence demonstrate several promising practices. These promising practices are supported by research and experience in effective adult ESL literacy instruction.

The promising practices identified in this checklist are recommendations to instructors, program coordinators, and all other stakeholders in ESL literacy.

The purpose of this checklist is to help instructors and program providers:

- reflect on instructional practices
- reflect on the conditions recommended for effective ESL literacy instruction
- identify areas of strength and areas for improvement, and to be concrete about these areas
- identify strategies for growth, improvement or change in ESL literacy classrooms, in order to align with the promising practices

As you work through the Classroom of Excellence checklist, keep in mind that these are descriptions of an ideal; most instructors and program providers need to find a balance between the ideal and the realistic. If your program does not have the resources to adopt all of these practices on a large scale, use this tool to identify ways that you (as an instructor or program provider) can move towards them. Set achievable and realistic goals for change in your ESL literacy classrooms.

Classroom of Excellence Checklist

In my class, do I...	Yes	No	Details	Strategy for improvement
...provide instruction that is learner-centred, meaning-based, and linked to community?				
...ensure that learning is repeated and recycled?				
... ensure that there is specific oral and vocabulary development?				
... ensure a focus on strategies for reading, writing and learning?				

Do our classes...	Yes	No	Details	Strategy for improvement
...take place in a large, dedicated ESL literacy classrooms?				
... have limited class sizes?				

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