

Learning for LIFE

An ESL Literacy Handbook



Building a Program
of Excellence

Support Document

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BUILDING A PROGRAM 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 eight key characteristics of a program 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:

ESL Literacy is Recognized as a Distinct Stream of Classes, Separate from Mainstream ESL and from Mainstream Literacy

Because LIFE progress at different rates and have distinct learning needs from mainstream ESL learners, they require a separate stream of classes. Many current programs often offer only a single ESL literacy class, where learners at all ends of the literacy continuum are placed, before they are put into a mainstream CLB 1 or 2 class, regardless of their oral ability. The other common option is to place LIFE into mainstream classes comprised of both academic learners and literacy learners, with no focus on literacy development. Neither of these situations meets the needs of the learners.

A program of excellence, instead, has a designated literacy stream which is formally recognized as a legitimate route to learning English as advocated by Jangles Productions (2006). It has a parallel and concurrent structure to mainstream ESL, and LIFE, having completed the ESL literacy stream, move into mainstream ESL (among other options) at a level appropriate to their new literacy and oral abilities. In a program of excellence, ESL literacy is not seen as a “pre-benchmark” step before learners enter CLB 1. In this way, learners can successfully continue their educational journey instead of being parachuted, after a single literacy class, into mainstream ESL CLB 1 or CLB 2 classes, where their oral skills are too high and their writing is too low for them to function.

Having a separate stream is also much more effective than placing LIFE into Adult Basic Education classes before they have had time to develop literacy and language together. One

participant in the survey says that rather than having all learners in the same class, “What teachers and learners need is a class dedicated to functioning listening/speaking who have no reading/writing skills, and another class for true pre-benchmark LINC learners who have adequate education and literacy skills in their first language.” Having a distinct ESL literacy stream allows LIFE to progress through classes where their specific learning needs are addressed, thus facilitating their educational journey rather than allowing them to slip through the cracks in the mainstream.

Many programs contacted are moving towards this vision of a literacy stream and away from placing all literacy learners into an either a CLB 1 class where their oral skills are too high and their written skills are too low, or into an Adult Basic Education program, where they lack language and vocabulary development. Not all programs have the resources, funding, or numbers of learners to provide a full separate stream for ESL literacy, however, but it is still possible to follow this promising practice. Smaller programs are encouraged to create at least one class for ESL literacy learners and to recognize that this class may be a multi-level class. Although not ideal, a multi-level class can be effective and rewarding for both the instructor and the learners. Another alternative is for several smaller programs to pool resources and learners and work together to create an effective stream for ESL literacy.

The ESL Literacy Stream is Comprised of a Series of Classes Progressing in Small Increments Along the Literacy Continuum

Ideally, a program of excellence is comprised of a series of ESL literacy classes, progressing in small measurable increments. Each class builds on the skills developed in the previous class, rather than having single multiple-level classes which do little to address the diverse needs of the learners. Learning to read and write for the first time is a slow journey and, without the right measurement tools, progress may seem non-existent. As some theorists argue, placing all LIFE into a multi-level ESL literacy classroom containing learners everywhere along the literacy continuum does little to meet their varying needs (Jangles Productions, 2006; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007).

This is not to say that multi-level classes are necessarily ineffective; there are challenges associated with teaching in a multi-level setting, but they can still be a productive learning environment for the students. Programs that do not have the numbers of learners or the resources required to support a series of ESL literacy classes may choose to have one ESL literacy class. While truly multi-level classes, including learners from Foundation Phase to Phase III, for example, are far from ideal, they can still work if the instructor recognizes the multi-level nature of the class and meets each learner where he or she is. Instructors in multi-level classes are encouraged to follow the same promising practice; recognize the distinct level of each

learner, recognize the length of time it takes to progress from one level to another, and celebrate small – and all – successes.

Ideally, where there are resources to support it, there needs to be a series of literacy classes which progress in small increments. Using the CLB Literacy Document as a model, classes in this kind of program are formed for each of the Phases or, better yet, the stages within the Phases.

This means that there is a Foundation Phase class, a Phase I Initial class, a Phase I Developing class, and so on. LIFE progress through the distinct classes for each Phase or stage. They acquire the necessary skills and strategies before moving into the next class, where they encounter more advanced skills and strategies. Progress is readily measured and tracked.

This model requires assessment to evaluate and accurately place each learner; it also requires assessment to move learners from one level to another. There are a number of assessments available. The CLB literacy placement tool is one assessment for placing learners in levels; it extends from Foundation Phase to Phase II. At this point, there is no CLB assessment tool for Phase III. Other placement assessments can also be used. In order to determine when learners are ready to move to the next level, assessments based on outcomes, such as portfolios or outcomes checklists, can be used.

Although progress might not always follow a precise path, where learners advance to the next level each term, progress is still measurable and evident for the learner, the instructor, and the funder. Because it takes a long time to develop literacy and because each Phase encompasses so many strategies and skills, more so than a single CLB, LIFE may need to repeat some classes. This should not be seen as failure by the student, the instructor, or the funder, but rather as an inevitable part of acquiring English and literacy skills.

Several organizations contacted through our research offer three, four, and sometimes even five or six literacy classes divided according to either the CLB Literacy Document or another system of literacy development. Those contacted supported the model of having multiple classes that progress through small increments of the CLB Literacy Document.

The ESL Literacy Program Offers Higher-Level ESL Literacy Classes

While it is readily apparent when lower-level ESL learners are in need of specialized literacy classes, it is often less clear when dealing with more advanced LIFE, particularly those in Phase III. These learners have higher literacy skills and often have higher oral skills, and so are most likely to be overlooked and misplaced in the mainstream. If placed in mainstream CLB 4 or 5 classes, LIFE tend to be left behind. Although they have good oral skills and may be able to write adequate sentences, they lack the literacy skills needed to cope with the textual demands

of an academic class. They are competent enough with word-level skills, such as spelling and decoding; however, they lack the text-level skills needed to thrive (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). Their reading comprehension and writing skills are much lower than the average mainstream ESL class requires; thus, they have little chance for success. A respondent from the survey described the learners as having “difficulty with vocabulary, seeing relationships, drawing conclusions, summarizing, sequencing, and visualizing...”

These advanced LIFE still require the scaffolding and explicit strategy instruction found in an ESL literacy class. As well, they lack the word attack skills needed to tackle increasingly demanding readings. When placed in a mainstream ESL classroom, LIFE fail to thrive. Because Phase III encompasses such a breadth of skills and strategies, one survey respondent’s organization has recently divided Phase III into two levels. This way, the class outcomes are more attainable for the learner. Another survey respondent, recognizing the importance of providing advanced ESL literacy classes, stated that they were “hoping to get funding for a third literacy class to accommodate clients at Phases II and III. This is a vital literacy class that is missing...”

A program of excellence recognizes that advanced ESL literacy learners are still in need of literacy support and offers literacy classes up to the end of Phase III. In this way, LIFE continue building up their pool of strategies for inference, identifying main ideas, summarizing, and writing in an ESL literacy-supported environment.

The Program Provides Professional Development Opportunities for Instructors

Many ESL literacy instructors are self-taught and pick up the necessary skills through a kind of “trial by fire.” The Centre for Literacy (2008) reports that many instructors feel they have neither the skills nor qualifications for teaching ESL literacy, even though they are certified ESL instructors: “Receiving ESL certification does not mean that an instructor has had any literacy training” (p. 4). When speaking with several ESL literacy instructors, a common theme of isolation emerged. ESL literacy instructors need more literacy training and opportunities to engage in professional development with other ESL literacy instructors. Many identified the need for more networking with other ESL literacy instructors to share ideas, support each other, and provide mentorship to new instructors in this area. The literature notes the need for both professional development and mentorship (Jangles Productions, 2006; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; Folinsbee, 2007). One survey respondent noted that “Professional development opportunities that focus on ESL literacy are rare...employees must create their own professional development activities through individual reading and research and networking with other ESL literacy instructors where possible.”

A program of excellence provides training specific to ESL literacy to all instructors in the literacy stream, including those that substitute teach in the program. This training is given to both experienced and inexperienced ESL instructors who are working with LIFE, so that anyone working with this group is trained in ESL literacy.

In addition to general ESL literacy training, a program of excellence provides regular professional development on topics specific to ESL literacy and a forum for engaging in dialogue with other ESL literacy workers. One survey respondent mentioned that she regularly team-teaches in the literacy classes, thus alleviating some of the feelings of isolation. Another mentioned that the ESL literacy instructors get a half day each month for professional development, and this is a time to share the joys and frustrations of teaching this level. As researchers point out, “A healthy, vibrant community would certainly lead to greater exchanges of information, providing some much-needed support to instructors” (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007).

A program of excellence also recognizes the importance of instructor retention and strives to have committed instructors. Since it takes a specialized set of skills and characteristics to become a competent ESL literacy instructor – a different skill set than the one needed to teach mainstream ESL – a successful program has measures in place to retain these instructors. Having consistent instructors helps create stability and security for learners in their literacy journey (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007, p. 73). Instead of placing the inexperienced or those lacking seniority into the ESL literacy classroom, a program of excellence places instructors highly trained in ESL literacy into these demanding classrooms.

Instructors are Allotted Time to Make Materials

There is a lack of commercially produced materials available for ESL literacy, especially ones with Canadian content. The materials that do exist often need to be modified for the specific needs of a particular set of LIFE. “As a result, ESL literacy classroom materials tend to be teacher-produced since these must be related directly to the learners’ skills, interests and personal surroundings” (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007, p. 28). These same materials need to be recreated into several different worksheets, with small variations, so that the learners have opportunities to do the same things many times. The Ontario Literacy Coalition argues, “The volume of material that is required to teach at this level is great” (2007, p. 64). Thus, ESL literacy instructors spend a great deal of time modifying and creating materials for the classroom.

This need to create materials places an increased workload on these instructors. A program of excellence recognizes that additional preparation time is needed for ESL literacy instructors and builds this time into the program. This can be done in a variety of ways so long as there is specific time to accommodate material creation. In some programs, the instructors get a

slightly shorter teaching day or are relieved of an administrative duty in order to build in material-creation time. Participants from the survey repeatedly talked about the need to create materials, many unique to the specific class they were teaching.

There is a Program into Which Learners Can Transition

At the end of the ESL literacy program, learners not directly entering the workforce need somewhere to go. One clear promising practice in ESL literacy is to create options and pathways for LIFE once they have completed ESL literacy programming. These options can include mainstream ESL, mainstream ABE, work-readiness programs, employment, or other forms of further education. At least three organizations in Alberta offer special ESL literacy classes targeted specifically at young adults with interrupted formal education who have gaps in their literacy learning. These learners, who have been exposed to academic skills and technology during their ESL literacy classes, will likely transition into Adult Basic Education programs.

A program of excellence needs to have somewhere for learners to transition into. According to the CLB Literacy Document, at the end of Phase III, those learners with high oral skills may be ready to learn in an Adult Basic Education program, while others with oral skills on par with their literacy skills might be best served by transitioning into a mainstream ESL class. The CCLB roughly equates successful completion of Phase III with CLB 5. However, it should be noted that many further education programs require higher benchmarks for entry. There is a clear need for development in this area.

There is a Numeracy Component in the Instruction

Many LIFE are lacking even the most rudimentary numeracy skills. Since numeracy is as essential to survival as reading and writing, a program of excellence needs to offer a numeracy component within its program. In this numeracy program, it is important to teach both the language of math as well as the concepts. According to research, "In programs for adults learning English as a second language, both the mathematical skills and the language for these skills need to be integrated into the curriculum in order to prepare the learners to be successful." (Ciancone, 1996).

The CLB Literacy Document divides numeracy skills into three Phases and provides outcomes for each Phase. Since learners' numeracy skills may be quite different from their literacy skills, one possible model is to offer separate numeracy classes so that learners can be placed in the appropriate numeracy class. Bow Valley College adheres to this model within its full-time ESL literacy programs. Twice each week, learners leave their literacy classes and go to numeracy

classes based on their numeracy abilities for a 45-minute session. In this way, Bow Valley College adheres to the practice of placing all literacy learners in a class with others of similar abilities, numeracy included.

There is Support for the Program and for the Learners

To create and maintain an ESL literacy program of excellence, stable program funding must be in place. Such a program needs full administrative support in order to ensure its success. There must be dedicated funding to maintain specialized ESL literacy instructors, to provide them with appropriate professional development, and to have designated literacy classrooms with low instructor/learner ratios. There must also be a budget for appropriate resources and materials to address the complex needs of these learners.

In addition, there must be dedicated support available to the learner. LIFE need help with an array of day-to-day tasks such as accessing subsidies, filling out funding applications, and finding daycare. They also need guidance for transitioning into other programs or work. A respondent of the survey described the situation by saying “The learners come to school with a variety of issues that make learning difficult for them: trauma, financial hardship...family issues in their country of origin, childcare responsibilities...” Jangles Productions (2006) echoes these findings, citing childcare and transportation funding as barriers to attending classes. Some survey respondents told of various support services that come into the classroom, such as social workers and other community support workers. More than one program offers childcare on-site, some offering a literacy component for the children as well.

Another type of support often mentioned in the literature is access to first language support. Using native language for clarification of instructions is particularly useful to ESL literacy learners (Condelli & Wrigley, 2005; Achren & Williams, 2006). This way, LIFE can concentrate on the literacy task rather than trying to figure out what is wanted of them. First language support can take a number of forms, from direct bilingual instruction, where the instructor is bilingual and all the learners in the class speak the same first language, to a variety of ways, including translation, explanation, or even the development of first language literacy.

Survey respondents have various ways of addressing first language support. One respondent spoke of having a person come in twice a week to translate important concepts and announcements. Several other survey respondents worked in programs with a philosophy of first language instruction. The learners from these programs all come from one language group, however, and this model is challenging to follow in classrooms that are more diverse. Current Canadian immigration patterns and policies on refugees mean that most Canadian ESL literacy classes have learners from many countries, speaking many different languages. Still, it is possible to provide first language support in even the most diverse classrooms. One Bow

Valley College program utilizes an internal model of student mentorship where high level ESL learners volunteer for 45 minutes twice per week in the Foundation Phase and Phase I classrooms. Mainstream ESL learners and even high-level ESL literacy learners are paired up with LIFE who speak the same first language to clarify instructions and announcements. It is a successful endeavour, providing bilingual support for the literacy learners as well as volunteer opportunities for the student mentors.

A program of excellence offers various kinds of support, including funding for the program and learners, counseling support for the learners, and access to bilingual translators. Having these supports in place better enables LIFE to concentrate on their learn

BUILDING A PROGRAM OF EXCELLENCE: CHECKLIST

ESL literacy programs 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 program providers:

- reflect on their program as a whole
- identify areas of strength and areas for improvement, and to be concrete about these areas
- identify strategies for growth, improvement or change in their program, in order to align with the promising practices

As you work through the Program of Excellence Checklist, keep in mind that these are descriptions of an ideal; most programs 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 your program can move towards them. Set achievable and realistic goals for change in your program.

Program of Excellence Checklist				
Does our program...	Yes	No	Details	Strategy for improvement
...recognize ESL literacy as a distinct stream of classes, separate from mainstream ESL and mainstream literacy?				
...comprise a series of classes progressing in small increments along the literacy continuum?				
...offer higher-level ESL literacy classes? (e.g. Phases II and III)				
...provide professional development opportunities for instructors?				

Does our program...	Yes	No	Details	Strategy for improvement
...allot time for instructors to make materials?				
...transition learners into another program?				
... include a numeracy component?				
...have support in place for the program and the learners?				

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