

# Learning for LIFE

An ESL Literacy Handbook



Guiding Principles for  
Teaching ESL Literacy  
Learners

*Support Document*

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING ESL LITERACY LEARNERS

Here are twelve guiding principles for working with ESL literacy learners. The strategies reflect the diversity of this group and ensure that LIFE (Learners with Interrupted Formal Education) learn in an environment that encourages them to succeed.

### ***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.*

### **View learners holistically**

- Respect learners' past life experiences and their roles as adults.
- Understand the challenges learners face in adapting to life in a new country.
- Make the classroom a positive place where learners feel comfortable and confident.
- Understand that learners have lives outside of the classroom and may have barriers to learning.
- Create a safe and supportive learning environment where learners feel comfortable to ask questions, take risks, interact with classmates and express their needs and goals.

### **View learning as a social activity**

Learners come to the classroom with a wide variety of educational and life experiences. They have an enormous amount that they can teach each other.

- Encourage partner and group work.
- Invite local community groups to visit the class.
- Send learners into the community when possible.
- Create a sense of belonging within both the classroom and the wider community.

### **Start with oral learning**

- Always begin with speaking. LIFE are usually better at speaking than at reading and writing English.
- Teach new vocabulary and ideas orally before learners see and use them in print.
- Help learners recognize the words they already use.
- Let learners write the sentences they speak.
- Make learners aware of the patterns in language and the benefits of understanding those patterns.

## Teach thematically

Theme teaching motivates learners and gives instructors a chance to recycle outcomes.

- Create theme units that present related vocabulary, language structures and concepts.
- Make sure that the themes are interesting to the learners and include topics and materials that relate to their needs and goals.
- Create simple, accessible materials with basic formatting, a large font, and lots of white space.

## Create a print-rich environment

- Use charts, posters and pictures on the classroom walls to help learners absorb written language into their visual memory.
- Give learners practice arranging language patterns in a kinetic and sensory way.
- Keep picture dictionaries and books of an appropriate level in the classroom.

## Create a classroom routine

- Establish a regular daily routine.
- Maximize the effectiveness of the routine by changing the activities according to learners' interest level and concentration span.
- Regular classroom routines help learners understand the importance of punctuality in western society. They give learners a feeling of comfort and stability in the classroom.

## Make learning concrete

- Make connections for learners between experiences, objects and text.
- For vocabulary development, begin with tangible objects and build gradually to photographs, then illustrations, and finally text.
- When presenting abstract concepts, such as representing places on a map, make a connection with the actual location by visiting the location together, or showing photographs.
- Make every effort to connect learning to real-life experiences and applications.

## **Respect learners' knowledge while providing them with new understanding**

- Respect learners, their different cultures, and their understanding of the world.
- Expose learners to other ways of looking at things.
- Show the advantages of understanding concepts and strategies for living in a literate, technological society.
- Continue to value the skills and understanding that learners bring with them from their own cultures.
- Help learners develop the cognitive skills they will need to effectively deal with print.

## **Focus on learning outcomes**

- Outcomes motivate learners and give accountability to instructors and programs.
- Make sure that what you teach relates to a useful, relevant learning outcome.
- Accept that learners will progress at different rates.
- Celebrate success!

## **Provide explicit strategy instruction**

Most ESL literacy learners will need strategies for developing and using their literacy skills. They also need strategies for interacting in the community and transferring their learning to other contexts.

- Integrate intentional and explicit strategy instruction throughout the ESL literacy program.
- Help learners to build the strategies they need for success inside and outside the classroom.

## **Incorporate technology**

- Introduce learners to different forms of technology as soon as possible.
- Encourage learners to use technology and teach them that technology plays a large role in Canadian society.
- Technology means more than just computers; for many learners, all kinds of electronic machines can be challenging, including ATMs, ticket dispensers for public transit, microwave ovens, etc.

## Incorporate numeracy

Learners' degree of numeracy will vary and often does not correlate with their literacy or language level.

- Learners need to develop both the numeracy skills and the English for talking about everyday math.
- Take every opportunity to link instruction with the numeracy and the language for talking about math.
- Some programs can provide designated time for numeracy instruction. In other cases, integrate learning outcomes for numeracy concepts and skills into thematic teaching.