

Learning for LIFE

An ESL Literacy Handbook



Supporting ESL Literacy Learners

Support Document

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SUPPORTING ESL LITERACY LEARNERS

Developing language and literacy are not the only challenges that ESL Literacy learners face.

ESL Literacy learners have full, complex lives as adults in a new country. They often face a wide range of barriers to their learning before they even step into the classroom. There is no easy solution to helping learners overcome barriers to learning.

Successful ESL literacy programs are sensitive to learners' barriers and recognize that learners need support. They work to be attentive and proactive in helping learners recognize issues, access resources, manage processes, anticipate challenges, and plan for independent navigation of the services learners need.

This tool provides information on the ways a program and instructors can support and empower learners.

COMMON BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Barriers to learning are problems or situations that prevent learners from accessing programs, make it difficult for learners to go to class or make it hard for learners to concentrate and learn. Learners face many barriers.

Here are the four main groups of barriers:

Emotional, Mental, and Physical Health Concerns

- Abuse
- Addiction
- Healthcare concerns
- Mental health concerns

Employment and Financial Issues

- Employment issues
- Financial issues

Housing, Legal, and Transportation Issues

- Housing issues
- Legal issues
- Transportation issues

Issues with Family Relationships and Social Support

- Changing expectations of new culture
- Child care issues
- Family problems
- Lack of support systems
- Scheduling problems

IDENTIFYING LEARNERS WITH BARRIERS

When learners are in a safe, supportive, welcoming and open environment, they will often volunteer information about their lives, including problems they are facing. Some learners feel comfortable asking for help. Other learners may not be able to discuss what is bothering them. Not all barriers to learning are obvious.

In an ESL literacy program it is not enough to sit back and wait for learners to say when there's a problem. All those who work in the program must be proactive.

Look for external signs

- Regularly exhausted or fatigued
- Often late for class
- Poor attendance
- Inappropriate behaviour in class
- Homework never done
- Struggling to see and hear in class
- Frequent sickness
- Signs of stress or high anxiety

Be careful. Do not assume that these signs are proof of barriers. Investigate respectfully and intervene when appropriate.

Listen to learners

They may volunteer information, including problems they are facing. They may ask for help if they feel comfortable, if they have higher oral skills, and if they are able to identify problems.

Be careful. Not all learners will offer this information. They may:

- Be proud or embarrassed.
- Not know if it is appropriate to ask for help.
- Not be able to express the problem.
- Not be able to identify the problem.

Talk about barriers with all learners in the classroom

Regularly show and tell learners that it is safe and appropriate to ask for help. Normalize the idea of barriers to learning by discussing them during class. If possible, incorporate barriers to

learning and ways to reach out for help as class content. Refer learners to supports that are available and appropriate.

HELPING LEARNERS OVERCOME BARRIERS

Helping learners overcome barriers is not an easy thing to do. In many cases, it might not even be entirely possible. Many barriers learners face will not change with a quick fix. Learners need long-term support to deal with ongoing problems as well as new problems that arise.

Here are a few things an effective program can do:

Provide dedicated support workers for learners

- Support workers are non-instructional program staff who help learners deal with issues. They work with learners either individually or in groups.
- Support workers offer direct support, assistance, information and referrals to other programs and services, such as counselling, if necessary.
- Support workers can help with any kind of issue, from filling out funding applications to setting goals to coping with loss, addiction, or trauma.
- Ideally, they are involved enough in the program that they know the learners and the learners are comfortable with them.

View learners holistically

- Understand that language and literacy affects every aspect of learners' lives.
- Language, literacy, and life are never fully separate from each other so consider them together when working with ESL literacy learners.
- Celebrate learners' immense strengths, skills, coping strategies, knowledge, and background experience.
- View learners' struggles and issues in the context of the wide range of barriers they may be facing. For example, they are likely not late everyday because they are "bad students" but because they are facing barriers to their full participation.
- Remember that learners are people coping with complex needs and wants, challenges, dreams, experiences, strengths and weaknesses.

Be flexible and understanding

- Recognize that ESL literacy learners have special needs not met in regular or mainstream programs.
- Acknowledge that rigid policies and practices of mainstream programs do not serve ESL literacy learners well and often contribute to the barriers they face.
- Understand that ESL literacy learners need more time and support than mainstream learners to be successful. Adjust your expectations.
- Commit to being flexible when dealing with learners and their issues. For example, develop flexible and responsive policies around punctuality and attendance, help learners brainstorm possible solutions to problems, and offer flexible scheduling for learners with time constraints due to work, family commitments, etc.

Respect and empower learners

- Respect the fact that learners are complex people who have taken a major leap of faith to come to your program. Celebrate their bravery and willingness to try.
- Respect learners' right to privacy and their right to choose when, how, and if they are ready to deal with problems.
- Empower learners by focusing on what they can do for themselves and what assistance they need to do it. Only they can be responsible for overcoming their barriers; the program supports and guides them to do it.
- Give learners the support and guidance they need in the short term while also building their capacity to help themselves in the longer term.
- Empower learners by brainstorming solutions and offering information and referrals to the kinds of programs and services they may require, such as:
 - doctors or medical care, including women's health and prenatal care
 - dentists, especially subsidized dental care
 - glasses and eye care, especially subsidies for free glasses
 - community housing
 - justice or legal aid, including parking ticket payment plans
 - community kitchens, food banks and hamper programs
 - second-hand stores and programs for free things, including bicycles, coats and winter clothing, furniture, etc.
 - career fairs
 - financial counselling, including budgeting and taxes
 - immigration, including family sponsorship

ADDRESSING LEARNER BARRIERS

A process to help address learner barriers has been developed and used in the Bridge Program at Bow Valley College. Dedicated support workers and student advisors work with learners either individually or in groups.

Step 1: Identify the barrier and the possible causes of it

Identifying barriers is an ongoing and layered process. After identifying a barrier and working through some of the steps in the process, other underlying barriers may be identified.

The focus is not just on the barrier itself but also on the underlying causes. This helps avoid simple band-aid solutions that only address the barrier for a short time and do nothing to help the learner understand what causes the barrier or how to break free of that cycle.

Step 2: Identify and focus on what the learner can do

This places responsibility with the learners and engages them in the process of overcoming their barriers. This responsibility is often a new kind of experience for learners and it can make them feel uncomfortable. It can also empower learners and help them work toward independence.

Step 3: Identify what the program can do

What kind of support do they need to address their barriers? For example, do they need more flexible scheduling for a short time?

- Do they need the services of a student support worker?
- Do they need short-term financial support in the form of transportation subsidies or food vouchers from the program?

Be aware of and address such questions as:

- How much support should one learner receive?
- With limited resources, how do we decide who gets what kind of support?
- How do we ensure that we are not encouraging dependence in learners?

Step 4: Identify resources available in the community

Become familiar with community resources. Connect learners to community resources. Many times learners need guidance to learn about the services that are available to them.

Prepare learners so that when they go to the referral centre they ask the right questions and are able to advocate for themselves.

Step 5: Provide ongoing support and coaching

Learners need ongoing coaching and support to access these resources. It is not enough to inform learners that they can apply for low-cost housing. They also need help finding the forms, filling them out, understanding the forms and the application process, and locating the office where the forms are dropped off.

Learners need a step-by-step plan outlining what to do and when to do it.

Creating a simple plan and having follow-up meetings holds learners accountable.

Part of helping learners to be independent is being there to check up on them and see that they have carried through with the steps in their plan to access resources and support they need.

PROVIDING ACADEMIC SUPPORT

ESL literacy learners need academic support, both inside and outside the classroom.

While classroom instructors provide academic support inside the classroom, learners also need support outside of the classroom so that they can cope with the school system effectively and make informed choices for themselves.

Learners need help to understand the academic system in their new country and to understand their place within it. This understanding is essential to the process of setting goals and making informed decisions.

An awareness of future possibilities is a powerful motivator for learners.

Learners who are getting closer to transitioning out of ESL literacy need information about what is available to them in order to plan their next step. There are many different pathways available to learners. Employment-training programs, mainstream ESL classes and Adult Basic Education programs are just some of the options available. It is important for learners to understand the natural progression of the education system and the length of time required at each step in order to set short, medium and long-term goals.

GOAL SETTING

Setting goals is a critically important learning strategy that helps to create independent learners. Goals come in many forms and goal setting is relevant to all aspects of life.

Goal setting is a process by which learners:

- Identify where they currently are.
- Identify goals or things they want to accomplish.
- Create a step-by-step plan to achieve those goals, with an awareness of how long each step will take.
- Periodically reflect on progress toward their goals and adjust their plan and goals as needed.

LIFE need to learn how to set goals. Learners at all levels need practice and guidance to become effective at setting specific and realistic goals for themselves.

With the right support and encouragement, goal setting:

- Helps learners feel success and see their progress, even if that progress is in small steps.
- Gives learners a sense of direction and purpose with clear tasks that are achievable.
- Allows learners to be in control of their learning by choosing goals that are relevant and important to them.
- Encourages learners to be responsible for their own learning by focusing on the actions they need to take to make their dreams a reality.
- Helps learners understand the time it takes to achieve long-term goals.

Short, Medium and Long-Term Goals

Instructors need to help learners understand the difference between short, medium & long-term goals.

Short-term Goals: accomplished in days or weeks

- Score 9/10 on a spelling test.
- Come to class on time every day for a week.
- Copy a model of a note, fill in the blanks, and send it to a child's teacher.
- Write a paragraph with help from an instructor.
- Share writing with the class.

Medium-term Goals: accomplished in several months

- Complete this level.
- Be able to talk to the landlord about painting apartment.
- Be able to read bedtime stories to children in English.
- Be able to go to a doctor's appointment alone.

Long-term Goals: accomplished in many months or years

- Finish Phase III.
- Go to ABE (Adult Basic Education).
- Finish High School Equivalency.
- Support family financially.
- Work in a store as a cashier.