Support Document

Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework
CLASSROOM NEEDS ASSESSMENT TOOL

BowValley COLLEGE | Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement

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Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework outlines a process for curriculum development in five stages:

- *Stage 1: Understand Needs*
- *Stage 2: Determine Focus*
- *Stage 3: Set Learning Outcomes*
- *Stage 4: Integrate Assessment*
- *Stage 5: Demonstrate Accountability*

Each stage includes information, guiding questions and suggestions for instructors.

This **classroom needs assessment tool** is designed for instructors and is based on the principles outlined in *Stage 1: Understand Needs.* Understanding the needs of the learners in your class is an important part of providing effective instruction. Taking the time to understand individual learners' needs, challenges and goals will help you provide effective instruction and support. Aim for a balance between learner needs and your program's purpose and goals.

The purpose of this classroom needs assessment tool is to help instructors:

- gather information about individual learners' needs, supports and barriers
- create a class profile, which can inform unit and lesson planning
- identify learners that may have been misplaced

This tool can be used:

- by individual instructors
- in a course guide or curriculum package designed to support instructors as they implement the curriculum

This tool includes three parts:

- a classroom needs assessment template
- a class profile template
- a process guide for conducting classroom needs assessments

This template has space to record information about two learners. Make enough copies so that you can record information about each learner in your class. Ensure that you protect learners' privacy. Consider using first names only and do not allow other learners to see the information.

Classroom Needs Assessment		
Factors to consider	Names	
First language		
First language literacy skills		
Educational background		
Goals		
Supports		
Barriers		
Other factors that may influence learning		

Use the information gathered in the classroom needs assessment to help you record general observations and formulate a class profile. Use this class profile to inform your unit and lesson planning.

Class Profile		
	General summary	How will this impact teaching and learning?
First language		
Educational background		
First language literacy skills		
Goals		
Supports		
Barriers		
Other factors that may influence learning		

Conducting classroom needs assessments allows you to gain a fuller understanding of learners' needs, interests, goals, existing supports and barriers to learning. This guide provides information and suggestions for gathering information to fill in the templates provided for a *classroom needs assessments* and a *class profile*.

Following a general introduction to classroom needs assessment, this guide provides information in two broad categories:

- lower-level ESL literacy: learners in Foundation and Phase I, and those with listening and speaking skills at approximately CLB 1 and 2

- higher-level ESL literacy: learners in Phases II and III, and those with listening and speaking skills at approximately CLB 3-5

When to Gather Information

Conduct your classroom needs assessment near the beginning of term, in order to form a class profile that will guide your planning. This profile will help you identify learners that may have been misplaced, and help you flag any learners who need immediate assistance or support. Where possible, refer these learners to support services or individuals that can assist them.

Many instructors find it helpful to integrate the classroom needs assessment into classroom community-building activities over the first two weeks or several classes. Spreading out the needs assessment process allows you to gather more in-depth information and also decreases the risk that learners may be overwhelmed by the process.

Consider revisiting your initial needs assessment informally over the course of the term. By doing this, you may gather additional information that will be useful in supporting your learners.

How to Gather Information

When conducting a classroom needs assessment, *how* to ask questions is as important as *what* to ask. Recognize the level of the learner when asking the questions and make the questions meaningful to the learner so the learner can express his/her needs. Suggestions for conducting needs assessments with lower and higher-level ESL literacy classes are provided following this introduction to the guide. Keep in mind that the purpose of gathering the information is to better understand your learners and to connect them with supports that are available.

It is important to recognize that learners may not be comfortable sharing information about their personal circumstances or barriers before they know you well. In some cases, learners prefer to keep this information entirely private. Aim to gather information that is useful for your planning and instruction, without pressuring learners and be open to receiving new information as the term progresses and learners become more comfortable with you. Many instructors find that if they share some of their own personal information and stories, learners are more comfortable in discussing their needs and background information.

How to Use the Information

Tailor instruction to build on strengths and meet needs

Keep in mind that the purpose of conducting a classroom needs assessment is to gather information that will help you:

- understand individual learners' needs, supports and barriers
- guide your unit and lesson planning
- identify learners that may have been misplaced

As you plan for instruction, keep in mind the general profile of your class, as well as individual needs, barriers and goals. Aim to build on learners' strengths, such as providing time for learners to work together in first language groups as they learn about a new concept or pattern in English. Provide support as needed to groups or individuals. Support can be provided in a variety of ways, such as giving ample time to practice the same skill in many different themes, building oral skills extensively before introducing print, or scheduling volunteers to provide one-to-one reading practice.

Share results with learners

Whether your needs assessments have been formal or informal, it is important to communicate with learners about the needs you will be addressing in the classroom. It can be challenging to communicate these with learners who have limited oral proficiency or a limited understanding of what is required to achieve their goals. Use simplified language, provide pictures and visual diagrams and regularly review the learning needs identified to help learners understand how what they are learning relates to their needs. Ensure that you protect the privacy of individual learners in this process by generalizing your comments.

In lower levels of ESL literacy, needs assessments can be conducted orally, with individual learners or as a group. Recognize the level of the learner when asking the questions. Avoid hypothetical situations, the conditional, or imagining the future.

A needs assessment can include several kinds of aids, such as:

- *realia:* Use actual items that learners may see in everyday life and find difficult, such as utility bills, applications or common government forms. Increase complexity by moving from concrete, everyday objects to photographs to illustrations.

- *photographs or pictures*: Use large, easily understood photographs of situations learners might see, such as doctors' offices, a supermarket, an apartment building, etc.

- *an interpreter:* An interpreter can be very helpful in a needs assessment. In some situations, it may be possible to conduct a needs assessment in the learner's first language. In this case, you may be able to gather more detailed information from the learner.

First (or Other) Language Literacy Assessment

Some of your learners may have literacy skills in their first or another language. Investigating learners' existing literacy skills in a language other than English can help you understand:

- which literacy skills and concepts the learner is being exposed to for the first time in your class (e.g. that text is connected to oral language, that it is possible to write using more than rote words or phrases)
- which literacy skills and concepts learners can transfer to English literacy (e.g. awareness/use of directionality, wrap-around text, punctuation)
- the rate of progress you might expect of learners in your class. In many cases, the learners that progress more quickly are those with more first language literacy skills or literacy awareness (such as those with more education or with educated family members).

Two approaches to gathering information about first language literacy skills and educational background are outlined here:

- gathering a writing sample
- a literacy storytelling process

Both approaches focus on writing samples. Although this is only one indicator of first language literacy skills, it is often the most manageable in classrooms with diverse language backgrounds.
Gathering a writing sample

Asking your learners to provide a writing sample (such as their name, a few sentences, or a story) can help you determine their first (or other) language literacy skills. Ask learners to provide samples in every language that they are able to.

Even if you are unable to read the text, it can be informative. This assessment can provide information on the learner's writing fluency, the formation of the script and the extent of the writing. Observe how fluently the learner appears to write and the length of the text they produce. Ask learners to read out their writing to you and tell you about what they've written. This can help you understand whether the learner has only rudimentary first language literacy skills, or whether he/she has some strategies for writing that can be transferred to learning to write in English.

This approach is also highlighted in the chart providing guiding questions for learners with lower oral skills.

A literacy storytelling process

Another way of investigating learners' first (or other) language literacy skills is to use a story-telling process to elicit information about learners' educational background. In a question-and-answer approach, learners sometimes say that they have no formal education, when in fact they may have more skills than they realize. However, in this storytelling process learners are asked to identify the types of writing that they can produce, in a context that is connected to personal stories.

Use this process near the beginning of term, as part of community building in your classroom. Make sure that you have spent ample time on get-to-know you activities and building the learners' comfort level with one another.

This process will be most effective if you can use a story that is connected to you personally. In this way, the learners understand that you are sharing something personal, and may feel more comfortable sharing their own personal histories with you and their classmates.

Sample literacy storytelling activity

In this activity, the instructor tells a true story that illustrates the educational background and literacy levels of people in her family. As she tells the story, she provides examples of the types of writing the people in her story can produce, as well as photographs of the people she is describing. After the story, she asks learners to point to the kind of text they can produce.

> *The story*
>
> A long, long time ago, my grandfather came to Canada. When he came to Canada, he was just like you. He came from a farm, he worked with animals. He had no time to go to school. When he came to Canada, they said "write your name". So, he learned to write his name. He wrote:

> *The instructor illustrates the way her grandfather signed his name with an "x", slowly and shakily.*
>
> My grandmother was the same. She didn't go to school. She helped her mother with the babies. But, her sister went to school. Her sister taught my grandmother how to write her name. She practiced a lot. She wrote her name like this:

MARY

The instructor illustrates the way her grandmother wrote her name, with more confidence and accuracy.

My grandmother's sister who went to school could write many words. But, she had to stop going to school when she was nine years old. There was a war in their country and they had to leave and then there was no school. This is how she could write:

My name is Sarah. I am nine years old. I like reading.

The instructor illustrates the kind of writing her grandmother's sister could produce.

The instructor continues the story, illustrating her mother and father's education and literacy levels.

When the story is finished, the instructor asks learners to point to the sample that is similar to their abilities and background. The instructor also invites learners to identify the background or literacy levels of family members, including their spouse and children. Learners are then asked to give samples of their own writing, in any language they are able to. This activity typically leads to a lot of discussion about learners' literacy skills and educational background.

To provide a more in-depth literacy storytelling experience, consider including the following kinds of writing samples:

- individual word-level writing (e.g. apple, dog)
- rote phrase/sentence-level writing (e.g. I am happy. / It is nice.)
- paragraph-level writing

It can also be helpful to include a character in the story that has learned to read and write in his/her second language, such as someone who was the only non-native speaker in a class with native speakers. This may help you gather information about what learners' early formal learning was like, if they were unable to access education in their first language.

This section provides guiding questions and suggested prompts for gathering information.

Guiding Questions: Lower Oral Skills (approx. CLB 1 – 2)		
Topic	Questions	Suggested prompts
First language & first language literacy	What is your first language? Can you write in your first language? Write your name in your language.	Give learners a pencil and paper and model in English. *My name is _____. I am from _____. I am a _____.* Now show me in your language.
Educational background	Did you go to school in your country?	Use simplified questions, mime or use pictures. *You…. school in Sudan? Small girl? Yes? No? Maybe one year?*
	What language did you use in school?	*School…. in Arabic? In Dinka? What language?*
	What was your school like?	Draw or provide pictures of children learning in different kinds of schools (e.g. a classroom with books/whiteboard or an outside school, with children learning under a tree, or in a refugee camp). *In _____, was school outside? Your school, your country, was school like this? Did you go to school in a refugee camp?* Provide pictures of/bring a slate to show the learners. *In your school, you used this?*
Goals	*In lower levels, it may be too abstract for learners to talk about their literacy goals. In many cases, the first step is to help learners become aware of the many ways that literacy skills can be used. The prompts provided here are aimed at gathering information about goals related to daily activities.*	Gather information about the kinds of daily activities learners are having trouble with. Aim to identify immediate needs. Show large, realistic photographs of people engaged in daily activities (e.g. shopping, taking the bus, using an ATM or debit card, going to the doctor). Prompt with questions such as: *Do you do this? By yourself? Is it easy for you?* *In your house, who does this?*

Supports	What support do you have at home? What kind of educational background and literacy levels do your family members have? Or others in your household?	*At home, can your /husband/wife/children help you with school?* *At home, your kids, they help you read?* *Your husband/wife/kids went to school in your country? Same as you? Different?*
Barriers	Can you see well in the classroom?	Provide several pairs of reading classes of different strengths. Have learners try them on to see if it helps their vision. *Do you have glasses? Try these. Can you see better?*
Other factors	Who do you live with? Where do you live? Do have children? How many? Do you have help? Do you have a job right now?	Provide photographs of people with a variety of family/household arrangements (e.g. a single mom with 3 children, a large family with grandparents, a single man with two roommates). *Which one is like your family?* *How many people in your house?*

In higher levels of ESL literacy, needs assessments can be done orally or in writing. They can also be conducted formally (e.g. in an interview or survey) or informally (e.g. in a class discussion or casual chats with individual learners).

In some cases, it may be possible to conduct an in-depth interview with each learner and to pose a series of questions about their background, needs, supports and barriers. If this is not feasible in your situation, consider posing the questions to individuals or groups over a period of time, such as one topic per day over a period of a week.

If you plan to integrate journal writing in your class, you could provide these as journal writing topics over a period of time. As with any writing task in these Phases, learners will need support (e.g. brainstorming, a writing model, sample sentences, word banks).

Some of your learners may have literacy skills in their first or another language. If this is the case, ask them to provide a writing sample. Even if you are unable to read the text, it can be informative. Observe how fluently the learner appears to write, the length of the text they produce, and ask them to tell you about what they've written. This can help you understand whether he/she has only rudimentary first language literacy skills, or whether he/she has some strategies for writing that can be transferred to learning to write in English.

The following questions are suggested for gathering information in a classroom needs assessment. Use those that are appropriate for your learners, and add to them as needed.

Classroom Needs Assessment: Higher Oral Skills (approx. CLB 3 – 5)	
Topic	Guiding questions
First language & first language literacy skills:	• What is your first language? • What other languages can you speak? • Which language(s) can you write in? • Can you write something for me in that (those) languages? • Can you tell me what you wrote about?
Educational background	• Did you go to school before you came to Canada? How many years did you go to school before you came to Canada? What country did you go to school in? Did you go to school all year? • How old were you when you started/finished school? • What was your school like? How many teachers were there? How many students were there? • What did your school look like? Did you have lots of books? Did you have computers? • Did you ever stop going to school for a while, maybe because of war or no food or because your family was moving somewhere? • Did you ever live in a refugee camp? Did you go to school in the refugee camp? • How long have you been in school in Canada? Where have you studied?
Goals	• Why are you in school now? What do you want to learn? • What do you want to do when you finish ESL? • What job do you want to get in the future? • What can I teach you that will make your life easier right now? • Are there things you want to do that you can't do right now? (e.g. talk on the phone, make appointments, read letters from children's schools, help children with homework, fill in government forms, use the computer)
Supports	• Is there someone at home that can help you with your studying? • Who helps you when you have problems with reading, writing or speaking English? • Who helps you when you have problems (e.g. with money, childcare)?

Barriers	• Is there anything that makes it difficult for you to come to class, do your homework, etc?
Other factors	• Do have children? How many? What help do you receive at home with the children? • Do you have a job right now? What is your schedule? • Is there anything that will make it difficult for you to participate in our class?