

# Working with Preliterate and Non-Literate Learners

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## Introduction

Given the recent influx of Somali Bantu refugees and the emerging population of other refugees and immigrants from preliterate societies, learning to serve these populations better has become an urgent concern for the adult ESL profession. This guide aims to provide teachers of preliterate adult and teenaged students with some key methods, activities, and steps to use in their classrooms.

The guidelines included in this document were developed in part from my graduate thesis in which I completed a case study of five Somali Bantu refugee women. I taught these women plus four others for ten months. I noted that several concepts that often work in classrooms with literate students simply were not effective. I began to take note of everything that I did in the classroom, what worked and what did not. After the class ended, I decided to write my thesis on the experience and interviewed the students asking them to reflect on their learning. Their voices are present in the eight suggestions below, as they affirmed many of the concepts that I had also perceived to be working.

While in graduate school, I attended several ESL-focused conferences and talked with other professionals. These conversations have influenced some of the suggestions below. The importance of a document such as this was made apparent through the continuing theme within these conversations regarding the lack of materials available about teaching preliterate learners. It is my hope that the following information, which is the product of ten months of intensive teaching and a subsequent thesis, will help inform both seasoned and beginning teachers so that we may all more effectively serve preliterate students.

## Defining the Four Types of Literacy

Savage (1993) discusses four types of students who may require literacy instruction: preliterate, non-literate, semi-literate, and literate in non-Roman alphabet language. These distinctions are particularly significant when determining the instructional techniques one should use with a particular group of learners.

- **Preliterate** students speak a language whose written form is rare or does not exist.
- **Non-literate** students (formerly illiterate) speak a language that has a written form, but they have not learned to read or write it themselves.
- **Semi-literate** students have some formal education and are able to read and write at an elementary level (usually up to grade 4 reading level).

- Students who are **literate in a non-Roman alphabet** are functionally literate in their native language, which uses characters or a non-Roman alphabet; they therefore need to learn the formation of the Roman alphabet and the sound/symbol relationship in English.

*From: Savage, K. Lynn. (1993). Literacy Through Competency-Based Educational Approaches in J. Crandall and J.K. Peyton (Eds.), Approaches to Adult ESL Literacy Instruction. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.*

\*Note - throughout the remainder of this document, it is assumed that the teacher does not speak the native language of the students.

### **How do preliterate and non-literate populations differ from other groups of learners?**

- They have little or no experience in a classroom and therefore have little knowledge of the formal learning process and classroom expectations.
- Often these populations have had difficult, traumatizing life experiences.

### **Things to keep in mind as teachers of preliterate and non-literate populations:**

- Utilize and honor the strong oral skills of the learners
- Realize that progress will usually be **much** slower than other groups of learners; celebrate the seemingly small achievements (holding a pencil; knowing which side of the paper is up)
- Repetition is key and necessary for retention of new information
- Remember that **everything** is new: writing on lines, page numbers, titles, writing your name on the top of the page, which side of the paper is up, etc.
- Learn about the backgrounds of your students; know what they have gone through to sit in your classroom.

### Eight Techniques and Methodological Suggestions

1. Use authentic, relevant material.

Yes, this is a common concept within the field of ESL especially in beginning level courses. However, authenticity and relevance becomes especially important with preliterate learners. In that they lack previous educational contexts with which to connect non-authentic/relevant materials, it becomes essential that you take this concept to a new level. For example, instead of using a hand drawn picture of a school from a textbook or a photo of a different classroom, go to your own school or your students' children's school and take a picture of the outside of the school, the inside of a classroom, the playground, and the library and use those photos within your classroom. Also, take pictures of their neighborhoods - grocery stores, banks, libraries, stores, your school, their homes, etc. Use these pictures within your classroom to facilitate the learning of vocabulary and grammatical

structures. Additionally, take pictures of your students and their families in order to work on familial terms, personal pronouns, etc.

2. Use culturally specific names, especially from your students' families.

Your students will need to learn names outside of their cultural context, but in the beginning give them an edge by using names with which they are familiar. Learn their family members' names and use them regularly within the classroom. After they are no longer in a beginning level class, they can begin to work more with a variety of names from a variety of cultures. This can be catered to each individual student if you do not have a monoculture classroom. Using names from their own culture not only provides a familiarity for your students, it also validates their home culture.

Additionally, you may also consider using words from your students' languages to facilitate the understanding of the fundamental concept of literacy: what we say is what is then written down. This will also allow you to approach the concept that letters are correlated to sounds within a context of more comfortable/familiar sounds than those of English.

3. Sequence vocabulary words from concrete to abstract.

Students who have not been exposed to literacy previously do not have the same understanding of doodles and stick figures that literate individuals easily recognize. A doodle of a sun does not differ that much from the letter O, P, or Q to a non/preliterate individual. This does not mean that you should not use stick figures. On the contrary, use them, but teach them first. Explain the concrete: that you are a person - a woman or a man. Move to a photograph of yourself. This is a less concrete representation of you.

From there, draw a picture of yourself on the board. Use more detail than you would in a stick figure. Make sure they are following that all of these things represent the same thing - a person. Then draw the stick figure and call it the same word that you have been using for yourself, the photo, and the more detailed drawing. Do the same thing for any other drawings that you plan to use in your teaching. Show your students the real item to class along with a real photo of the item. For example, if your book has a section on food with pictures of vegetables. Bring a real potato, a photograph of a potato, and then make it clear to them that the drawing in their book is a representation of the same objects.

4. Teach your students how to be a student.

Preliterate learners have no educational background, so they do not know how to be students in the formal sense. In saying this, I am in no way discounting their ability to learn and the extensive knowledge each brings into the classroom about the real world. However, they do not have the skills to learn in a formal, structured environment. Teach your students how to

care for their homework, raise their hands, etc. Allow your students to play an active role in the classroom, i.e., handing back papers. You may have to give your students pencils, but tell them to bring them each day. Everything is an opportunity for learning when the classroom is unfamiliar to your students.

5. Check in with your students constantly.

Doing this will save your students from a great deal of confusion. Before changing or starting new activities, make sure all the students are on the same page. Have students repeat directions if you think they do not understand. If you think a few students understand something, check with them in their native language. Ask them to tell you the word/concept in their native language. If they all say the same thing, there is a good chance that they do in fact understand. If they all say different things, they will often take it upon themselves to work it out or if they do not, you know that you need to re-teach the word/concept. After they have figured it out, let them explain it to the rest of the class in English, if possible, and if not, then in their native language. You do not need to understand what they are saying as long as you know that the speaker understands the directions/material. Concepts like writing on top of a line, and not under it or through it, are difficult to convey when your students do not have much English language and you do not speak their native language. Repeat the concept the same way about three times; if that does not work, think of a different way to explain the concept and try again. This obviously takes a great deal of patience, but once you see the look of understanding/learning in your students face and eyes, it will all be worth it.

6. Use classroom activities to reinforce concepts from your lessons.

Everything that happens in the classroom is an opportunity for learning. When you take attendance for example, you can have the students spell their names. You can have the students count how many students have arrived to class as they are coming into the room. Start each class with the day of the week and the date. Talk about what time it is and what day yesterday was and what day tomorrow will be. Use the same language and start each class the same way. The repetition will be beneficial in the long run. It took my students four months of me repeating the date, day of the week, and the yesterday/tomorrow activity at the beginning of every class, and then they got it and it was rewarding for them and for me!

7. Go from big to small in terms of writing.

Have your students write the letters with their arms in the air, in sand, in Jell-O powder. After they feel comfortable with this, transition them into big pieces of paper or the board. If they want, give them markers, then thicker pencils, and then have them move to thin

pencils. These activities will help in the development of the fine motor skills necessary for writing.

#### 8. Be consistent with your writing and handouts.

Start by using all capital letters. They are easier to write and they convey the same thing. Once your students master this, then they can move on to small letters. Use only one font on your handouts. I have used the font that I recommend in this document: Comic Sans. The letters: a and g in Comic Sans are more like how we write than other fonts which use these forms of the letters: a g.

### Final Thoughts

Preliterate learners do challenge conventional teaching concepts. However, working with them and seeing them succeed on any task promises to be an extremely rewarding experience. In most of my teaching experiences and especially while working with the Somali Bantu, my students have been incredible teachers of that which cannot be learned in books. As their teachers, it is important that we see what they bring to the classroom (wisdom, perseverance, etc.) not only what they lack (language, formal schooling skills, etc.).

Understanding, empathy, and patience will take you far in a preliterate ESL classroom. Additionally, I encourage you to share what you learn with others. Many of the techniques we create for our preliterate learners are specific to each student or to a certain culture; nevertheless, the foundations of these techniques can be, and I believe should be, documented for the betterment of the ESL profession.

*Should you wish to read my thesis in its entirety, it is entitled: Preliterate English as a Second Language Learners: A Case Study of Somali Bantu Women and may be found at:*

*[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/28/06/63.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/28/06/63.pdf)*

*Additionally, the author welcomes feedback and would be happy to continue a dialogue about preliterate learners with other ESL professionals. She may be contacted at: [colleenas@gmail.com](mailto:colleenas@gmail.com)*