

Bringing Literacy to Life

Issues and Options in Adult ESL Literacy

Heide Spruck Wrigley, PhD
Gloria J. A. Guth, PhD

Aguirre International
San Mateo, CA
for the U.S. Department of Education
Office of Vocational and Adult Education

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Chapter 2

Approaches and Materials

As a reading teacher 1 was in a somewhat similar position to those primitive societies that perform ritual ceremonies to make the rain come. They know that pouring water on the ground won't really open the heavens, but they have to do something.

Michael Simons cited in Cambourne, 1979

Many ESL literacy teachers find themselves in a position similar to Michael Simons'. Feeling overwhelmed by the variety of approaches available for language and literacy teaching, they are no longer sure of what works. Yet, while there are many options for teaching language and literacy, the field is clear on one point: The most effective approaches are those that focus on meaning, are responsive to the needs and interests of the learners, provide opportunities for active learning, and foster collaboration. This chapter explores a number of meaning-based approaches and provides strategies for classroom teaching.

In the "Background" section, we discuss two models of literacy development and show how teachers can integrate phonics into meaningful, communicative literacy activities. We then outline seven approaches in teaching ESL and literacy and show what kind of student might benefit from a particular approach. Finally, we explain how various approaches can be linked through a program-based literacy framework.

In the "Practice" section, we provide strategies for teaching initial literacy. We show how learners can be introduced to reading and writing and how teachers can help their students develop a good sense of what literacy is all about. Finally we offer "Tips for Teachers" who want to provide a rich literacy experience for their students.

The "Reflections" section deals with selecting and developing appropriate literacy materials. We offer a series of questions designed to help teachers and coordinators think about the needs of their program. These questions are meant as decision making tools that allow programs to decide what kind of materials might best reflect their program focus and meet the needs of students and teachers.

Background: Contrasting approaches

Learning to read and write is not a simple process, especially for adults who are acquiring literacy in a second language and have had little or no previous experience with print. Reading involves understanding what a text means, matching marks on the page with the meaning of words, connecting the message of a text with background knowledge and experience, and interpreting the overall purpose of a text.¹ Writing requires thought, the language necessary to express these thoughts, powers of organization, and the mechanical skills necessary to put ideas on paper. Obviously, there can be no quick and easy way to acquire the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed for understanding and using written language and becoming what society considers a literate person. There are, however, a number of approaches to teaching literacy that show promise in helping students become independent readers and writers.

Skills-based versus social-context models of literacy development

Practice reflects theory and there is nothing as practical as a good theory. The approaches teachers choose reflect their view of learning and their understanding of the way adults acquire literacy in a second language. Two models of reading and writing development are common in the literacy field: (1) a decontextualized skills-based model that claims that literacy develops in a linear fashion from letters to syllables and from syllables to words and on to sentences, and (2) a holistic, social context model that holds that literacy develops as learners use their minds to make sense out of the literacy materials found in real-life. These models are sometimes combined in interactive approaches that integrate phonics into a meaningful context.

Advocates of the skills-based model claim that literacy is an individual accomplishment, consisting of a set of skills that exist independently of the context (setting, situation) in which they are used. In literacy teaching, this model has been represented by a phonics-first approach to literacy that is evidenced in many basic literacy programs (particularly Laubach). Phonics-based approaches are sometimes called "bottom-up" approaches since they start at the bottom (the letters on the page).

Proponents of the social context model, on the other hand, hold that literacy develops out of the need of humans to communicate and share meaning. In this view, literacy encompasses a set of social practices influenced by individual goals, collective experiences, and societal values. This model is reflected in approaches that focus first and foremost on communication and meaning.

Approaches based on this model are sometimes called "top-down" approaches since they start with the top, that is, the background knowledge and experience that exists in the learner's mind. Literacy educators agree that real-life literacy, or reading and writing for a purpose other than classroom practice, always involves both top-down and bottom-up processes. The debate revolves around how much time should be spent on making meaning and understanding the "big picture" and how much should be spent on practicing letters and sounds. The recent literature supports an approach that puts meaning first, but helps learners to understand the relationship between meaning and structure at a point when such information becomes relevant and necessary (i.e., when learners repeatedly get stuck in similar patterns or when learners ask questions about grammar and sound/letter relationships).

We will now turn to a discussion of the phonics-based approaches and their limitations and explain the cognitive theories that form the basis for meaning-based approaches. We then show how "bottom-up skills" can become part of meaning-based teaching through an interactive approach.

Phonics-based approaches and their limitations

Phonics-based, bottom-up approaches reflect literacy as a process that is largely visual and technical, requiring that the new reader learn to associate letters with sounds before moving on to meaningful texts. In this view, the meaning of a word resides on the page, "outside" of the readers mind. This model holds that before a word can be understood as a unit, smaller parts, such as letters and syllables, need to be assembled and sounded out. This process is often referred to as "decoding."

In spite of their popularity in many basic skills programs, phonics-based approaches have many detractors. Phonics foes point out that teaching letters, syllables, and words out of context may not only be useless, they may even be counterproductive, since a focus on skills keeps learners from gaining what really counts, namely, meaning.² They claim that

- millions of students have learned to read not because of phonics, but in spite of it, and thousands of students have already failed phonics in school
- asking students to discriminate between similar shapes, letters, and numbers only serves to confuse, frustrate, and discourage learners unfamiliar with literacy
- phonics requires an understanding of the English sound system, knowledge that many ESL literacy students have not yet acquired
- since sound-symbol relationships in English are distressingly irregular (e. g., common words, such as "here," "there," and "were," cannot be sounded out), phonics provides a tool that has limited use in English
- phonics-based approaches start with what ESL students "don't" know (decoding), instead of what they "do" know (making sense out of things that appear unfamiliar)
- many, if not most, learners spend only a few weeks in phonics-based programs and leave before they get a chance to read or write anything they care about.

Thus, focusing primarily on phonics during the first few weeks of literacy teaching may frustrate ESL literacy learners and keep them from learning how to deal effectively with the literacy of their everyday lives.

Meaning-based approaches

In contrast, advocates of meaning-based approaches see reading and writing as a cognitive process through which the reader associates meaning with print. As readers study the print on a page, they simultaneously try to match their own background knowledge with the ideas that appear in front of them, "making meaning" in the process. For example, a person who is familiar with the culture of shopping in a U.S. supermarket will be able to use a store directory effectively, since she understands that the store will be laid out in aisles and that noodles, for example, will most likely be in the pasta section. On the other hand, someone who has only shopped at a farmer's market will find the directory confusing and overwhelming in spite of being able to read the individual food items. The directory only makes sense to someone who has the cultural knowledge to interpret its meaning.

Meaning-based approaches that focus on meaning and context instead of letters and sounds are based on research in psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology.³ They rely on studies in information processing strategies that show that good readers do not decode every word they read. If they did, it would take them a very long time to get to the end of a page. Rather, fluent readers check out words quickly (sometimes using

phonics as an aid) and then match what they see on the page to their own knowledge of the world. For example, a reader fluent in English will realize immediately that, in a news story, the sentence "the firemen pulled the horse from the fire truck" contains either a typographical error or an absurdity that deserves special attention.

In effect, rather than reading each word, efficient readers "predict" what a text might say. As they read, they continue to confirm their predictions by moving forward and backward in the text in an effort to make sense out of words and create meaning. Poor readers, on the other hand, often get stuck on the word level, fail to use their knowledge of the world, and may continue to apply/reapply various word attack skills instead of making use of other information in the text.

The theory holds that proficient writers use similar strategies as they compose a text. They jot down ideas and then move back and forth, revising and making changes as their ideas take shape. Good writers know that writing is an ongoing process that includes brainstorming ideas, tentatively putting ideas on paper, organizing and revising, and finally editing, which may lead to additional writing. While good writers focus on meaning first and only secondarily on form, poor writers tend to focus on spelling and mechanics and often plunge ahead with little consideration for how their ideas connect.

Proponents of meaning-based approaches maintain that the basic processes that are used in reading and writing are essentially the same for everyone - children, adults, native speakers, and second language learners. They hold that those new to literacy will learn best if they are taught the same strategies that proficient readers and writers use.

The role of background knowledge in meaning-based approaches

Studies in psycholinguistics and text processing focus heavily on the role of background knowledge in the development of reading and writing, an issue of particular interest in ESL literacy since non-native speakers often do not share the same experiences as native speakers. Cognitive theory now holds that, as we experience the world and as we read, our minds seek to integrate what we already know with the new ideas that we encounter. Experiences and knowledge become encoded in the form of cognitive structures. Since each cognitive structure is called a schema, approaches that link experience and literacy are also called "schema-theoretic approaches."

Schema theory suggests the following: in trying to understand or compose a text, learners select the appropriate background knowledge in their minds, activate the particular schema needed for comprehension, and try to make sense of the meaning encoded in the words on the page, a process sometimes called "reading from behind the eyes."⁴

In ESL literacy, the relationship between past experience and present reading deserves special consideration since much of what is written in the United States presumes a certain cultural and linguistic knowledge that the ESL learner does not (yet) have.

Based on research in schema theory, the literature now holds that literacy education will be most effective if discussions, activities, and materials take full advantage of the background knowledge and experience of the learners. Furthermore, connecting literacy activities in the classroom to learners' lives beyond the classroom will significantly strengthen literacy development.

Integrating skills into meaning-based approaches

To become independent readers and writers, all literacy learners need opportunities to use language for communication and read and write meaningful texts. Some ESL learners, however, may have difficulty understanding the meaning of a text. Their limited vocabulary and their unfamiliarity with the structure of the language may make it hard to see the connection between what they know and what they see on the page.⁵ These learners may need special support in blending top-down (meaning and communication) and bottom-up (phonics and grammar) processes. (For examples on how to blend these processes, see the curriculum modules by Lynellyn Long and Marilyn Gillespie and by Peggy Dean.)

In recognition of the fact that ESL learners might need additional support in making meaning, some educators support an "interactive" approach that combines strategies for meaning-making with vocabulary development and word identification skills. This approach suggests that literacy lessons include activities that help students develop the skills needed to identify letters and words quickly and accurately so that they can develop the automatic processing skills necessary for fluent reading.⁶ Choosing an approach that views literacy development as integrated and interactive, nevertheless, requires that literacy be kept "whole." To be effective, the primary focus must remain on meaningful self-expression and social communication.

There now is agreement in the literature, if not in the field, that meaning-based approaches that focus on communication and social interaction are more effective in supporting adults in their literacy development than approaches that put phonics first or teach skills out of context. We will now turn to a discussion of meaning-based approaches that are used in the field.

Examples of meaning-based approaches to teaching ESL and literacy

There are a number of meaning-based approaches that can be used effectively in the ESL literacy classroom. While some were developed by linguists focusing on second language acquisition (the communicative approach and the natural approach), others were developed by educators concerned about literacy development in general (whole language, language experience, the participatory approach). The ethnographic approach was developed out of collaborations between anthropologists, linguists, and educators.

Each approach tends to emphasize some dimensions of literacy, while de-emphasizing others, and thus may be more appropriate for some programs than for others. The seven approaches outlined are (1) the functional approach, (2) the natural approach, (3) the communicative approach, (4) the whole language approach, (5) the language experience approach, (6) the participatory approach, and (7) the ethnographic approach.

Functional approach

The functional approach as developed in the United States was designed to teach the life skills needed in everyday life and at the workplace. Teaching units and learner outcomes are often expressed in the forms of competencies.⁷ Functional skills to be taught often derive from a needs analysis in a particular domain (workplace, for example) that outlines the contexts in which language and literacy are needed.

Functional skills are outlined and prioritized for each context and appropriate instructional strategies are developed.

The approach is most common in programs that focus on workplace literacy or life skills and works well when students want to focus on everyday survival skills, such as reading a bus schedule, writing a check, or filling out an official form. As a rule, this approach focuses on "coping skills" and tends to neglect the expressive and creative functions of literacy. As used in most programs, it tends to shy away from controversial social issues, such as lack of affordable housing, discrimination, or poor working conditions.

Natural approach

The natural approach, popular in ESL classrooms in California and elsewhere, tries to teach languages and literacy the "natural way," that is, in a way that parallels the way young children learn their first language. Developed for students who speak little or no English, the approach stresses listening before speaking and reading before writing. Students who are new to English are believed to need a "silent period" in which they focus on listening before they speak and reading before they write.

Instruction is highly structured and follows a linear sequence, moving from nonverbal communication to single words, then to two and three word combinations, and, finally, on to sentences. The approach stresses communication but does not specify what kind of language or literacy is to be taught. Teachers try to provide a supportive environment so that learners won't fear making mistakes, and errors are not explicitly corrected as learners speak. Based on the principles of language acquisition popularized by Krashen,⁸ the approach was developed in reaction to the traditional grammar-based model of ESL teaching.

The natural approach works well for students and teachers who prefer a meaning-based approach that is clearly sequenced. As originally developed, it de-emphasizes the socio-cultural and political dimensions of literacy, focusing instead on language as a tool for general, all-purpose communication. Aspects of the functional, communicative, and natural approach are found in chapter 9 of this handbook in the curriculum modules by Maria Malagamba-Roddy, Nancy Hampson, Gail Weinstein-Shr, and Laima Maria Schnell.

Communicative approach

The communicative approach, as developed in Europe, focuses on the sociocultural aspects of language use and teaches students what to say, to whom, and under which circumstances. This approach places a special emphasis on cultural and linguistic appropriateness. Teaching units are presented as "notions" and "functions." Notions explain how abstract concepts, such as time, distance, and quantity, are expressed. Functions explain expression of communicative intent in ways that are appropriate for a given culture.

Examples of functions include apologizing (e.g., for being late or drinking the last beer), complaining (e.g., about slow service or bad weather), requesting (e.g., that one's teenage son turn down the music or that neighbors control their dog), and contradicting (e.g., the boss who maintains no overtime was worked or the spouse who claims that all housework is women's work). Popular in many beginning ESL classrooms, the

communicative approach integrates socio-cultural norms with the vocabulary and language forms used to express ideas between native speakers.

This approach works well when students want to compare cultures and understand "how things are done" in English. Similar to its U.S. counterpart, the functional approach, the communicative approach tends to neglect literacy for self-expression and often ignores the creative and cognitive functions of literacy.

Whole language approach

The whole language approach, based on research in psycho-and socio-linguistics, also supports a natural way of learning language and literacy, but it does not support the idea of a linear sequence from listening to speaking and from reading to writing. Learners may be encouraged to speak right away, using a combination between the native language and whatever English words or phrases they may have "picked up." Learners may "write" before they read, composing stories orally and putting down approximations of print that they later "translate" back to the teacher or to the group. Whole language teachers do not move from words to phrases to sentences but provide a variety of oral and written messages and then watch carefully to see which students might need additional support and which students would benefit from greater challenges. The basic tenet of whole language is that language must be taught and learned as a whole. Any attempt to break it into parts (vocabulary lists, phonics patterns, grammar exercises) destroys the spirit of language. A second principle holds that the four language modes - speaking, writing, listening, and reading - support each other and must not be artificially separated.⁹

A beginning whole language class may listen to a song in English and give it a title based on the feeling expressed in the music or create a giant birthday card for a classmate expressing wishes through "invented spelling." Another class may explore themes, such as "people migrating to different places," "countries gaining independence," "families helping each other," or "the history of work in our community." Learners talk about ideas and concepts related to these themes, collect pictures and symbols, make timelines, tell their personal histories, and interview friends and family members to get their views. Information is collected, discussed, analyzed, categorized, and then put into book form (pages stapled together with illustrated cover pages) to be shared with others. (See the curriculum modules in chapter 9 by Ana Huerta-Macias, Pat Rigg, and Janet Isserlis for other examples of using aspects of whole language.)

The whole language approach focuses on the social and cognitive aspects of language, giving learners the opportunity to talk, read, and write together, and discuss their own way of learning (often in conferences with the teacher). A highly reflective approach, whole language uses demonstrations and group interactions to explore how people use language and literacy to express thoughts and interpret ideas, in the process building "language awareness."¹⁰ Carefully planned, whole language activities often focus on particular strategies for reading and writing (brainstorming, predicting, and connecting one's personal experience to the experience of others) while providing learners with many options of what they want to read and write.

The approach works well with learners who want to develop a broad foundation for literacy. Teachers and learners who prefer "direct teaching" may initially find it difficult to fully implement all aspects of the whole language approach.

Language experience approach

The language experience approach (LEA), developed in part as a reaction to phonics-based reading, uses the language of the learner as a basis for literacy development. Although developed before the whole language movement, it is now often regarded as part of whole language. Since it lacks a strong theoretical foundation and learning philosophy, it is regarded by many as a method or technique and not a full-fledged approach.

As a rule, the language experience approach follows this process: learners discuss an experience or describe an event (either individually or as a group). The story the learners generate is transcribed by either a teacher, an aide, a volunteer, or a literate student. The "scribe" then reads the story together with those who have composed it. These learner-generated texts are then used as a basis for discussion, further reading and writing, and, where appropriate, focused language development activities.

In an ESL literacy classroom, an LEA story may derive from a common experience or an event (e.g., a Cinco de Mayo celebration, Chinese New Year, or an earthquake), from photographs that capture a feeling, or from videotapes and dramatizations of learner experiences. As a group, learners discuss ideas and later dictate the story to the teacher who negotiates with the students as to how the sentences are written down ("How do we want to start? What should the first sentence be?"). As a rule, the teacher writes down only sentences generated by the students and does not correct the grammar, since the point is not to write correct English sentences but rather to build an awareness that "whatever can be said can be written down." The process continues until learners end their story.

Next the teacher might read the story as dictated and then ask the group to read the story along with her several times. Learners will discuss the details of the story. Then, encouraged by the teacher ("Is there anything that is not quite clear? Where would you like to make changes?"), the group revises the text and reads the new version either orally or silently and alone or in pairs. Rereading increases the learners' speed, enabling beginning readers to practice fluent, efficient reading. If learners have a strong background in oral English, they may go on to suggest editing changes (fixing the grammar, correcting misspellings, etc.). Depending on the focus of the class, learners might spend some time on focused language and literacy activities, such as cloze exercises, putting paragraphs in sequence, or making flash cards for "favorite words."

To move the LEA stories beyond the personal, the group might relate their story to the experiences of others. The group might listen to a song or a jazz chant, read a simple poem, look at photographs, watch a video, and then compare experiences. This approach works especially well with students who are new to print but can express their ideas in oral English. LEA lacks the strong theoretical foundation of whole language and thus cannot be implemented across all program components.¹¹ (The curriculum modules by Gail Weinstein-Shr and Janet Isserlis illustrate aspects of the Language Experience Approach.)

Participatory approach

The participatory approach, originally developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil, emphasizes shared decision making and seeks to examine issues critical to learners' lives. The participatory approach focuses on problem posing and communal problem solving with the goal of developing the skills and strategies necessary to participate in a new culture and effectively confront problems. Unlike the functional approach, where life skills are taught for individual competence, a Freirean approach emphasizes collective knowledge.¹²

In a classroom using the participatory approach, the group may discuss themes that have a strong emotional content for the learners, such as the changing relationships between teenagers and their immigrant parents. Learners may respond to a picture, story, or dialogue that illustrates that theme, then discuss the differences in parent/child relationships in the home culture and in the United States, and talk about reasons for these differences. Learners then might describe their concerns about raising children in this country and discuss ways in which the community can support strong family relationships. As appropriate, the teacher might integrate language development activities with these discussions. (See the curriculum modules by Ana Huerta-Macias, Celestino Cotto Medina and Deidre Freeman, and Maria Malagamba-Roddy.)

Many programs that use the participatory approach include phonics to show students how words and word families are related. The class chooses a "key word" that has strong meaning for the group and, after discussing the concepts that underlie this word, breaks it into syllables. These syllables are then used to "generate" new words. (See the curriculum modules by Peggy Dean and Lynellyn Long & Marilyn Gillespie.) While this method has been used successfully with Romance languages, such as Portuguese, Spanish, and Creole, it is less effective with Germanic-based languages, such as English, where basic words (house, food, school, children) are not easily generated out of common syllables.

This approach works best with groups who share the characteristics of the people that Freire worked with: learners who share a common language and culture, and teachers and learners who both share concerns for fairness and justice and are willing to work toward social change. The approach is less effective with groups of learners who do not share the same language and who are not prepared to discuss social or political issues in English.

Ethnographic approach

The ethnographic approach draws its ideas from anthropology, education, and sociolinguistics. It is designed to develop linguistic and cultural awareness of the uses and functions of literacy in the society, particular communities, special settings, and in the learners' lives. When used in conjunction with a participatory approach, it often explores the power structures that validate or invalidate certain forms of literacy (e.g., standard English has greater prestige than non-standard variations).¹³ The approach is often used by teachers to find out more about the "literacy practices" of their students. Some teachers also use ethnographic strategies to explore how their non-literate, non-English speaking students negotiate meaning in a print rich, English speaking environment.¹⁴

In some classrooms, students learn to observe and investigate how English is used in their homes, at work, at the doctor's office, and in other places. For example, a workplace literacy group may decide to investigate what people do and say when a

problem arises, such as someone's being late or a supervisor's accusing a worker of making a mistake. The group would then investigate (1) what kind of problems commonly occur at their work sites, (2) who is involved, (3) the language used to introduce and explain the problem, (4) why such problems occur in the first place, and (5) possible strategies for resolving such problems.

The ethnographic approach emphasizes the socio-cultural dimensions of literacy and is often part of both the communicative and the participatory approach. This approach works well with teachers and students who are interested in exploring cross-cultural issues or patterns of communication. It is also an excellent starting point for needs assessment and curriculum development. It is less effective in classrooms where learners come from different communities and do not yet have the oral language skills required to explore the social dimensions of language in English. (For examples, see the modules by Celestino Medina and Deidre Freeman, Ana Huerta-Macias, and Maria Malagamba-Roddy.)

Effective practices

In addition to these major approaches, there are a number of effective literacy practices that innovative teachers are using in their classrooms. These include dialogue journals,¹⁵ project work, using learner-generated materials (by their own students as well as by others),¹⁶ cooperative learning activities, field trips, and neighborhood surveys. For examples of some of these practices, see "Tips for Teachers" at the end of this chapter and the promising practices in other parts of this handbook.

Whether an approach is used exclusively or in combination with others, successful literacy events in the classroom share some common characteristics. They provide opportunities for learners to

- interact with print in a meaningful way, using "whole" texts and not just isolated words and letters, and allow learners to explore the various dimensions of literacy
- engage in wide variety of literacy experiences through a broad range of reading and writing experiences that include not only functional materials but literature and "visual texts" as well
- use listening, speaking, reading, and writing throughout the program and examine the roles language and literacy play in their lives and in their community (in English as well as in the native language)
- negotiate meaning in interactions with others and discuss the strategies they use in reading and writing
- participate in making decisions about their own learning, including decisions about program structure, curriculum content, and learner/teacher interactions
- explore language and literacy in its many forms and gain a sense of the role that literacy can play in their lives and in the larger communities in which they participate

Choosing approaches

Exploring program goals, the nature of their communities, and the needs and interests of their students will help programs decide which approach might work best. Such explorations can also show whether a program is better served by implementing one particular approach or combining aspects of several meaning-based approaches. The discussion outlined here is designed to facilitate this decision making process.

Using one approach

Some programs support the "strong form" of an approach, implementing the philosophy that the approach is based on across various program components (needs assessment, curriculum, teaching, and evaluation) and adhering to the principles the approach spells out in all aspects of the program. Thus, a program adhering to a participatory approach may involve learners in decision making throughout the program while a whole language program may use only holistic assessment and teaching in its program. Choosing one approach and adhering to its principles often strengthens a program and brings staff and teachers together through a common philosophy. Such a program, however, is only effective if the goals and assumptions of the chosen approach are continuously examined to ensure that the approach continues to meet the needs of the students.

Combining approaches

Since it is difficult to implement a new literacy approach across all program components, most literacy programs have chosen to implement an "eclectic approach" instead. In these programs, teachers pick and choose from various approaches combining aspects of one with features of another. Eclecticism of this kind carries some dangers:

there may be lack of consistency from day to day within a class as well as across the program an ad-hoc approach to teaching may place greater emphasis on what to do on Monday morning than on consistent literacy development assessment may become fragmented since each approach might require a different assessment strategy.

A framework for adult ESL literacy

In an effort to minimize the shortcomings of the eclectic approach and to benefit from its flexibility, some innovative programs have developed a literacy framework that links various approaches through a common understanding of what the program is all about. Elements of a framework for ESL literacy include:

- an educational philosophy that outlines the pedagogical principles a program holds dear and the social goals it supports
- a set of literacy definitions that explain the assumptions the program makes about the nature of language, literacy, and learning
- the dimensions of literacy that the program wants to emphasize as it tries to be responsive to the needs of learners

- a curriculum focus that spells out whether the program has a general focus or whether it wants to limit literacy to specific contexts (e.g., community literacy or workplace literacy)
- a perspective on biliteracy that examines the program's stance on using the native language of the learners in its literacy education
- assumptions about learner participation that discuss the role that learners play in the program regarding decision making, curriculum development, classroom interactions between teachers and learners, and assessment
- assumptions about teacher participation that discuss the role that teachers and staff play in the program in respect to decision making, curriculum development, classroom interactions between teachers and learners, and assessment.

A literacy framework of this kind forms the basis of a well-articulated literacy education program that can bring together various approaches in a coherent fashion.

Practice: Implementing meaning-based approaches

This section is designed for teachers and coordinators who want to know how to implement meaning-based approaches in the ESL literacy classroom. It is divided into three parts:

1. "Classroom Strategies" for introducing initial literacy (reading and writing) and for helping learners to develop a sense of the uses and functions of literacy
2. "Cases in Point" that illustrate how innovative programs in the field have operationalized various aspects of meaning-based literacy teaching
3. "Tips for Teachers" that give practical advice for developing meaningful literacy activities that can be used with any approach.

Classroom strategies

Teaching strategies that introduce /learners to reading

Most teachers use "meaning making" activities along with pre-reading practice during the first few weeks of a beginning literacy class. If the students are pre-literate or have no familiarity with print, pre-reading practice may include activities that help learners associate real objects with pictures, tell certain shapes from other shapes, and build letter discrimination skills. Similarly, students who have never written anything before may benefit from pre-writing activities that develop the kinetic skills of holding a pencil and in forming letters with ease. Such activities include tracing letters and shapes in the air or on rough cloth before trying out letters on paper.¹⁷

The following teaching strategies are commonly used at the start of a beginning literacy class:

- Teachers and learners share their names, countries of origin, and bring in pictures of their families. The group shares the names of the people in the pictures and discusses relationships. Learners may volunteer the ages of people in the pictures. As the class progresses, short stories about the families in the pictures may be developed using the language experience approach.
- The teacher writes large name cards for students to place in front of them. Name cards are collected and, at the beginning of each class, learners help each other find their name tags. At various times, learners may be asked to sit next to someone who has a "similar" name (similar can mean coming from the same language, sharing the same initial letter, or having a similar length). As the class progresses, learners are asked to focus on certain aspects of their names (initial letters, letters that reoccur, or similar sounds among the names in the group).
- Teachers and learners develop signs about their home countries and group them by some criteria, such as distance from the U.S. or common languages. Learners can match their names with the names of their countries or participate in other activities that require problem solving.
- Learners discuss how they came to the United States and who came with them. Some may also want to talk about the family members they left behind. Learners are encouraged to draw pictures depicting their journeys or bring in photographs and share them with the group. Again, language experience stories can follow these discussions.
- The group talks about how long they have been in the United States or discusses how long it took to come to this country. If appropriate, dates are introduced. The teacher may write "Today is Monday, May 3, 1993" on the board and with the group read the new date each day. Simple grids or charts may be introduced that show who came from which country and when.
- As the class progresses, the teacher highlights certain letters as they appear in the words that learners are most familiar with and shows that many words share the same sound combinations.¹⁸ (See also the curriculum module by Lynellyn Long and Marilyn Gillespie.)

Most teachers have found that introducing a few key words that contain the same letters is more effective than drilling learners on the alphabet or teaching 26 letters in alphabetical sequence. In many classrooms, the alphabet is used as follows: written out in big bright letters, it serves as a reference point for students and reminds them that there is a finite set of letters to be learned. At the appropriate time, teachers show how the alphabet can be used to make life easier (e.g., to check words in the dictionary, to sort vocabulary cards, or to find a dentist in the phone book).

Teaching strategies that introduce learners to writing

In many classrooms, writing is introduced as students learn to read and express themselves in English. As teachers discover which words their students can recognize (their names, most often), they focus on a few initial letters. Many use the following strategies:

- Learners write letters in the air or trace them on velvet, sandpaper, or on the surface of their desks before attempting to copy them on the blackboard. Some learners might trace their names a few times before attempting to write them freehand, and those who have never held a pencil may need a chance to develop small motor coordination by drawing loops and imaginary letters.
- Learners use big, brightly colored felt tip pens on butcher paper or large cardboard strips. As learners progress to writing their first and last names, paper or strips can be cut to show word boundaries.
- The teacher provides opportunities for learners to sign large birthday cards or draw pictures for a get well message. These messages are then posted in the classrooms as first examples of learners' "published writing." Language experience stories, typed up by the teacher (and possibly enlarged), are also collected, illustrated, shared, and made public.

As the class progresses, learners are encouraged to interview each other to find out more about their classmates' backgrounds, experiences, hopes, struggles, and their opinions of issues that interest the class. Teachers often develop grids and charts that allow learners to write down short answers to the questions they ask, answers that later on may turn into poems, plays, biographies, or opinion pieces.

Classroom strategies for developing print awareness

In addition to the reading and writing strategies outlined above, some educators now propose that teachers focus on helping students develop what is called "print awareness." Under this model, students are encouraged to see, collect, and respond to the print that surrounds them and, thus, slowly develop a sense for the functions and uses of print. (See the curriculum module by Pat Rigg.)

At the print awareness level, students are not asked to read or write anything in the conventional sense. The teacher merely helps them to develop a sense of what print looks like, such as how it is different from a picture or the wallpaper, which merely exists as decoration. Students who are not familiar with the Roman alphabet may also need to develop a global sense of the shape and look of English writing before focusing on individual words and letters.

Some teachers help learners to move from print awareness to literacy by using realia that contain writing to help students see what they already know. This is illustrated in the following activity:

1. The teacher brings in food packages, a stop sign, a tube of toothpaste, a dollar bill, a pack of popular cigarettes, or some other common commercial item with print on the outside. Then, working together, learners discuss where the products may have come from or what they might be used for. As they try to guess what the print on the packet might say, the teacher supports good guesses (even if they don't correspond exactly to the print on the product) and encourages further hypothesizing. The teacher then marks the most obvious print on the product and the group, proud of their success in getting the general idea of the printed message, reads together.

2. In a follow-up activity, a teacher may ask students about the products they use most often. If members of the group mention that they like soft drinks, the teacher might bring in cans of Coca Cola or 7-Up and some food and have a mini-party. Students select what drink they want by "reading" the label on the appropriate can. These activities are then repeated with other items that learners can easily "read."
3. As the class progresses, the teacher will move from using realia to using only graphics, photographs, product labels, or pictures of store signs. Learners now discuss the pictures and try to guess what a label or sign might say. Again, learners should be encouraged to talk about the strategies they use in their guessing so that they can develop confidence in their own ability to interpret print.
4. Finally, the teacher copies the names of the most popular products and signs onto newsprint (e.g., Kent or Crest, arroz or soy sauce) and learners try to match the writing on the page with the actual product.

Similar activities can be developed around the print commonly found around classrooms, an area marked "DANGER," a door marked "EXIT," "911" tagged to the bulletin board, the word "LADIES" on a restroom door, or a "WALK/DON'T WALK" signal in front of the school.

These strategies are effective because they build on the knowledge that adults already possess. In showing adult learners that they can make sense of literacy the same way that they make sense of their environment every day, these types of literacy activities also build confidence and pride.

Cases in point

The following cases illustrate how programs in the field use variations of meaning-based approaches to support learners in their language and literacy development. We offer these examples as a starting point for discussions among teachers and among teachers and coordinators.

Providing a social context for literacy education

Many successful ESL programs have come to realize that literacy education is most effective if it is tied to the lives of the learners and reflects their experience as community members, parents, and workers.

Case in point

El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York asks the men and women in the program to do research in the community and report their findings back to the group. When we visited, the participants had canvassed several streets in the neighborhood, counted the number of stores with bilingual signs, and interviewed the merchants to find out what language was used in their interactions with customers. Back in the classrooms, participants charted the information, showing a pattern of bilingual use in commercial interactions street by street. Later analysis and synthesis of the information

led to a discussion of the benefits of bilingualism in various contexts (family, business, and trade). By using the community as a context for literacy, the program showed learners how to access, interpret, synthesize and analyze information in ways that spoke to the learners' reality and connected school-based learning with community experience. (See also the curriculum modules by Celestino Cotto Medina and Deidre Freeman.)

Learning through experience

ESL teachers have long known that linking verbal and non-verbal communication is an effective way of introducing language and literacy. To that end, they provide learners with the opportunity to participate in "purposeful literacy tasks," such as following directions for a VCR or on a subway ticket machine, building a model to specifications, or following a recipe. As learners gain confidence, such hands-on learning is often followed by "experiential learning" in which they work in groups to give a presentation, write a class story, develop a yearbook, generate "class rules" that the group wants to follow, or design a resource guide for other students.

Case in point

At the YMCA literacy school in San Francisco, learners take a field trip using the city's bus and subway system. They take pictures of the ticket machines, the ticket purchasing instructions, and the large subway maps on the wall. Back in the classroom they use the photographs to study the subway maps. Then they discuss the problem solving strategies they used to get their tickets and find their way around.

Case in point

Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) in Seattle publishes the stories that the women in the program have written as part of a class called Family Talk Time. These stories contain the women's remembrances about family celebrations, as in the stories "Nigisti's Wedding" and "New Year," and about special places as in "Tom's House in Laos" and "On the Mekong."¹⁹ Illustrated by the women, the stories, many only a paragraph or two long, are stapled together with a bright cover showing the native languages of the group and shared with the community. (For examples of using learner-generated materials, see the curriculum module by Gail Weinstein-Shr.)

Linking communicative competence and language awareness

To find the proper balance between fluency and accuracy in English (especially in writing), most innovative programs put a primary focus on communication and a secondary focus on error correction. Yet, largely in response to learner requests for information on "what is correct," teachers often give simple explanation about sentence structure and word patterns. Many programs use process writing, a method that teaches students to focus on meaning during the "creative stage" and on form during the editing stage. Through process writing, students learn to edit what they have written, pay attention to certain language patterns as they read the text of others, and develop strategies for moving toward the use of standard spelling and grammar.

Case in point

At IIRI in Rhode Island, learners work in small groups to develop stories based on sets of pictures distributed by the teacher. As the group develops ideas, students take notes. They then compose the story on newsprint. One student acts as a scribe and checks spelling and wording choices with the group. Since the group knows that the story will be shared with the rest of the class, editing becomes an important aspect of writing. The story is then brought to the front of the class where a member of the group reads it aloud using the picture to illustrate her point. Other learners then respond to the writing, asking questions such as "why is the girl smiling?" or making suggestions for improvement such as "the dress red is not right. "

In innovative programs teachers often alternate between activities that involve listening and speaking and those that demand reading and writing; however, the major focus remains on meaning and communication. As they provide opportunities for using literacy in purposeful ways, these teachers are mindful of their learners. They watch closely to see what their strengths are, where their interests lie, where they might need further support, and where they could benefit from additional challenges. They have become classroom ethnographers.

Tips for ESL literacy teachers

How can teachers provide a rich literacy experience for their students? The following suggestions, based on the educational principles that shape rich language and literacy development, may provide some guidance. These guidelines are not meant as "teacher-proof" solutions to ESL literacy; rather they are meant as a basis for reflection and discussion.

Strive for genuine communication between yourself and your students.

Design activities that tell you who your students are, what their experiences have been, what they care about, and what literacy means to them. Share information about yourself, your joys, and your sorrows, and invite your students to talk about themselves. Treat your student as you would any intelligent adult and do not spend a great deal of time asking questions to which you already know the answer. After you have just written the date on the board, saying "Su Ma, could you please read the date on the board?" is more respectful than asking "What's the date today?"

Make your classroom into a community of learners where everyone feels welcome and all views are respected.

Provide opportunities for different groups to work together, share information, and be a resource for each other. Ask learners to read as a group, share their ideas about a piece they have read, and write collaboratively. Invite contributions that do not depend on language and literacy, such as illustrating a story the group has written. Provide opportunities for sharing experiences across cultures by asking learners to talk about their lives back home and share significant cultural customs (e.g., weddings, funerals, or births) and family traditions. Discuss differences in literacy practices as well as commonalities. Learn to be a facilitator who guides the group, instead of a general who controls all interactions.

Link literacy with visual information.

Provide information in the forms of visuals and realia (objects such as phones, staplers, machines, food, and signs) to get a point across. Choose photographs, posters, slides, and videos whose message can be understood without language (e.g., Charlie Chaplin's "The Immigrant," the grape stomping scene from "I Love Lucy").²⁰ Use these visuals to create an atmosphere, illustrate a point, demonstrate a task, elicit a feeling, or pose a problem. Encourage learners to respond in many different ways, allowing them to smell, touch, and manipulate realia and to respond to visuals in both verbal and non-verbal ways (classifying signs or developing strip stories by moving pictures around). Provide opportunities for learners to illustrate their writings with illustrations and photographs and give them a chance to interact without having to depend on language and literacy (e.g., sharing food, organizing a potluck, dancing at end-of-cycle parties).

Publish your students' work.

Make room for your students' writing on your walls and in the hallways. Involve them in making signs, labels, and posters. Write their ideas down on large newsprint, tape papers on the wall, and refer to them often. Involve the school in publishing end-of-semester yearbooks, autobiographies, and collections of student writings. Use hallways or places where students congregate as a gallery for displaying student work, photos, poems, etc. Encourage learners to invite family and friends to visit and admire their work.

Don't let learners get "mired in words."

Instead, provide opportunities to get the "big picture." Ask learners to bring in literacy materials they find puzzling, have them explain the context, and enlist the group in guessing what the materials might say. Highlight key words and ask learners to fill in the rest using what they know about the real world. Watch an interesting video with the sound off and have learners create their own stories or predict what the actors might be saying. Turn on the sound and ask learners to repeat the phrases they catch. Talk about the way adults learn to listen and read in a second language by linking what they already know about the world with what they hear and see written.

Make literacy learning fun and focus on things that matter.

Students learn best when they have something to say and a reason for paying attention to others. Present a variety of options and then let learners choose what interests them, so they will enjoy their work. Give them opportunities to respond in a variety of ways in class, such as quiet listening, group recitations, non-verbal reactions, and written responses. Encourage and support your students, but challenge them as well.

Focus on meaning while helping learners see how language works.

Recognize that ESL students need opportunities to use language and literacy for their own purposes. Sometimes, that purpose includes understanding unusual phrases, idiosyncratic pronunciation, or simple grammar rules. At other times, students may wonder what language is appropriate in certain situations, such as what kind of note to write if a teacher's mother has died. Make room in your students to write down the topics that concern them and the questions they want to have answered. Let them predict what

the speaker might say. Help your students make connections between what they know, what they are curious about, and the information they expect to receive. Ask your students to respond to the session and evaluate the speaker (e.g., what they liked and didn't like, understood and didn't understand, their favorite new words, etc.).

Connect literacy to life.

Ask students to tell their stories, share their pictures, and recite their favorite poems or sayings. Give them the opportunity to observe literacy use in a variety of contexts and ask them to listen for interesting language wherever they go. Turn your students into researchers who ask family members, friends, and acquaintances about their experiences with schooling and learning. Ask them to find out about other people's views on language and culture and compare them to their own. Encourage learners to examine the role of literacy in their life and in their communities and help them see how literacy can be used to shape and alter the world.

Assess success.

As you observe your learners, ask yourself "what is really going on here?" Find ways of recording "literacy incidents," events that show you whether your students are fully engaged in a particular activity or are just "going through the motions." Share your notes. Collaborate with others in your program (coordinators, teachers, and learners) and decide "what really counts." Define what you mean by success in language, literacy, and learning for the program and develop strategies for capturing small successes along the way. Categorize, analyze, and summarize until a rich picture of your literacy class emerges. Congratulate your students on their achievements. Share your success.

Reflections: Selecting and/or developing materials

How can a program successfully match its approach to teaching ESL literacy with materials that are comprehensible, interesting, and relevant to learner's lives? Much depends on

- the approach a program supports
- the preference of learners and teachers
- the availability of commercial materials suitable for the program's purposes
- the time, money, interest, and experience available to develop program-based materials.

Given the wide diversity of ESL literacy programs, it is not surprising that there is diversity in the kind of materials programs use.

Some programs rely largely on learner-generated materials, which may include language experience stories, student drawings, illustrations and photographs, environmental print collected in the classroom and in the community, and "found" materials, such as bills, letters, and notices that learners bring from home. As learners

progress, these materials are often supplemented with "authentic stories," accounts written by writers for a general audience, not just for ESL learners.

In other programs, materials might largely consist of "literacy kits" that teachers have assembled over the years. These may include pictures, posters, movies, songs, stories, poems, magazines, and books which may be in both English and the learners' mother tongue.

Still others use textbooks they have found that learners and teachers enjoy. Most programs, however, use a combination of materials that are learner-generated, teacher-assembled, and commercially produced.

Questions for decision making

To help programs make informed decisions about materials to select or develop, we offer the following questions for reflection. Please keep in mind that not all questions will be applicable for all programs.

Need

1. Do we need textbooks and, if so, for what purposes?
2. Are our students better served with textbooks or should we develop a resource bank of materials that teachers can share?
3. What is the best way to spend our limited dollars? Does it make more sense to spend funds on textbooks and prepared materials or should we invest in teacher time and expertise?
4. Does it make sense to invest in technology? If so, should the focus be on commercially prepared videos and computer-based literacy programs or should we focus on buying equipment that allows students to produce their own materials (cameras, camcorders, word processors, printers)?²¹ Should we invest in equipment that allows learners to use literacy for telecommunication?

Linking ESL literacy to program focus

1. Do the materials illustrate the varying perceptions that teachers and learners have of the reading and writing process? Is there a focus on meaning throughout?
2. Are content, language, and exercises in the materials reflective of the program philosophy? If not, how would the materials fit into the orientation the program has chosen?
3. Do the materials emphasize both accuracy and fluency in reading and writing? Does the balance between these skills support the program's view of the way literacy should be taught?

4. Is the primary focus of the materials on the literacy area the program wants to emphasize (e.g., workplace, ESL civics, pre-employment, pre-academic, life skills, family literacy, self-actualization)?

Language and literacy

1. Will students feel both successful and challenged doing the lessons?
2. Do the materials try to link listening and speaking to reading and writing?
3. Do the materials focus on meaningful reading and writing for a purpose (other than practice)? Are there enough opportunities for students to "try out" writing and express their ideas on paper?
4. Do the activities present a good balance between word recognition skills and letter identification on the one hand and whole language activities on the other? Do the activities provide enough opportunities for global processing?
5. Do the materials take advantage of the print environment that exists in the students' communities? Do they present opportunities to develop print awareness?
6. Are the materials written at the appropriate level in regard to students' overall language proficiency, literacy background, familiarity with cultural concepts, and prior knowledge?
7. Do the materials encourage students to make hypotheses while reading by asking students to guess the meaning of a word using context cues? Do the materials encourage students to take risks in their writing by going through a process of brainstorming with others, writing down ideas, composing several try-out drafts, and focusing on selected aspects of spelling, punctuation, and grammar in the final editing phase?

Linking text to student needs, goals, and experiences

Do the materials

1. contain the kind of activities that respond to student needs and student goals?
2. reflect the students' reality, their roles, lives, and aspirations?
3. help students to link their own experience to the activities and tasks? Do they provide space for student contributions, such as learner-generated materials, student research, etc.?
4. provide a link to the community, such as realistically reflecting issues that the community faces?

Extending the students' background know/edge

Do the materials

1. help activate the background knowledge that students bring to class and call on the coping strategies that they have developed?
2. help students acquire new ideas by linking their experiences and ideas to larger issues in the community or the society?
3. contain opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem solving?

Cultural bias

1. Do the materials present positive images of immigrant groups in general and of the student group in particular? Do they avoid stereotyping according to age, gender, and ethnic group?
2. Do the materials stereotype by omission? Are women, the elderly, Asians, Latinos, Blacks, and other groups absent or do they appear only as tokens?
3. Is there an ethnocentric slant to the way cultural information is presented? Do the materials give the impression (or even insist) that there is one right way of doing things or do they explain options and choices?
4. Are the contributions of immigrants and minorities in general and the learners' groups in particular adequately represented in the readings?
5. Do the materials allow learners to present their own perspectives on life or do they simply show adults in their roles as model workers, model parents, or model community members?

Linking teacher experience and interest with the materials

1. Given the background of the teachers, do the materials look "teachable?" If not, can the program provide the support needed to make it so?
2. Would the materials be a joy to teach and fun to learn from? What activities can be used to "lighten up" literacy overload?
3. Does the content reflect the interests of both teachers and students?
4. Is it clear how teachers are meant to use these materials? How does the teaching approach the materials support fit into the focus of the program's staff development efforts?

Print accessibility

1. Is the print easily accessible? Is it large enough and is there enough white space?
2. Is print supported by context, such as pictures, photographs, charts, and headings?

3. Is there enough room for students to practice, scribble, and edit their writing?

Adaptability

1. Can the materials be adapted to various learning and teaching styles?
2. Are there enough different kinds of activities so all students can develop a range of skills?
3. Do the activities lend themselves to whole group discussions, small group work, pair activities, and individual reading and writing?

Assessment

1. Do the materials support both the curriculum and the assessments that the program is using (e.g., assessment of reading and writing processes)?
2. Can the activities be used as a basis for observing how students interact with print? Do they lend themselves to observing and evaluating literacy progress?

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the reading and writing process, see Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Byrnes, 1987; Cambourne, 1979; Carrell, 1987; Eskey, 1988; Goodman et al., 1984; Hughes, 1986; Kern, 1989; Smith, 1982x; and Smith, 1988.
2. See Smith, 1986; Goodman, 1986; and Cambourne, 1979.
3. See Goodman, 1986; de Beaugrande, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Graves, 1983; Rumelhart, 1985; Smith, 1982; and Smith, 1988.
4. See Smith, 1982.
5. See Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988; Eskey, 1988; and Grabe, 1988.
6. See Eskey, 1988 and Grabe, 1988.
7. See also the discussion of a competency-based curriculum in the Curriculum chapter.
8. See The natural approach by Krashen & Terrell, 1983.
9. See Rigg & Kazemek, in press.
10. For a full discussion, see Crandall, in press; Goodman, 1986; Kazemek, 1989; Rigg & Kazemek, in press; and Soifer et al., 1990.
11. See also Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Rigg, 1990; and Taylor, in press.
12. See Wallerstein, 1983.
13. Sometimes learner investigation includes examining the values that are attached to certain ways of speaking or writing (e.g., attitudes toward accents or non-standard spelling), leading to a discussion of "correctness" as a concept that reflects middle class values. See also Auerbach, 1990.
14. See Fingeret, 1983 and Weinstein-Shr, 1990. See also the chapter on biliteracy in this handbook for ideas about which questions to ask.
15. See Dialogueueueueue journal writing with nonnative English speakers by Peyton & Reed, 1990.
16. See Listening to students' voices: Publishing students' writing for other students to read by Joy Kreeft Peyton, in press.
17. For examples of activities to use with pre-literate students, see Savage, 1984 and Bell & Burnaby, 1984.
18. There is no agreement on whether it is better to start with lower case or upper case letters and some confusion on the part of the learners is inevitable, as they try to figure out why the small "q" looks so different from the capital "Q. " Since most literacy students have had some experience with print, teachers often introduce the two sets simultaneously and then let the learners choose the type of letters they want to use, knowing that mix-ups will sort themselves out eventually.
19. See ReWA, 1991.
20. For more ideas, contact the video interest section of TESOL or Lenore Balliro of the Adult Learning Resource Center (ALRC) at Roxbury College in Boston.
21. We want to thank Elsa Auerbach for suggesting this point.

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