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Who is this section for?

If your student can speak English well enough to carry on a simple conversation and can carry out most everyday transactions such as shopping without an interpreter, then the strategies in this resource are appropriate for helping them learn to read and write (National Reporting System Level 1 for Speaking and Listening).

You should note however, that this resource has been written to help you tutor a student in adult literacy. It is not designed to offer strategies for English language teaching.

If English is not your student's first language, they will experience some degree of additional complication in learning to read and write, which native English speakers may not. This section deals very briefly with some of those aspects.

In the process of learning to read and write, your student's English language will probably be improved, but that is not the primary aim of these suggested activities.

If you need to help someone to develop or improve their speaking and listening skills, see the end of this section for further references and referral information.

A second language learner will bring a whole range of factors to the literacy learning situations which do not necessarily apply to the native speaker.

Factors affecting literacy learning

Literacy in student's own language

If your student has not been to school or has had very little schooling and is not literate in their own language, progress will necessarily be slow. They need to learn a lot of basic concepts about how language works, concepts which we take for granted but which need to be made explicit for some learners. For example, the concept of a 'word', a 'sound' and a 'letter' and the idea that a sound is represented by a letter or a group of letters are difficult concepts to grasp for many students.

- Make these concepts explicit. Talk about them often.
- Be patient!

Schooling background

On the other hand, your student may have had a successful educational background and be a confident learner. They may even speak other languages. If this is the case, they will have advantages over many native speakers in that they will understand how language works and be more likely to be a self directed learner.

The script of the first language

If your student is literate in their first language, is the script Roman (like English)? If not, then one of the early tasks is to teach them to recognise and form the letters of the Roman alphabet.

- See *Handwriting* Section 5 p 28.
- Give exercises on visual discrimination between the features of similar letters such as p and b and d.

The reading process and the second language learner

The process of learning to read is basically the same for second language learners as it is for native speakers. However, you need to recognise that some aspects of the process are going to be more difficult for them.

In the section *How do we read?* we point out that efficient readers use four sets of clues in reading:

1. The context of the text

We are able to make a lot of predictions about the material we are about to read from its context. (*Is it in the sports section of the newspaper or the TV guide? Is it a supermarket ad or a school newsletter?*) It is possible that your student has come from a culture which is not a very literate one - where people are not surrounded by newspapers and advertisements. If so they may not be used to the types of print which surround us in our culture, so that they are unable to make use of these clues in reading.



- Draw your student's attention to the format of the material you are reading and show several examples.

2. The meaning of the text

Whereas native speakers are usually able to predict the meaning of one or two unknown words in a sentence, the more restricted vocabulary of a second language learner will mean a text may have many unknown words. This places an additional strain on their ability to make use of this set of clues.

In addition, the cultural significance of whole concepts may be mysterious to them so that they may not understand how particular parts of a text fit together. For example, unless you are aware of the significance of *Once upon a time ...*, you may not be aware that you are about to read a fairy story.

- Precede any reading activity with plenty of discussion and clarify any difficult vocabulary.
- You could spend time building up sets of vocabulary using pictures etc. before attempting texts on particular subject areas.
- Take time to explain (using a number of examples or samples) some of the cultural aspects of the texts you are reading. For example, expressions of someone's opinion are found in some parts of the newspaper and magazines. On the other hand statements of fact are found in other parts of the newspaper and government brochures etc.

3. The grammar of the sentence

This will be perhaps the most inaccessible set of clues. If your student doesn't know whether the sentence they have read 'sounds right' or not, then they can't monitor their reading.

- Read to your student often to help them absorb the rhythm of the language.
- Read a passage to your student before you ask them to read it.

4. The sounds made by the letters

Since second language learners can't rely very much on the above three sets of clues, they usually tend to rely very heavily on trying to work out the sounds made by the letters. They will have trouble predicting what the word might be and will rely on decoding, word by word with the result that meaning will be lost. Trying to sound it out may pose additional problems anyway for the student who has problems hearing and recognising sounds in English.

- Encourage the use of all four sets of clues by using the language experience approach. This is ideal for second language learners.

The writing process and the second language learner

When native speakers are learning to write they face a range of demands simultaneously claiming their attention - the ideas they are trying to capture, spelling, punctuation, clear handwriting, appropriate layout on the page and more. For the second language learner, there are additional things to worry about.

If they are new to the Roman script, attention must be paid to forming the letters. If they are not literate in their first language, the fine muscle control necessary to hold a pen correctly needs to be learnt.

The matter of acceptable grammar becomes important. Halting English, aided by facial expressions and body language may be adequate for oral situations, but greater language skills are called upon when it comes to writing. A limited vocabulary will add to the frustration.

The problem of spelling poses additional problems. While a native speaker can make up the spelling for many words by sounding them out, and can usually get quite close, the second language learner may not even get close. The problem is that they may have difficulty distinguishing certain sounds. For example they may not hear the difference between /b/ and /v/ and have no way of judging from the sound of the word, which letter is required. When the student wants to write *shíp* they may be saying *sheep* to themselves. Speakers of some languages simply find it very difficult to pronounce some particular sounds in English. In spite of your best efforts your student may never be able to say some words. 'Sound it out' as a spelling strategy will have more limitations than for the native speaker.

- Give your student plenty of writing models to use. Write to them and with them.
- Stress the visual memory for the spelling of a word.
- Give some practice in sound discrimination of problem sounds. For example, say a number of words beginning with the same sound, interspersed with some others and ask them to identify the odd ones out.
- Encourage your student to set up a personal dictionary.

Cultural issues



There are a range of cultural issues which may also impinge on your relationship with your student. For example many students will nod and smile when you ask them if they understand something when in fact they do not understand. This response may be due to a variety of cultural reasons including being respectful to the teacher, not wanting to be in disgrace for not knowing the answer, not having adequate language to state this respectfully to the teacher or to explain they understand part of it but not all, etc. You will have to find other ways of gauging their understanding.

Many students whose educational experiences have been in very teacher dominated settings will look to you for direction in everything. They will be puzzled by suggestions that they tell you what sort of things they want to read or to write about, or that they should first try to find their own mistakes in a piece of writing. You will need to explain why you are trying to encourage them to take some control and that you are not just being a lazy tutor.

Appropriate topics for discussion and writing also vary from culture to culture. Your student may have been through traumatic and life changing experiences in their native country. In our culture we would expect that writing about this would be a therapeutic thing to do (and provide a rich source of writing/spelling practice) but in many cultures such topics are off limits. Likewise, writing about family and home seems an obvious topic, but if the family has been separated because of migration, it may cause distress to share the story with a stranger.

These are some very brief examples which may or may not apply to your student. The important point is that you need to be sensitive to their response to such issues.

What about grammar?

Be realistic about what you can help your student with, and in general don't try to correct every mistake. If your primary task is to help them learn to read and write, then that is probably enough for them to think about, especially if they are a beginner reader/writer.

The best help you can be is to model acceptable English grammar. For example, if your student says, *Yesterday I move to new flat*. You could reply *Oh, you moved to a new flat did you?*

However, if your student is not a beginner and has developed some confidence with reading and writing, they may want you to help them with some aspects of the grammar. Be careful to target particular grammatical structures and give plenty of practice one at a time rather than trying to correct everything they say or write.

Verbs are usually the most troublesome. For example, if they have trouble remembering to use the past tense, you could write a cloze exercise with only regular past tense verbs deleted (that is, verbs ending in *-ed*) Or you could give a passage written in the present tense and ask them to re-write it in the past tense.

The only exception to this 'gently, gently' approach is if you are helping your student with an authentic piece of writing for someone else to read, for example a formal business letter or a model of a letter for school. In these circumstances you help produce a whole text with acceptable English grammar.

What are the boundaries of the tutor's role?

You need to be clear in your mind just what the boundaries of your role are, particularly if your student is a new arrival. If they are newly arrived, they may have all sorts of settlement issues, both emotional and problem solving, which they may look to you to help with.

Be clear from the start how much of your time and emotional energy you are prepared to give to this. It is probably more efficient anyway, to refer them to an organisation such as the local migrant resource centre or other government department.

Your role as literacy tutor is not to solve the problems for your student, but to help them develop the skills they need to find and use the resources in the community. For example, if they are having problems getting a Medicare card, you could devote a series of lessons to looking up the telephone book to find the phone number to call, practising the vocabulary and phrases necessary to make the phone call, or writing a model letter requesting information.



Some Useful References

NSW AMES publishes a range of very good materials. Their catalogue is available online at www.ames.edu.au or by writing to:

PO Box 1222
Darlinghurst
NSW 1300
Ph: (02) 9289 9255

The following are some suggestions from their catalogue:

- Christie J. *The Literacy Workbook for Beginners*, AMES NSW, 2005.
- Duffy J. & Graham J. *Shopping Words*, AMES NSW, 2006.
- Barnard B. Kerr J. & Wilson L. *Writing Skills*, NSW AMES, 1997.

The Australian National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) also publishes a wide range of very good materials. Their catalogue is available online at <http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/publications/Catalogue.pdf> or by writing to:

NCELTR Publications, Macquarie University
North Ryde NSW 2109
Ph: (02) 9850 7966

The following is particularly useful for the beginning reader/writer:

- Mullen D. *Numbers and Letters Workbook, (It's Over to You series)*, NCELTR, 2005. (Not available as part of the *It's Over to You* materials on the Department of Immigration website)
- *Australia Has No Winter* (Video) Video Education Australasia, 1999.
<http://www.vea.com.au/index/index.html>
- O'Sullivan K. *Understanding Ways*, Hale & Ironmonger, 1994.
- The Department of Immigration website has a section with useful practical suggestions for beginner readers.
<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/help-with-english/learn-english/index.htm>
Click on *Curriculum Materials* and *It's Over to You*, Stage 1 or Stage 2 materials. They can also be ordered through NCELTR.

Further information for language tutoring

If you would like more information about being a language tutor for someone from a non-English speaking background, you might like to contact one of the organizations below for details of their tutor training programs:

www.ames.net.au/volunteer (all states)

www.smithfamily.com.au/index.cfm?pid=2534&pageid=2569 (all states)

http://els.sa.edu.au/home/hts_tutor.php (South Australia)

www.tafe.qld.gov.au/courses/english_language/volunteer_tutor (Queensland)

www.cit.act.edu.au/foccus/amep/home_tutor_scheme/ (ACT)

NSW AMES also offers online English courses at www.ames.edu.au; click the link to ENGLISH@AMES or phone (02) 9289 9222.