

Preparing Non/preliterate Learners for Literacy

Robin Lovrien Schwarz

Sometimes teachers of non-literate or very low-literate learners* want to start right in with instruction in reading and writing. However, having very limited literacy does not just mean not knowing how to read and write, but more fundamentally not knowing many pre-literacy skills needed to *begin* reading, writing, math and other learning.

Focusing on three important types of these pre-literacy skills can help assure that non-literate learners will be able to move into literacy more easily.

1. Visual processing skills:

- **Interpreting visual information correctly.** Non-literate learners see pictures, drawings and photographs differently from the way literate learners do because their brains have not yet learned how to interpret two-dimensional information. Consequently, they need explicit training in learning to understand visual images, and then associating them with real objects and events.

Build these skills by first having learners match *real* objects with photos, then gradually with drawings (no text—this is not a reading exercise). Limit this practice to objects learners know and use daily (Be careful not to make assumptions or decisions about what learners should know!) Be sure to have multiple versions of real objects, pictures and photos to encourage generalization of the idea. Aim for lots of individual or pair activity so that learners have plenty of opportunity for tactile input, touching and sorting objects and pictures as they say them. Provide practice over many weeks until learners can readily match pictures and objects—and then can pick out pictures or photos from oral prompts only.

- **Associate symbols and two-dimensional information with sounds and meanings from real life.** When children see a picture of a ball over and over, they soon learn that the picture can represent the ball they like to play with. Later, when they are learning to read, they readily accept the picture for the real ball. Non-literate learners do not have experience with this kind of pre-reading training in transferring meaning from objects to pictures. Programs in many parts of the United States report to me that even when pre-literate learners begin to recognize pictures or drawings, they may not readily substitute them for the real thing.
- To extend the meaning of pictures to real life, have learners go “shopping” for real objects using pictures for the shopping list. Or they assemble pictures to “write a letter” showing what they did in class—listening, writing, helping, etc.; then they show their “letter” to another student, who interprets it.
- **Perceiving spaces and sequences in visual information:** It is notoriously hard for low-literate learners to see that upper-case letters are taller than lower-case letters, to learn to space words adequately when writing, or to pay attention to

margin lines. This is because they have not yet developed the visual perceptual skills to see these details.

A variety of tactile activities will help learners perceive the size and appearance differences of letters. They can sort plastic letters by size, correct words by replacing lower case letters with capitals, highlight capitals on pages of print and make exaggerated letters on a white board or flipchart. To increase visual sequencing, they can find and circle words they are learning in lists with similarly spelled or misspelled words.

2. Auditory processing skills—

- **Phonological awareness:** Before beginning phonemic awareness (understanding individual sounds in words), non-literate learners require more basic phonological awareness of chunks of sound—how many words are in an utterance, then how many syllables are in a word; hearing when words rhyme or don't rhyme, and then becoming aware of individual beginning and ending sounds in words. (See *On Speaking and Cultural Terms*, Northeast ABLE Resource Center at www.neable.org.)

To help learners develop phonological awareness, design activities where learners have kinesthetic and tactile input as well as auditory. Have them start by “walking out” sentences, one step for each word; next they place a card or other marker on their desk for each word they hear or say in a sentence. Do the same for syllables once words are mastered.

- **Auditory discrimination and sequencing:** As adult language learners, non-literate learners also need extra help paying attention to critical sounds such as plurals and in discriminating important sounds such as sh/ch .

Start practicing auditory discrimination of sounds through simple same-different activities: Say two words; have learners hold up one color card if they are the same, another color for “different.” Focus on one sound contrast at a time (Don't contrast vowels at first—these are hard to hear and non-literate learners don't yet understand the idea of beginning-middle-last sounds in words). Be SURE to use words learners are learning or know: pen/Ben; back/bag etc. Do the practice within the context of vocabulary lessons or other meaningful activities and repeat often to help learners improve.

3. Fine motor skills.

- **Fine motor strength:** Few non-literate adults have the fine motor skills needed to write letters and words and do tasks such as underlining or circling comfortably and legibly, so these learners need extensive practice to give their fingers strength. Also, older adult ESOL learners may have done hard physical work and have hands that do not hold pens or pencils easily. Provide pencil grips and fat pencils, pens or crayons for learners for whom gripping is tiring.

To build fine motor skills—and to add to visual processing and alphabet or number sequence practice—provide learners with the kinds of activities available in commercial children’s “activity” books: *very* simple pictures to color or trace, simple mazes or follow-the-dots. Often the pages by themselves are not childish looking at all. To increase understanding of two-dimensional information while practicing motor skills, learners can draw pictures of familiar objects or people. Use your imagination!!

- **Kinesthetic training.** Writing requires lots of practice because muscles must learn how letters are formed. Competent readers have strong kinesthetic associations as well as visual or auditory ones in letter and word recognition. To learn about this, have someone “write” a word on your back with their finger without telling you what the word is. You will know what the word is because you have learned what words “feel like” when you write.

Learners can increase kinesthetic learning by doing “air writing” of letters and words, “writing” on carpet squares or some other rough surface, tracing letters in sand, using markers to make large letters on newsprint or big paper and making letters out of other materials.

Building these skills means building new neural pathways in adult brains—and this takes time. Some of your learners may acquire these skills readily; others will require many weeks and months of practice. Aim for mastery and be sure to give learners ways of seeing their progress. Realize that your learners probably won’t understand the need for these skills. You may need to explain often and help them see progress often, too. Once these skills are in place, moving into the next stages of literacy—reading, writing words and learning more about the language—will be much easier for your learners.

* Non-literacy refers to having no education at all in any language. Very limited literacy refers to having two or fewer years of education—not enough to learn to read or write.