Stories from the Field:

An Exploration of Programming through Innovation in English as a Second Language (ESL) Literacy

Volume 3

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Acknowledgements

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I thank the following people who gave so generously of their time for interviews and involvement:

Elza Bruk, Dean, Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement; Diane Hardy, Coordinator, Innovation and Research, Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA); Shelagh Lenon, Manager, ESL Literacy Network; Val Baggaley and Emily Albertsen: Instructors, and Editors, ESL Literacy Handbook; Dan Merryfield and Don Morris: Instructors, Bridge Program and developers of Laptop program within Bridge; Heidi Beyer and Ruby Hamm: Instructors, and developers of the Financial ESL Literacy Toolbox; Norma Tersigni, Lois Heckel, and Joanne Pritchard: Instructors, Computer Enhanced ESL Literacy Program; Katrina Derix-Langstraat: Instructor, and project lead, ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework; Jennifer Acevedo: Instructor, and project consultant, ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework; Shelley McConnell: Instructor, Trainer and Workshop Designer, ESL Literacy Julia Poon: Instructor, ESL literacy; Kelty Christensen: Learner Engagement Officer, Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA); Venantie Nyirabashumba: Learner in the Bridge and Youth in Transition Leadership Program, CEIIA; Theresa Wall: ESL Literacy Learning Support Specialist and developer, ESL Literacy Readers; and Joan Bruce: Instructor and developer, ESL Literacy Readers.
Thank you to these donors for supporting adult literacy at Bow Valley College:

- Rotary Club of Calgary
- The Gordon & Kathy Laing Memorial Fund at The Calgary Foundation
- Harry & Martha Cohen Foundation
- Ms. Valerie Seaman
- Marnie Schaetti
- Diane E. Zinyk
- Patricia Cochrane
- Michael L. J. Morin

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CEIIA stock photos
Introduction

This third Stories from the Field project is a collaboration between the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning (CEFL) and the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA). This series of stories explores innovations in ESL literacy programming in the CEIIA at Bow Valley College. We thank all of the practitioners who have generously contributed their time, wisdom, and passion in the building of these articles. We especially thank Diane Hardy for being an engaged and enthusiastic partner in this endeavor.

Who are ESL literacy learners and what is ESL literacy?

The term ESL literacy describes a distinctive group of learners who are facing two significant challenges: they are learning English and simultaneously developing literacy skills.

Bow Valley College practitioners coined the term LIFE (Learners with Interrupted Formal Education) to describe this group. LIFE “have had between zero and ten years of formal education, often interrupted by war, political unrest, famine, displacement, or poverty” (Bow Valley College 2009, 3). Given this span of years in formal education, ESL literacy learners present with a wide range of literacy levels.

The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks uses the following categories to capture this diversity:

**Pre-literate**

Learners come from oral cultures where the spoken languages do not have written forms or where print is not regularly encountered in daily life. They may not understand that print conveys meaning or realize how important reading and writing are in Canadian society.

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1 Currently, the term ESL (English as a second language) is still in use. However, there is a movement toward using the term ELL (English Language Learners) which recognizes English may be a learner’s third, fourth, or even seventh language.
Non-literate
Learners that do not read or write, even though they live in literate societies.

Semi-literate
Learners who have some basic reading and writing skills, but are not yet functionally literate.

(Canadian Language Benchmarks 2015, 5)

While they bring many strengths into the classroom, ESL learners with limited to no literacy generally do not thrive in mainstream ESL classes. ESL literacy practitioners at Bow Valley College advocate “for a separate stream of ESL literacy classes with the recognition that LIFE have different needs, different advantages, different ways of learning, and often different goals than mainstream ESL learners” (Bow Valley College 2009, ix).

‘Necessity is the mother of invention’ aptly describes how the ESL literacy field grew out of the need to provide training and develop resources for practitioners working with the unique needs and challenges of ESL learners with low literacy skills.

Building Capacity – Professional Development for ESL Literacy Practitioners

Many of the practitioners I interviewed during my research for these stories talked about entering the mainstream ESL teaching field ten to twenty years ago and gradually moving into ESL literacy as more learners with interrupted formal education (LIFE) began showing up in their classes. At the time, research, resources, and professional development for practitioners working with this group of learners were limited or non-existent. Practitioners essentially taught themselves and created their own teaching resources. Several described it as “baptism by fire”. However, over the past decade, this has changed largely due to the collaborative work of the ESL literacy faculty at Bow Valley College under the leadership of Diane Hardy.

2 ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’ is an English proverb meaning that difficult or impossible scenarios prompt inventions aimed at reducing the difficulty (Wikipedia. 2015).
The ESL Literacy Network

“Over the past ten years, the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement has become a recognized leader in the field of ESL literacy. We’ve produced a wealth of resources that have been developed and vetted by ESL literacy experts. With funding from the Alberta Government, the Network was launched in 2011 with the purpose of sharing Bow Valley College publications, resources, and expertise,” Shelagh told me. Their initial target audience was ESL literacy practitioners in Alberta; however, the reach of the Network extends far beyond, including practitioners at a national level, in the US, and around the globe.

Shelagh Lenon manages ESL Literacy Network, a respected and recognized professional development website that provides resources and ongoing training in the field of ESL literacy. In her role, she oversees the development and maintenance of the site; her responsibilities include creating blogs, hosting and producing all the professional development webinars, managing social media, and collaborating with practitioners to create professional development in their areas of expertise.

I asked her how it all started. She explained:

“At the start of this project in 2009, we conducted a survey across the province to determine the needs of ESL literacy practitioners. The survey explored this question: What do ESL literacy practitioners need to effectively address the unique learning needs of learners with interrupted formal education? We discovered several things. Practitioners have limited time and resources. People couldn’t find information, they couldn’t access resources or even classroom materials. They wanted relevant materials and information they could use in their class to teach adult learners. We also discovered that many practitioners lacked specialized training in this area. 87% of respondents said that there are not many professional development opportunities that are specifically designed for the ESL literacy practitioner. …And lastly, we discovered...
that practitioners feel isolated. Almost 80% of respondents said that they weren’t connected to or unable to connect easily with other ESL literacy practitioners across Alberta…. We realized that there were three different areas – there was a need for resources, there was a need for training, and there was a need for community. We wanted to create a website that could support practitioners in these three areas.”

The Network began with concentrating on offering information and resources.

**Sharing Resources and Expertise on the ESL Literacy Network**

The ESL Literacy Handbook, ESL Literacy Readers, ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework, and the Financial Literacy Toolbox are only a few examples of the Bow Valley College resources available on the Network. In addition, practitioners provincially, nationally, and internationally share their resources including curriculums, lesson plans, learning activities, digital books, and more. All are available online to download for free at User Resource Guide.

In my reading, I came across research that supports this concept of sharing skills, resources, and information as a way of building capacity and strengthening ESL literacy practice. Perry and Hart encourage practitioners to:

Share what you know: Once you gain experience, be sure to pay it forward – remember that you have knowledge and expertise to contribute, too!

- Offer to mentor a new instructor.
- Blog about resources and successful lesson plans you’ve used.
- Post videos of your own effective teaching.

(Perry and Hart 2012, 121)

The Network excels in all of these areas: mentoring, blogging about successful resources and programs, and hosting webinars on teaching practice and techniques.
The Development of Training on the ESL Literacy Network

Next, the Network focused its eye on training. “We started to think about how to address the ongoing need for training. That’s when we started to offer workshops,” Shelagh explained. Initially, Val Baggaley and Katrina Derix-Langstraat, Bow Valley College practitioners who were part of the ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework project, went around the province providing face-to-face workshops. The training workshops introduced practitioners to the newly developed framework, and additionally to the ESL Literacy Network. Although the workshops were successful, Shelagh soon realized that the Network wanted to reach a wider audience. “We needed to offer training with a bigger return on investment. When you do a face-to-face training in a small location you might reach 10 people and once it’s over, it’s over. Although we blogged about the workshop, people who missed the training couldn’t access the actual content.”

That’s when the idea grew to offer online professional development through webinars. In 2012, Val offered the first webinar, a two-part series on using the ESL Literacy Readers. “We had about 24 different people from across North America participating which was really exciting,” Shelagh told me. She and her team realized that practitioners embraced the online delivery method, which had the added bonus of connecting and reconnecting practitioners regardless of location. Now, in addition to its face-to-face workshops,

Quotes from ESL literacy practitioners about professional development on the Network:

“I honestly feel that the network is setting a global standard in ESL Literacy – the best and most comprehensive “go to” for professional development and direction, and I must say that I also feel proud that it is all happening right here in Calgary."

“I’m so excited about this class, you have no idea. Last night some issues I’ve been fretting about were cleared up. In a big city like New York, you’re on your own with low literacy ESL adults. Many, many thanks."

“I ran a 6-week study circle in Minnesota for low literacy ESL teachers this spring, and my participants LOVED the short, informative, clear nature of your videos. I told them to set a timer before opening your site, or they might lose a few hours with all those great things to see and read.”
the Network hosts online professional development webinars every fall and spring. Recorded sessions are archived on the website for others to watch and learn from. To date, they have produced over 30 webinars and instructional videos for the Network. Many of the videos are also posted on YouTube. And people are definitely watching. For example, Val Baggely’s video on Portfolios has over 1200 views to date and there are over 8000 views on the Language Experience Approach video by Julia Poon, another Bow Valley instructor.

“I am really inspired by Centre faculty who have stepped out of their comfort zone to share their expertise in an online format. They are generous with their time and the resources they have developed, and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to lifelong learning.” Shelagh continued on to say, “We’ve also been delivering targeted professional development to ESL literacy organizations, tailoring the workshops to their specific needs. For example, Centre faculty have delivered training for organizations in Edmonton and Vancouver. Through the Network, our Centre has also consulted on curriculum and assessment practices.”

As the Network continued to develop, attention shifted to the third goal of addressing the need for community for ESL literacy practitioners.

**Connecting and Collaborating with Community on the ESL Literacy Network**

Shelagh described some of the community connections made through the Network. “From the instructors who operate the ESL literacy bus in Tennessee to a practitioner that connected with us from Portland who was writing a manual for volunteer tutors to an ESL literacy practitioner from the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association... the Network has provided many opportunities for connection and collaboration.” Along with offering the webinars and workshops, the community section includes a Blog, Discussion Forum, and Showcase.
1. Blog

The Blog promotes exchanges of information and inspiration. ESL literacy practitioners post articles sharing their experiences and information about classroom practices, new programming, and curriculum development. Some recent posts have included the Low Literacy Employment Program by Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association, a Pre Beginning ESL Curriculum created by the Minnesota Literacy Council, and Creating a Peer Teaching Community posted by the ESL Literacy Bridge program staff at Bow Valley College.

Shelagh shared a story about an experienced Bow Valley College practitioner who was new at blogging and initially shy about the process. “Beena is passionate about using music in the ESL literacy classroom and I thought that would be a great entry point. She agreed and did two different posts which generated lots of discussion, over 30 different comments. She realized that blogging and sharing what she was doing in her class allowed her to reflect and be reflective. She said that there were conversations happening on the blog that she thought wouldn’t have happened face to face, even with colleagues in the same building because of people’s work schedules or people not having enough time. The Blog allowed this exchange of information.”

2. Discussion Forum

The Discussion Forum encourages practitioners to enter into reflective discussions about their participation in the online training and study circles and how that affects their teaching practice. Past topics have included Integrating Technology, Creating Digital Books, and Teaching Immigrant Youth among many more. Participants include new practitioners interested in expanding their knowledge and teaching repertoires as well as experienced practitioners sharing their expertise.

Research strongly supports the value of reflective discussion around teaching practice. In a pilot study by Vinogradov (2012), practitioners working with adult ESL emergent readers described some of the benefits:

- First the teachers developed a sense of loyalty and commitment to the group. This led to dedication to the tasks and thoughtful reading and preparation for meetings.
• Secondly, teachers were able to share resources, ideas, teaching tips, and other professional wisdom with each other. The facilitator provided readings and tasks, but the most useful sharing appears to be from the collegial conversations themselves, from having a place to finally meet others who do similar work and to bounce ideas off them.

• Thirdly, participants found that the study circle helped them to break their sense of isolation in their teaching, to realize that their frustrations and challenges are in fact widely held.

The study concluded: “In an instructional setting as complex as teaching ESL to low literate adult immigrants and refugees, this sense of shared work and collaborative learning was reassuring and hopeful to participants” (Vinogradov 2012, 41-42).

3. Practitioners’ Showcase

The Showcase invites practitioners to share instructional materials, approaches to teaching, learning activities, lesson plans, and worksheets, and collaborate with peers. This repository features over 50 resources created by both Bow Valley College faculty and ESL literacy practitioners elsewhere.

Shelagh cited another example of the Network’s success in promoting professional growth and sharing expertise. “Kelly Morrissey was a new ESL literacy practitioner from Windsor, Ontario, who attended one of the very first webinars on using the ESL Literacy Readers in 2012. Through our discussions in the webinar, I realized that she had created a blog for her ESL literacy class. We featured her in a two-part ESL Literacy Network blog series, focusing on how she uses a blog with ESL literacy learners. She also uses Bow Valley College resources in her classroom. For example, she uses the ESL Literacy Readers and has developed numerous companion activities that support the use of the readers in the classroom – all of which she has shared on the Network’s Practitioners’ Showcase. Just this past month, she facilitated a webinar on creating an ESL literacy blog. She’s moved from being a new ESL literacy practitioner to mentoring other practitioners in her area of expertise.”
A Closing Note

A “community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. This definition reflects the fundamentally social nature of human learning” (Team BE 2011). The evolution of the ESL Literacy Network from providing resources and online training to building community connections has succeeded in creating an online community of practice which supports the professional development of ESL literacy practitioners.

“The Network is an inclusive learning environment for practitioners to connect, share ideas, and grow professionally. You can be a novice practitioner looking for mentorship or instructional resources. You can also be an experienced instructor, like many of the instructors at Bow Valley College, and share your expertise,” Shelagh explained. “The biggest success [of the Network] is that this high quality professional learning and sharing has a ripple effect. It impacts ESL literacy instruction which in turn impacts the lives of ESL literacy learners.”

References


ESL Literacy Learners
Engaging with their Communities

Celebrating International Literacy Day, Sept. 8.

Since 1966, UNESCO has celebrated International Literacy Day to remind the international community that “literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one’s health, one’s income, and one’s relationship to the world” (UNESCO 2015a).

This year’s theme was Literacy and Sustainable Societies. “Literacy is a key driver for sustainable development. Literacy skills are the prerequisite for the learning of a broader set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, required for creating sustainable societies” (UNESCO 2015b).

The ESL literacy programming at Bow Valley College aims to provide learners with interrupted formal education (LIFE) with both the literacy and the life skills they need to be successful in their lives within a variety of contexts: home, further education, employment and the community at large.

One innovative program in particular is focused on developing these important ‘soft skills’ – helping ESL literacy learners build their self-confidence and increase their engagement with their community. The Bridge Leadership Program is targeted at youth between 18 and 25 years of age. The learners work on building their skills in areas such as checking in and checking out, active listening, managing anxiety and nervousness, giving and receiving feedback, clarifying information and messages, initiating social contact and conversation, and refusing requests (Westwood and Pearson 2005, 3).
I spoke to Kelty Christensen, Learner Engagement Officer at the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement at Bow Valley College, to learn more.

She explained how the program evolved. “Prior to coming into the position there was a Leadership program in existence whereby students would engage in different school and class activities to enhance leadership skills. I realized that there was a definite desire for students to be involved and to learn more practical hands-on skills that would support them not only in their schooling but within their community and work life. The leadership program grew out of that need. The Bridge Leadership program has evolved over time. The intent is to increase learners’ communication skills and their levels of self-confidence in public speaking, and by building these skills have more success within their school setting, their life and their community. I found that they had the most success and the most impact when those skills could be applied to real life situations. As I worked with this group of immigrant youth, I realized that they were intimidated by their lack of English, and yet still really wanted to get involved in their communities. They didn’t know how to get started, and they didn’t know how to gain skills to promote their success. There are many barriers that prevent learners from doing that, prevent them from understanding how to get involved, and how to learn those skills. They wanted to engage in leadership activities and improve their communication skills, which is why they gravitated towards this leadership program. It runs each semester for approximately 12 weeks. The program varies each semester and allows different learners from the Bridge program to have the opportunity to become involved.”

The demand for the leadership program has steadily increased as the numbers of learners in the Bridge Program has increased. Currently, 24 learners enter the program each trimester. Participants meet once a week to go over different topics and learn interpersonal and communication skills using a sociocultural competency training model.

The course culminates in a community engagement piece that varies each semester. Kelty explained: “During the course, we focus on presentation skills, communication skills, confidence building, and intercultural competency. These are the kinds of skills that the learners can use in multiple facets of their lives. At the end of the 12-week
period they participate in a community engagement opportunity – engaging not only within our College community, but within the greater Calgary community. The program helps the learners gain self-confidence so that they can turn around and access community volunteering opportunities on their own. They reflect on their experience and how it has changed them, and how they can take the skills they’ve learned forward.”

Learners choose organizations based on their passion and interest. One past community engagement project included working with Operation Christmas Child; the learners volunteered in the warehouse, filling and checking the shoeboxes before shipment. In another project, the learners organized and participated in a learner-led orientation for all of the English Language Learning students when they moved from the classrooms at Rocky Mountain Plaza to the newly expanded Bow Valley College. Working in groups of three, the leadership program participants provided tours of the North and South campuses for over 600 students to orient them to their new location.

Over the past six years, leadership program participants have worked with the Mustard Seed, the Calgary Drop-In Centre, the Calgary Food Bank, the Calgary Children's Festival, Brown Bagging for Children and the Royal Bank Pennies for Water campaign. “Often, after learners leave the program, they get involved in volunteering in other capacities, either through Propellus or other volunteer organizations,” Kelty added.

Kelty shared a success story from the leadership program. “I had one learner who had a very strong stutter. It was so strong that his ability to articulate himself was a word by word effort. He did not let this stand in his way. He pushed himself

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1 Operation Christmas Child is a program of Samaritan’s Purse®. Volunteers fill shoeboxes with hygiene items, school supplies and toys. The shoeboxes are then shipped around the world to children in need. http://www.samaritanspurse.ca/rss/operation-christmas-child/resources/about-this-project.aspx#.Vh18m_JVikq

2 Propellus is a non-profit organization that helps strengthen other community organizations through networking, collaboration, mentorship and shared experience. They also help connect volunteers to organizations. http://propellus.org/about-2/
to take on challenging speaking roles and constantly put himself outside of his comfort zone. The class was very supportive of him and gave great feedback. I think that the leadership program gave him the tools to help him in increasing his self-confidence, and he began to understand that something that might prevent people from taking on new challenges was not going to hold him back. He was very involved and inspired other learners within the program to take on roles, which was very impressive and spoke to his natural leadership. He has moved into High School upgrading, but he remains connected to College community through the Intercultural Centre’s ICan Volunteer Program. His ability to navigate the challenge of moving from the Bridge program level of leadership to the College-wide level of leadership and engagement tells me that we’re doing something right.”

**A Closing Note**

Literacy-level learners “may be beginning learners but they are not beginning thinkers” (Brod 1999, 5). They are thoughtful about their connections to the world, and, like all of us, want to make a valuable contribution to their communities. Innovative courses like the Bridge Leadership program, using techniques such as cultural mapping and experiential learning, help learners improve their communication skills, which results in an increase in self-confidence and self-advocacy skills. Importantly, these newly learned attitudes, skills, and values are transferrable into other settings: family, further education, work and the larger community, and contribute to the creation of a sustainable society.

Leadership was very interesting to me. I learned from leadership. I didn’t have any confidence to stand in front of an audience. But when I was in leadership… first time [I spoke] I was feeling very kind of scared. Second time I was kind of a little bit scared. Third time I was feeling I can talk, doesn’t matter how many people are there…. After leadership, I was feeling that I can ask anything I want, and volunteering, oh my goodness, it was very, very good for me. (personal interview with Venantie Nyibabashumba, a learner in the Leadership program)

- learner quote
References


Using Technology to Learn and Learning to Use Technology:

Transforming Teaching and Learning Practices at Bow Valley College

It is the first week of classes in the Bridge program at Bow Valley College. Mohammed, an ESL literacy student, is just starting his first term. He is happy to learn that he will be receiving a laptop computer of his own to use while in the Bridge program. He eagerly signs it out and carefully carries it home excited about exploring this (new to him) tool. Mohammed is one of over 60 learners in Bridge who will be receiving laptops this trimester as part of the program.

The Bridge program serves immigrant youth between the ages of 18 and 24 with interrupted formal education. They are ESL learners and literacy learners, working on improving their skills in reading, writing, learning strategies, and essential skills. The goal of the program is to help learners identify and transition into the next step in their educational or occupational pathways. These may include adult basic education, high school upgrading, secondary education, or workplace training. Bow Valley College’s Vision 2020 document articulates and supports the development of these kinds of seamless learning pathways for lifelong learners.

1 The College distributes 150 laptops each trimester to learners in Bridge and the Youth in Transition program.
While the Bridge program is highly original itself as a state-of-the-art transitioning program, a key innovation within the program is the distribution of laptops to each learner and their incorporation into the curriculum.

Daniel Merryfield and Donald Morris, ESL literacy practitioners who teach in the Bridge program, have been instrumental in implementing the laptop program. I recently spoke to them to find out more about how the program works and how it has affected teaching and learning.

Don started the conversation. “With the introduction of laptops in 2013, our approach to teaching has changed. The expectations, the way we present things, the way we work, the way learners manage work, all that has changed. And it continues to change. As the laptop program develops so does our understanding of how to best use laptops in the program.”

Dan described how the laptop program works. “We give the students a laptop the first or second week of the term and they keep it. While the learners have the laptops, they are their responsibility. The main goal of this program is to get our learners comfortable using computers and prepared for academic upgrading or other pathways. Many of our learners come with very little exposure to technology… when I say technology what I mean is using a computer, say a laptop or a tablet. The exposure they’ve had is basically through cell phones and social media so they’re quite comfortable using things like Facebook… And as literacy learners, they are still learning to read and write. If they were given an assignment in the first week of classes that involved writing something, typing it and emailing it, many learners would struggle because they don’t have the literacy or the technology skills to complete this task.”

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3 Bridging the Gap: A Framework for Teaching and Transitioning Low Literacy Immigrant Youth reports on the development of the program and describes the “key elements of a successful transition program for young adult literacy learners who have exited high school but are still in need of focused literacy training in order to transition to further educational studies or workplace training” (https://esl-literacy.com/sites/default/files/Bridging%20the%20Gap_0.pdf).
Bow Valley College utilizes D2L (Desire to Learn), an online teaching and learning platform, as part of its commitment to ‘learning anytime anywhere’. This becomes especially relevant within the laptop program.

Don explained how the two work together. “With D2L, learners are able to access the work that we have in the classroom and everything is very organized for them. It’s easy for them to find the work that they need to do, to submit their homework, to communicate with their classmates, or to communicate with the instructor. It’s a very good platform. In my classroom, the way I use D2L has changed a lot of things. For example, in paragraph writing, the first draft would be done in writing and then I’ll correct it, and give it back to them. Learners use Microsoft Word to do their second draft and send me their file through D2L. I look at their second draft and either give them a printed copy or send it back to them through D2L. Everything we do in the classroom, whether it’s a paper copy or electronic copy, I put up onto D2L so they have easy access to it.”

Dan added, “Teaching and learning responses to D2L have been very positive. It serves as a repository of all our work. We have midterms approaching next week and my learners can access every reading that we’ve done, they can access all the vocabulary words, they can access all the writing assignments as well. They have that copy, that’s always there. And as for teaching, I’ve saved all of the learning materials each trimester, so I can go back three trimesters and see what I did, the readings are all right there. So it’s a great tool for organizing…. It’s an extension of our classroom.”

Bridge has four levels: Intermediate, High Intermediate, Advanced, and Advanced Transition. They correspond roughly to Canadian Language Benchmarks 2-6. Learners work through the different levels, moving on to the next when they have achieved competency in a given level. They may repeat levels if necessary. Upon completion of the Advanced Transition level they will have met the requirements to transition to Adult Basic Education or Upgrading. The expectations of what the students can do with technology (laptops and D2L) increase in difficulty as the learners work their way up through the levels of the Bridge program.

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Success Stories

Don described some of the successes he has seen coming out of the laptop program. “We see a lot of success stories of our learners who have moved on to Upgrading or into Career programs, or who are actually working now…. We have alumni coming back to the program and saying how much it meant to them in preparation for their education or in their jobs. …Because when they go into a career program, they’re expected to know how to use Microsoft Office, they should know how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Publisher, applications like that. So with the laptop program, we use technology to learn but we also learn to use technology in the classroom. You can see a lot of transferable skills. The fact that they are now able to use applications such Microsoft Word or PowerPoint gives them confidence and gives them more opportunities. I believe, for the younger generation like our learners, technology is a necessary tool. Without it, it’s a definite hindrance to whatever career or educational path they want to take.”

Dan added, “I’ve had students come back to me quite happy, quite pleased because they were able to apply online for a job. If I walk into a store with a resume they’re going to tell me go to the website. For our learners this was an access issue. They were being shut out of certain jobs, and the opportunity to even get into some industries. But now they’re more comfortable being online and they’re more comfortable using a computer. The task of filling out a resume is one skill but the task of filling out a resume online is another skill and it was too much for them. They feel empowered that they can go online, they can put it in their application and for them it’s quite rewarding. We’re talking about literacy and digital literacy for our students.”

“Literacy in the year 2015 includes digital literacy. Quite often people make the assumption, they’re young so they know how to use computers. And when learners don’t have those skills, they feel they’re being shut out from a lot of opportunities. Being able to read and write also means being able to read and write online, there’s a lot more involved in it than just simply pen and paper.”
- Dan Merryfield
Something to Consider in Implementing a Laptop Program

Don shared an important learning from the program. “I think we realized that in order to introduce a program like this, you need a larger community behind you. And what that means is you’re going to need the financial support to pay for these laptops and as the program is growing, to buy additional laptops. You also need IT support, because you can’t expect the instructors to be IT specialists. We also have people who help distribute the laptops at the beginning of the term and collect them [at the end]. We learned that you need a big team and a lot of support behind you in order to make this program a successful one.”

Dan agreed. “We’re very fortunate that Bow Valley College is the size that it is and that we have the IT infrastructure like D2L. We also have an IT team to support us…. I think a smaller school or smaller provider would have to invest a sizeable amount to have the hardware, enough WIFI, and the IT support.”

A Closing Note

Don concluded by saying, “I think where we are in the Bridge program, having this laptop program, we are in some respects on the forefront of what’s happening in technology for young adult learners…. I also think our main purpose is to share what we’re doing…and how successful it is and how useful it is and we hope by doing things like webinars and communicating with a larger audience, that it will spread.”

5 In Spring 2014, Don Morris, Dan Merryfield, and Emily Albertsen, another faculty member in the laptop program, presented a webinar titled Learning with Technology on how they integrate technology into the curriculum. This and other professional development webinars are posted on the ESL Literacy Network website.
It is clear that digital literacy is an essential skill in the 21st century. ESL literacy practitioners Donald Morris and Daniel Merryfield, and their colleagues in the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement, successfully demonstrate the many benefits of introducing laptop computers into the curriculum. The laptop program used in conjunction with the D2L learning platform provides an effective and innovative way to help young adult immigrant learners prepare for life in a digital world.

“…the computer is not a toy; it is the site of wealth, power and influence, now and in the future. Women and indigenous people and those with few resources cannot afford to be marginalised or excluded from this new medium. To do so will risk becoming information poor. It will not be to count; to be locked out of full participation in society in the same way that illiterate people have been disenfranchised in a print world.” (Spender 1995, quoted by Moriarty 2011, 15)

References


ESL Literacy Comes of Age:
Developing promising practices in programming and instruction

The field of ESL literacy has come into its own thanks to the dedication and efforts of practitioners and researchers working locally, nationally, and internationally to understand how to best serve this distinct group of learners. The development of best practices in programming and instruction was a natural step in creating a context for working with ESL literacy learners. The Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College played a leading role in researching and developing innovative promising practices.

Early in 2009, the CEIIA embarked on an ambitious project: the research and creation of a practical resource for instructors, program coordinators, and other stakeholders in the field that would give them promising practices in program considerations and strategies for the classroom.

ESL literacy practitioners Valerie Baggaley and Emily Albertsen headed up the research team under the guidance of Diane Hardy. They spoke to me about the project and their process and purpose.

“The ESL Literacy Handbook project, funded by the Alberta Government, was an attempt to gather together the collective knowledge, understanding, and experience of the CEIIA faculty working with ESL literacy learners. Val and I were editors of the book. Val did a huge amount of research and the literature review. I did the bulk of the writing, taking what our many contributors said and writing from there, as well as writing from scratch. The idea for the book was to pull together our accumulated knowledge in one place. I think one of the strengths of the book is its breadth – it is broken into sections such as program considerations and creating programming, and other sections designed for teachers as a resource in the classroom. But I think the most important part of the book was capturing what we have tried and feel are best practices in ESL literacy,” Emily explained.
Val added, “Even now there isn’t a lot written about ESL learners with low education, but 6 or 7 years ago there was even less…. If you really dig, there is research, but a lot of it is more academic writing than a classroom-based, how-to manual. I feel very privileged I got to work on this because it allowed me to read what other people who work in the field say about ESL literacy, to talk to people working in the field at that time, and then have the time to process and reflect on my own teaching and to go ‘aha’. A lot of what we were doing already was validated. In those early days of teaching ESL literacy, we figured it out as we went. It was trial and error, but it worked. Seeing the research validate what we were doing in the classroom was really reassuring. And it was really exciting to be involved in developing the best practices.”

The project was truly a collaborative one, drawing on the shared knowledge and expertise within the CEIIA, as well as extensive research including a literature review, focus groups held in Alberta and at two national conferences, and a survey of 100 ESL literacy practitioners worldwide. However, the first source of information was the learners themselves and “what they have told us about their lives, needs, and goals, and how they responded to different approaches, theories, practices, and activities…. Our primary intentions are to be true to the needs and goals of our learners and to be useful to instructors.” (Albertsen and Millar 2009, 6)

The project culminated in Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook, a resource intended to be a detailed introduction to program design and instruction in ESL literacy. The first section looks at program considerations; the second section focuses on strategies for the classroom; and the third section looks at the four levels of ESL literacy (based on the Canadian Language ESL Literacy Benchmarks). The Handbook is meant to be a real world resource: well-used and well-thumbed.
The Handbook has certainly been successful in reaching the wider community of ESL literacy practitioners. Emily elaborated, “We sent out as many complimentary copies as we could all across the country, trying to reach as many programs as we could, and we’ve gotten excellent feedback. It’s even used as a course text.”

Val shared a story about the national reach of the Handbook. “My daughter went to university in Queens and I was out there visiting her…. I was working on another [ESL literacy] project and… I knew there was one program in Kingston where I was so I phoned and asked if I could meet with the person in charge. We met and I was asking her some things about her program. And she said, ‘Well there’s this great book that’s out there, it’s just my bible’, and she pulled it out. And I laughed because it was the ESL Literacy Handbook!”

Val and Emily both spoke passionately about how working on the project validated the teaching practices and work being done in the CEIIA. Val explained, “I was doing the literature review and I loved it. I like research so it was great to go on the internet and pull everything I could find and have the time to examine it. Researchers were describing some of the best practices and I got excited because we were already doing some of this at BVC, and this research echoed what I too felt a program should be to best serve the ESL literacy population. I remember thinking, we got it right!”

Emily agreed. “I think one of the things that I learned was that we were making good decisions with what we were doing in our classrooms, what kind of programs we were trying to create. This project gave me confidence in articulating why it is that we do what we’re doing. And I think in seeing what other people are doing and in seeing research that supports us, it gave us the confidence to say we are making some good decisions about what we do. I began to understand our place within an international community of ESL literacy…. That was a big piece of learning for me. It took me out of my classroom to see a much, much bigger picture.”

Bow Valley College’s work is recognized within LESLLA (Low Education Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) for Adults, an international community of researchers and practitioners working to increase the knowledge about low literacy second language learners and inform practice.1

1 “LESLLA (Low Education Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) for Adults brings together researchers and practitioners from many countries to establish an international and multi-target-language research agenda. During annual symposia and information sharing throughout the year, LESLLA participants will increase the body of knowledge and outline areas of research that require investigation for low-educated second language learners.” (http://www.leslla.org)
What are promising practices in ESL literacy programming?

Based on the results of the project’s extensive research both in the literature and with experienced practitioners, the Handbook outlines eight promising practices prevalent in programs of excellence.

1. *ESL literacy is recognized as a distinct stream of classes, separate from mainstream ESL and from mainstream literacy.*

As discussed in the first story in this series, learners with interrupted formal education have unique learning needs and challenges. Experience and research suggest that these learners do not thrive in mainstream ESL classes. Having a separate stream of classes helps ESL literacy learners “progress through classes where their specific learning needs are addressed” (Handbook, 354).

2. *The ESL literacy stream is comprised of a series of classes progressing in small increments along the literacy continuum.*

Theorists and practitioners support a series of ESL literacy classes which progress in small increments. In its ESL literacy programs, Bow Valley College uses the standards set out in the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000; classes are organized around stages within in each of four phases (Foundation, I, II, III). This means that there is a Foundation Phase class, a Phase 1 Initial class, a Phase 1 Developing class and so on. Learners progress through each distinct phase, acquiring the skills and strategies, before moving on to the next. Progress can be slow. Having small increments allows this progress to be observed and measured, and enables the learner, practitioner and funder to honour the progress being made (Handbook, 355).
3. **The ESL literacy program offers higher-level ESL literacy classes.**

ESL literacy learners in Phase III may have higher literacy skills and higher oral skills and are sometimes overlooked and misplaced in either mainstream ESL classes or mainstream Adult Basic Education. They lack the literacy skills needed to cope with the textual demands of an academic class and get left behind. These advanced learners still require the “scaffolding and explicit strategy instruction found in ESL literacy classes”\(^2\) to help to develop their strategies for higher level concepts such as” inference, identifying main ideas, summarizing, and writing” (Handbook, 357).

4. **The program provides professional development opportunities for instructors.**

A program of excellence provides training specific to ESL literacy to all practitioners in the ESL literacy stream, ongoing professional development, and opportunities for practitioners to engage with one another on relevant topics. “Instead of placing the inexperienced or those lacking seniority into the ESL literacy classroom, a program of excellence places instructors highly trained in ESL literacy into these demanding classrooms” (Handbook, 358). Research shows that ”the most successful teachers were trained and experienced in both language and literacy education, adapted their curriculum as needed, and were culturally aware” (Millar 2008, cited in Centre for Literacy of Quebec 2008, 5).

5. **Instructors are allotted time to make materials.**

There is a general lack of suitable materials available to teach adult ESL literacy. This means practitioners must modify existing materials or create their own. In addition, materials “must be related to the learners’ skills, interests and personal surroundings” (Ontario Literacy Coalition 2007, 28). Consequently, practitioners are constantly creating teaching materials tailored to learners’ changing requirements. A program of excellence recognizes that instructors require additional prep time to create their own materials and builds this time into the program (Handbook, 358).

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2. “Explicit strategy instruction is characterized by a series of supports or scaffolds, whereby students are guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning the new skill, clear explanations and demonstrations of the instructional target, and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery has been achieved.” (Archer and Hughes 2011, 1)
6. There is a program into which the learners can transition.

ESL literacy learners need viable and clear pathways to transition into once they have completed the ESL literacy stream programming. At Bow Valley College, these options can include mainstream ESL, mainstream adult basic education, upgrading, further learning, workplace skills training programs and employment.

7. There is a numeracy component in the instruction.

Numeracy is an essential skill every bit as important as reading and writing. In an ESL literacy numeracy program, “it is important to teach both the language of math as well as the concepts” (Handbook, 359). A future article in this series will focus on the importance of teaching financial literacy to ESL literacy learners. The Financial Literacy Toolbox, available on the ESL Literacy Network, is a great resource of lesson plans and ideas for teaching this.

8. There is support for the program and for the learners.

An ESL literacy program of excellence requires stable funding and full administrative support in order to be successful. This includes dedicated funding for professional development, resources, and materials.

Broader life supports for learners may include mental health and career counselling, information about affordable housing options, subsidized childcare, assistance in accessing financial aid, scholarships and awards, and referrals to appropriate community resources.

A specific type of classroom support for ESL learners is ‘access to first language’. The What Works Study Hi Connie, found that “in classes where teachers used the native language as part of instruction to clarify and explain, students exhibited faster growth in both reading comprehension and oral communication skills” (Condelli and Wrigley 2008, 17). The Handbook suggests two ways of addressing first language support: having a person come in once or twice a week to translate important concepts; and using a student mentorship model, where learners from higher level
ESL classes are paired up with learners in the lower level classes who speak the same language. This model has proven successful on two levels: providing bilingual support for the learners, and offering volunteer opportunities for the student mentors (Handbook, 361).

“ESL literacy teaching could be defined as supporting adults with little English and little formal education in their efforts to understand and use English in its many forms (oral and written, including prose, document, and quantitative literacy), in a variety of contexts (family, community, school, work), so that they can reach their fullest potential and achieve their own goals, whether these be personal, professional or academic.” - (Wrigley and Guth 2000, 14)

**What are promising practices in the classroom?**

The Handbook project also compiled information on promising practices in the classroom and this resulted in the identification of the following six elements:

1. **Learning must be learner-centred, meaning-based, and linked to the community.**

“Literacy instruction for those who are non-print literate should be part of a larger vision in which learners’ lives, oral culture, and other skills and knowledge are all part of the curriculum and classroom. There is a high degree of consensus in the literature that classroom learning for the non-print literate should have a highly functional, personal focus – more so for them than for other adult language learners” (Bigelow and Schwarz 2010, 14).

The Handbook project found similar practices to be effective. Using authentic materials found in the learners’ lives is one way of making literacy meaningful. They also recommend using realia (actual objects, such as coins, fruit, cooking utensils) instead of images (line drawings, pictures), as they help make the connections more real (Handbook, 361). Going into the community for walks and on field trips are other ways that help connect learning to real life.
2. Learning is repeated and recycled.

“A classroom of excellence recycles the material and concepts each day and over time, thus enabling learners to fully incorporate this new knowledge and make it their own” (Handbook, 362). Many of the practitioners I spoke to for this series of stories talked about the ongoing need, and challenge, to come up with different ways to present the same concepts.

“Having a central theme for classroom activities provides many opportunities to repeat, reinforce and recycle the previous sessions’ learning. Learners’ familiarity, understanding and confidence increases when new information is recycled or repeated” (ESL Literacy Network n.d., recycling).

Recycling can extend beyond one class. BVC practitioners explained that concepts are recycled through the different phases in the curriculum so learners will encounter the same concepts in their next level class.

3. There is a large dedicated classroom for each ESL literacy class.

Researchers recommend large spaces dedicated solely to teaching ESL literacy (Cummings et al. 2007). This way, practitioners can create a stimulating learning environment with walls covered in print rich material, and store realia and authentic materials for use when required. Unfortunately, this is not always possible as many classrooms are shared spaces. For example, the Pebbles in the Sand program, run by the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association, takes place in mostly donated spaces (church halls and rooms) and the practitioners bring the classroom in a rolling suitcase (Loschnig 2014, 40). Practitioners at Bow Valley College also bring their own authentic materials and learning aids moving them from classroom to classroom as needed.
4. **Class size is limited.**

The Handbook project found agreement among the literature, survey respondents, and practitioners that ESL literacy learners require an individualized approach, which creates greater demands on teacher time. “A classroom of excellence needs to be small enough to address the demands of these learners who have limited ability to work independently” (Handbook, 363). In one study, expert teachers recommended 10 to 15 students for an optimum class size. The numbers should not exceed 15, and numbers above 10 should be supported with a second teacher or trained volunteer (McPherson 2007, 4).

5. **There is specific oral and vocabulary development.**

In a classroom of excellence, learning is done first in the oral before it moves to the written. “Because LIFE³ are oral learners, it is important that they have oral control over the material before it is introduced in writing” (Handbook, 363). Practitioners can help learners develop oral skills by recycling vocabulary through chanting, singing, and using rhymes and drama (Handbook, 363). The literature supports this approach.

“Adult learners from high-oracy cultures not only bring with them adult cognitive and social capacities, but also a particular set of well-developed strategies for learning. Consequently, such learners may benefit from classroom learning that includes opportunities for: repetition and memorisation; rhythmic activities such as clapping, chanting, poetry, and singing; and ‘imaginative’ texts such as stories and poetry” (Achren and Williams 2006, p.1).

Val shared a story about the value of chanting and repetition. “We had practiced a greeting chant and we were out on a field trip. A stranger said hello to my learner and the learner responded just perfectly from the chant, the woman must have said ‘how are you’ and the learner said ‘I’m fine thank you and you?’ And the way she said it was exactly from the chant. I knew because she didn’t just monosyllable a word or anything. That’s a learner success.”
6. There is a focus on strategies for reading, writing, and learning.

“In a classroom of excellence, the instructor explicitly teaches strategies for reading, writing, and learning, and spirals them throughout the learning” (Handbook, 364). Strategies can include asking the instructor for help, word-attack strategies, and brainstorming ideas before writing. “Learning strategies help learners become more successful in reading, writing, language learning, and test-taking. They also help learners to become more effective language users and learners both inside and outside the classroom, and help them prepare for the demands of post-literacy study” (Leong and Collins, 2007, p.125).

The ESL Literacy Network section on Strategy Instruction gives practitioners practical ideas for incorporating explicit strategy instruction into teaching. As well, Bridging the Gap, a framework for teaching and transitioning low literacy immigrant youth, has a section and toolbox to help practitioners integrate strategy instruction into their curriculum.

“Teaching at its heart is about communication because it’s saying something in a way that somebody can understand you, and listening to what it is that they are saying, and bringing those two together as best you can.”
(Emily Albertsen, interview)

A Closing Note

“This project was about helping practitioners gain the knowledge, the skills, and the resources to create a [positive] learning environment for ESL literacy students…. I think everybody who teaches in our programs uses the things we’ve talked about in here. It’s a book for teachers on how to be better teachers,” Emily summed up.
Val felt it was important to add, “All of our students have an amazing amount of skills. They’re adults and they come as a full package, but often our society just sees their deficits. We recognize their strengths.”

The ESL Literacy Handbook provided a first step in attempting to pull together the knowledge from both experienced practitioners and the ongoing research in the ESL literacy field, nationally and internationally. For Emily and Val, and the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement, it serves as a jumping off place for further exploration in and out of the classroom in their mission to better serve ESL literacy learners.

“ESL literacy remains a challenging field, but there are clear directions in which we can develop in order to best serve our learners and help them thrive in school, in employment, and in the community.... We hope to build on this learning and to support the continued development of communities of practice in ESL literacy” (Albertsen and Millar 2009, 364).

References


Innovative Financial Literacy Programming Helps Newcomers Navigate Canada’s Financial Landscape

I enter an English language learning classroom at Bow Valley College that has been rearranged to look like a classic science fair. The energy and excitement is palpable. Groups of three or four learners are gathered around half a dozen tables. On each table is a tri-fold display, and I catch glimpses of some of the headings: Banking, Saving and Investment, Entrepreneurship, Shopping Wisely. In the classroom across the hall, clusters of two and three learners are gathered around laptop computers participating in PowerPoint presentations on topics related to money and finances. As I walk from table to table, listening to the different presentations, I learn about debt, savings, starting a new business, bank accounts, automated banking machines, budgeting, and the least expensive grocery store (as identified by Bow Valley College ESL learners).

It’s the third annual Financial Literacy Fair hosted by ESL learners in the Bridge and the Youth in Transition (LINC) programs. Both programs serve young adult immigrant learners ages 18 to 24. The students have worked for weeks to prepare for this day.

Research shows that for newcomers, financial literacy is an essential skill for creating a successful life in Canadian society. Research also indicates that financial literacy may be a challenge for many newcomers along with the other settlement concerns they face.
What do we mean by financial literacy?

“What financial literacy means having the skills and knowledge to use money wisely. Being financially literate means having the knowledge to make prudent financial decisions, now and for the future” (Bow Valley College 2010b, 1).

Studies have shown that “upon arrival, and during the first year of settlement, the probability of entering poverty is high among newcomer populations (34% - 46%) and this tendency seems to be increasing. Statistics show that approximately 65% of immigrants experience bouts of low income within the first 10 years in Canada” (Picot, Hou, and Coulombe 2007, cited in SEDI 2008, 3).

While low income is not always connected to low financial literacy, newcomers without access to financial literacy supports are “at greater risk of slipping into further poverty” (SEDI 2008, 3).

Despite the government’s renewed focus on increasing financial literacy for all Canadians, newcomers continue to face unique challenges that require not only innovative and responsive programming, but policy changes within government and financial institutions.

Prosper Canada Centre for Financial Literacy1 is on the steering committee of the Asset Building Learning Exchange (ABLE), a “national coalition of community practitioners, financial institutions, researchers, policymakers, and funders committed to advancing financial empowerment approaches to improve the financial capability and wellbeing of Canadians living in, or at high risk, of poverty” (ABLE 2014, 1). In a research brief prepared as part of a response to the government’s National Strategy, ABLE identifies some of the systemic and other financial literacy barriers newcomers may experience:

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1 Prosper Canada Centre for Financial Literacy is a national charity dedicated to expanding economic opportunities for Canadians living in poverty through program and policy innovation. They work with governments, businesses, and community groups to develop and promote financial policies, programs, and resources that transform lives and foster the posterity of all Canadians. (http://prospercanada.org/About-Us/Overview.aspx)
• public policies/programs that impede positive financial behaviours by people living in low-income (e.g., savings and asset restrictions for social assistance and disability benefit recipients) or fail … to incentivize them to the same extent as other citizens;

• reliance on unstable, low-wage jobs and other forms of precarious employment;

• reluctance to access mainstream financial institutions by those who have had negative experiences with financial institutions, either in Canada or in their country of origin;

• complicated application procedures or lack of clear messaging about eligibility requirements for tax credits and other public benefits to which they are entitled;

• low levels of literacy and/or numeracy; and

• limited knowledge of English and/or French. (ABLE 2014, 2-3)

In addition, newcomers face unique financial pressures including “financial responsibility for family members in Canada and/or their country of origin; failure to recognize foreign credentials, leading to difficulties securing adequate employment; and the financial burden of repaying refugee transportation loans, relative to typically low levels of income” (ABLE 2014, 5-6).

Financial institutions, community-based organizations and other agencies and individuals who assist newcomers during their initial adjustment period must rise to the challenge and work together to improve the availability of programs and materials that respond to immigrants’ specific needs. (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service 2012, 22)
The Financial ESL Literacy Toolbox: An Innovative response to increasing financial literacy among newcomers

This brings us full circle to the Financial Literacy Fair at Bow Valley College. Ruby Hamm and Heidi Beyer are part of the faculty in the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA). They work with young adult ESL learners helping them to develop their reading, speaking, listening, communication skills, and essential skills – including numeracy. Their programs include a focus on the development of financial literacy skills. The Financial Literacy Fair showcases learners’ understanding and comprehension of financial literacy concepts taught throughout the trimester. I spoke with Ruby and Heidi to learn more about this important topic.

Ruby began our conversation by explaining that “in the Youth in Transition program, the end of trimester project this past spring was to host a financial literacy fair for the rest of the young adult immigrant population at the College.”

Heidi described how it comes together. “We have a number of different stations [depending on class size] so some learners are presenting on how to manage a budget and showcasing Microsoft Excel while others are presenting on the use of credit cards, and some learners are presenting on saving money. The students have to build up their own expertise, not only during class time, but out of class as well. They have to go out into community to get information, bring it back, synthesize it, figure out how to explain it to their peers, come up with takeaway information that people can take home, and be prepared to answer any questions. They know learners visiting the fair will have a lot of questions because financial literacy is an area where they have gaps in knowledge.”

For instructors and learners alike, the annual Financial Literacy Fair is a highlight of the school year. The financial literacy learning doesn’t stop there. Heidi and Ruby are also co-collaborators and developers of the Financial ESL Literacy Toolbox, a compilation of innovative resources that practitioners can use to teach financial literacy.
Funded by the Alberta Government, the Toolbox was developed to meet the needs of ESL literacy learners. Specifically, the resource is intended “to support learners with interrupted formal education (LIFE) who are at risk of not completing high school education and transitioning into post-secondary studies or career programs” (Bow Valley College 2010a, 1).

Heidi described the project this way: “Before we started creating the resource, we did a landscape analysis. We realized that not many of the tools we could find were for ESL literacy learners. None of the tools would have worked without being adapted in some way for the classroom so I think that was very much kind of a driving force behind this project. At the end of this project, the Toolbox reflects the collective knowledge of ESL literacy practitioners at Bow Valley College, and provides other practitioners across the country with peer-reviewed lesson plans developed for various literacy levels.”

Ruby shared how they started out in the process to develop the Toolbox. “We got together in early 2009 and started talking about what is it that learners need in order to be successful financially, in order to be able to deal with money in a way that’s really going to move them forward. And we didn’t just talk about it ourselves, we were able to talk with several focus groups. We brought in ESL literacy instructors that taught from beginner to more advanced levels, and asked them, ‘What is it that your learners really need?’ … And we were able to take that information and then decide, okay this is the direction that we need to go with our Toolbox.”

Heidi added, “Not all numeracy gaps can be addressed in classrooms that focus on language development. However, there are some core skills and knowledge that you need to know about money and how to navigate financial systems here in Canada. Fundamentally, we’re ESL literacy practitioners – we’re not math instructors. So our challenge was how do we build a Toolbox that enables a non-math teacher to introduce a numerical concept? We wanted to use what we know is best practice for this audience [practitioners].”

Heidi and Ruby worked together with instructors and learners in the CEIIA to identify gaps in numeracy skills and to develop financial knowledge relevant to the Canadian context. They were grateful that as practising instructors, they could try the new resources out in the classroom and use feedback from the learners to inform the shape and design of the Toolbox.
Ruby highlighted a strength of the Toolbox. “One of the things we did was look at the Alberta curriculum to see what numeracy skills could be taught in the context of financial literacy. Literacy learners don’t necessarily understand numeracy. They may not have a math background so financial literacy concepts may be used to teach the math. For example, decimals can be better understood in the context of money. That way the teaching enhances the understanding of money and of decimals. We worked to ensure that there were connections. In the Toolbox, the financial literacy outcomes and the numeracy outcomes are both present and connected.”

As well as learning a new language and navigating educational pathways, our learners are keen to learn how to make money work for themselves, their families and learn how to make wise financial decisions today and in the future. (Bow Valley College 2010a, 1)

The Toolbox has been highly successful in helping learners understand the meaning of money and move forward financially. Heidi and Ruby shared some success stories.

Ruby recalled, “We were working with a calculator online and I showed a student how to use it. He was a smoker and he started figuring out how much his cigarettes cost and he started plugging in the numbers. He said, ‘Ohhhh, if I quit smoking I could have a car.’ I said, ‘That’s right.’ You know, it’s as simple as that. You need to use your money differently.”

Heidi gave other examples. “The class was learning about budgeting skills. We had built our vocabulary about incoming and outgoing funds and we actually connected it to using Microsoft Excel. And I had one learner who just, wide-eyed, kind of shot up out of her seat and said, ‘I don’t make that much money.’ They had been collecting their receipts in an envelope. And she literally was plugging them into this spread sheet, and she had no idea. That was the first time she made that connection that she was spending more than she actually made. Another learner who worked in a restaurant was walking past her manager’s office, and her manager was struggling with how to make a pie chart in Microsoft Excel. She said, ‘Oh I think I can help you with that,’ and she went in and did it. She stopped working in the restaurant and was promoted to working in the office. Another higher level learner went into the bank with her parents and helped them get a mortgage because she knew where to get her information, she knew the questions to ask, and she understood how the interest would be calculated.”
The Toolbox has been well received locally, provincially, and nationally. To encourage use, the resources are easily accessible on the Financial ESL Literacy Toolbox website, which is part of the ESL Literacy Network, and can be downloaded and adapted to suit diverse learner needs.

Heidi described the reach of the project. “I’ve done numerous presentations on the Toolbox and financial literacy including for Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL) and hosted webinars on the ESL Literacy Network. I was invited to speak with the Further Education Society of Alberta as part of their practitioner training to do a really hands-on workshop to get them started and ready to jump in to teaching financial literacy. ESL organizations from across the country are recognizing the need for financial literacy instruction and have turned to the CEIIA to access support with material and curriculum development.”

A Closing Note

The financial literacy field has begun to articulate some guiding principles for effective financial literacy interventions aimed at vulnerable groups. In a research report for the Canadian Centre for Financial Literacy, Robson found that financial literacy interventions are most effective when they:

• offer appropriate, accurate content, tailored to the audience;
• are delivered by trusted persons;
• are consistent with principles of adult learning for adult clients; and
• are embedded in programs with sustainable capacity.

(Robson 2012, 33)

ESL literacy practitioners are well-placed to successfully deliver financial literacy instruction. The Toolbox materials are designed specifically for ESL literacy learners and offer practitioners a choice of three skill levels for each of 13 themes. They incorporate adult learning principles. Most importantly, the components are intended to be delivered by ESL practitioners and other trusted teaching professionals already working with ESL learners.
Heidi ended our conversation with a passionate plea. “There is a real case to build here for having financial and numeracy curriculum as part of early settlement services. Prosper Canada and the Canadian Centre for Financial Literacy have said that 40% of all Canadians lack the basic skills and knowledge to function in the Canadian economy and that’s almost half the country. It’s a very sobering statistic. I think when you’re working with populations that already have additional barriers on top of that, financial literacy is essential. I’m very thankful for the opportunity to have worked on this project because it’s an absolute need for people who are arriving in Canada with literacy and numeracy needs.”

Ruby agreed that financial literacy is an essential skill for all newcomers. “I think that what it really comes down to is that financial literacy is integral to the settlement process. It’s being able to make good financial decisions, being able to be wise in your purchases, and being wise in how you use your money.”

The Financial ESL Literacy Toolbox is an important resource for building financial literacy in new immigrants. However, government agencies, financial institutions, community-based organizations, and educational institutions all have a part to play and need to work together to continue to develop effective initiatives designed to meet the financial literacy education needs of newcomers.

2 Adult learning principles include:

* **Adults must want to learn.** They learn effectively only when they have a strong inner motivation to develop a new skill.
* **Adults will learn only what they feel they need to learn.** Adults are practical in their approach to learning; they want to know, “How is this going to help me right now?”
* **Adults learn by doing.** Children learn by doing, but active participation is more important among adults.
* **Adult learning focuses on problems and the problems must be realistic.** Adults start with a problem and work to find a solution.
* **Experience affects adult learning.** Adults have more experience than children. This can be an asset and a liability.
* **Adults learn best in an informal situation.** Often, adults learn only what they feel they need to know.
* **Adults want guidance.** Adults want information that will help them improve their situation or that of their children.

(http://www.literacy.ca/professionals/professional-development-2/principles-of-adult-learning/)
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One Size Does Not Fit All:
Designing Curriculum and Assessment for Adult ESL Literacy Learners

Developing “pathways, programming, services, and curricula design that promote a highly flexible, interactive and supportive environment” for learners is one of Bow Valley College’s Vision 2020 priorities (Bow Valley College 2011b, 15). Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework embodies this principle, and extends it beyond the walls of the College by supporting organizations to create their own customized curriculum tailored to their communities’ and their learners’ needs.

“Curriculum is both planned and lived (Aoki, 2005). The planned curriculum is the formalized curriculum which is developed in response to an understanding of the needs of learners as a group, the needs of your community and the wider environment of which your program is a part. The lived curriculum is the way in which the planned curriculum is addressed in the classroom, as instructors respond to the needs, interests and learning styles of individuals. Understanding curriculum as lived is one way of acknowledging ‘the uniqueness of every teaching situation’ (Aoki, 2005, 165).” (Bow Valley College 2011a [Framework], Introduction, 7).

ESL literacy learners bring diverse strengths and challenges into the classroom. Their life experiences may include war, poverty, and other forms of violence and trauma. Their formal education has been limited or interrupted for many reasons.
As a result of this history, many ESL literacy learners have not developed “the knowledge, skills and strategies that are commonly assumed of adults in Alberta” (Framework, Stage 1, 6). However, they possess remarkable resilience, survival skills, and perseverance. They are genuinely motivated to learn English language and literacy skills so they can participate as full citizens in their new lives in Canada.

This struck me from the very first day I walked into an ESL literacy classroom. As much as possible, leave your assumptions at the door. You don’t really know what people’s backgrounds are, what their skills are, what might be scary for them, or what might be comforting for them. (Katrina Derix-Langstraat, ESL literacy practitioner, personal interview).

Early in 2009, the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College, with funding from the Alberta Government, began developing a curriculum framework intended to provide information, guidance, and a structure that would help adult ESL literacy program administrators, curriculum developers, and practitioners develop responsive programs designed to meet the specific needs of their distinct learners. It was not a “one size fits all” approach, which would be inappropriate and ineffective given that ESL literacy programs are diverse – in location (urban/rural), setting (colleges, community organizations), and learners. Instead, it aimed to provide a thoughtful and considered framework that encouraged practitioners to engage in their own curriculum planning process. Katrina Derix-Langstraat (project lead) and Jennifer Acevedo (project consultant) talked with me about how the Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework took shape.

Katrina began. “The curriculum framework was one stage of a larger project. The other parts were the Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook and the ESL Literacy Network website. The intention was to create a resource that would help programs across the province to develop an ESL literacy curriculum of their own. The resource is intended to support both classroom instructors and program developers. It was meant to give them a place to start.”
The Framework project began with an extensive review of the research and theory in adult ESL literacy and adult first language acquisition. This process also included a review of curricula and curriculum framework models from a variety of resources and countries.¹

Katrina and Jennifer took a collaborative approach in developing the resource. The Framework project included the formation of an Alberta Advisory Committee comprised of ESL literacy experts and practitioners. This committee provided ongoing feedback throughout the project. Interviews and site visits were conducted at community and educational organizations throughout rural and urban Alberta. As well, experienced ESL literacy practitioners at Bow Valley College contributed their collective expertise and insight.

“There were consultations with different programs and providers across the province. We discussed learner demographics, the learning needs of the learners, as well as practitioners’ perceptions about those needs. These conversations helped to identify emerging themes and trends,” Katrina explained.

Through their research and consultations, Katrina and Jennifer outlined four program contexts of ESL literacy programming for the Framework:

**Community orientation and participation in ESL Literacy programs:**
These programs focus on addressing needs related to the acclimatization stage of the settlement continuum.

**Employment ESL literacy programs:**
These programs provide ESL literacy for the workplace or ESL literacy in the workplace.

**Family ESL literacy programs:**
These programs focus on providing ESL literacy development for parents and children, and also often address parenting skills.

¹ The Manitoba Adult EAL Curriculum Framework Foundations: 2009 and the Massachusetts Adult Basic Education Curriculum Framework for English Speakers of Other Languages (2005) were influential in developing the resource.
**Educational preparation ESL literacy programs:**

These programs aim to transition learners from ESL literacy to adult basic education programs or other training opportunities.

*(Framework, Stage 1, 15)*

Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework provides background information and guiding principles for all four of these program contexts and can be easily adapted according to a program’s needs and resources.

Katrina elaborated on the stages of curriculum development. “We came up with a five-part process. Stage 1 is understanding needs, both the community’s needs and the learners’ needs. Stage 2 is determining the focus of your program. Stage 3 is about setting learning outcomes. Stage 4 is about integrating assessment for learners. Stage 5 is demonstrating accountability to all stakeholders. It’s not intended to be a linear process. The parts influence each other and there is interplay back and forth. However, if you’re going to design a program, or even as an instructor, these are things you need to think about, and then make decisions based on your learners, your demographics, and what’s possible in your context. It’s not ‘here we did it for you.’ People still need to do a lot of work on their own.”

The Framework also looks at *Habits of Mind*. Katrina explained, “*Habits of Mind* are the soft skills, the non-literacy skills that learners need to be successful in school. They are things like setting goals, managing your learning, being prepared for different situations, managing information, and managing your time.” Jennifer added, “Based on conversations with other practitioners, we heard that learners don’t often realize how their behaviour is perceived. We do them a disservice if we don’t try to illuminate aspects of Canadian culture such as expectations at school or at work. We tried to develop a process, a series of questions teachers could draw upon in their classrooms.”

“In the Framework, *Habits of Mind* is the term used to describe the non-literacy skills that demonstrate the characteristics of successful learners in North American contexts” *(Framework, Stage 3, 94)*. The term draws on the research of Costa and Kallick that identified 16 *Habits of Mind* that contribute to success in learning and in life. They defined a habit as a behaviour that requires “a discipline of the mind
that is practiced so it becomes a habitual way of working toward more thoughtful… action” (Costa and Kallick 2008, xvii). The Framework focuses on four specific Habits of Mind: resourcefulness, motivation, responsibility, and engagement (Framework, Stage 3, 96). For each of the four, the Framework provides a description of the Habit, a description of the skills that support learners in demonstrating the Habit, considerations for understanding learners’ challenges, considerations for building on learners’ strengths, and a process of skill development that demonstrates each Habit of Mind (Framework, Stage 3, 99). In addition, practitioners are given considerations for assessing these Habits of Mind (Framework, Stage 4, 51-52).

The Importance of Integrating Alternative Learner Assessment

Katrina talked about the importance of assessment. “It’s particularly challenging in this field to make assessment meaningful, purposeful, and transparent. We want to demonstrate accountability to learners and instructors, and to the other stakeholders [funders, administrators]…. One of the reasons we included Habits of Mind is that progress is gradual depending on the learner’s background knowledge and life experiences. We see great growth and progress in learners over the course of a term or a program in these other [soft skill] areas which actually have a huge positive impact on learning…. So including Habits of Mind gave instructors some language and some awareness to capture the progress being made in [these soft skills], because everything, like bringing your glasses to school and knowing when it is appropriate to speak out…makes students more aware of themselves as learners.” Jennifer added, “The learners have an opportunity to practice these skills and make connections with their previous experience…and these skills help them succeed in their daily lives…how to be a student, how to be an employee….”

2 “The Habits of Mind are an identified set of 16 problem solving, life related skills, necessary to effectively operate in society and promote strategic reasoning, insightfulness, perseverance, creativity and craftsmanship.”
(http://www.chsvt.org/wdp/Habits_of_Mind.pdf)
“Assessment is a transparent, ongoing process of purposefully gathering useful information that directs instruction and enables communication about learning. Effective assessment provides detailed, useful information for instructors, learners and other stakeholders” (Framework, Stage 4, 4). The Framework recommends getting learners involved in the assessment process by:

• using assessments for different purposes,
• integrating informal assessment as part of the classroom routine,
• using a portfolio based language assessment approach, and
• integrating regular learning conferences [with learners] as an opportunity for communicating about learning expectations, challenges and achievements. (Framework, Stage 4, 6)

The Framework’s philosophy surrounding assessment is congruent with a formative assessment model that requires learners’ engagement and involvement. Practitioners do not just give feedback but engage in a dialogue with students about learning.3

Progress for ESL literacy learners is not always straight-forward or linear. The more complex and flexible measurements of success such as personal growth, self-confidence, independence, social connections, and changed attitudes toward life and learning are all ways to measure progress, but are not easily quantified or standardized. Building accountability into each stage of curriculum development helps demonstrate and value the incremental progress made by ESL literacy learners.

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3 Researchers Derrick, Eceleston, and Merrifield (2007) list ten best practices in formative assessment:
  1. Make it part of effective planning for teaching and learning, which should include processes for feedback and engaging learners.
  2. Focus on how students learn.
  3. Help students become aware of how they are learning, not just what they are learning.
  4. Recognize it as central to classroom practice.
  5. Regard it as a key professional skill for teachers.
  6. Take account of the importance of learner motivation by emphasizing progress and achievement rather than failure.
  7. Promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria being assessed.
  8. Enable learners to receive constructive feedback about how to improve.
  9. Develop learners’ capacity for self-assessment so that they become reflective and self-managing.
 10. Recognize the full range of achievement for all learners.
Developing skills and personal growth are inextricably linked and equally necessary for foundational learners to make progress. Learners develop skills when they have the self-confidence to take risks and when the experience themselves as learners. They build self-confidence and experience themselves as learners when they develop skills that make a difference in their daily lives at work, at home, and in the community. Including both these components of progress offers the possibility of honouring the whole learner and giving a true indication of progress. (Jackson and Schaetti 2014, 54)

**A Success Story**

Jennifer shared a successful application of the Framework within her own work. “I took the Curriculum Framework that we designed and used it to successfully create and pilot a curriculum for what we call our ‘Practical Program’ at Bow Valley College. We define ‘practical’ learners as learners with 4 to 9 years of education who already have the very basics of literacy but still need support to develop more learning strategies and literacy skills. These learners benefit from a program designed for their specific needs.”

“The development of the Practical Program curriculum was a huge undertaking as the program consists of nine levels. The curriculum provides instructors with a progression of connected outcomes over these nine levels. The outcomes help instructors measure learners’ progress in small incremental steps across the levels, allowing for spiralling and recycling. Without the Curriculum Framework to support the development of this curriculum, it would have been much more of a challenge to create it.
The Curriculum Framework provided a structure and tangible outcomes, not only in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but in learning strategies and life skills as well. The result is a program curriculum that is able to effectively address the literacy and language needs of learners. Instructors use the Practical Program curriculum for planning, teaching, and assessment, providing learners with a cohesive learning experience across all levels of the program.”

A Closing Note

Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework is the culmination of well-considered research and the collective expertise of experienced ESL literacy practitioners. It provides an invaluable resource to ESL literacy program administrators, curriculum developers, and practitioners as they engage in the dynamic and ongoing process of developing responsive ESL literacy programming tailored to their learners’ needs.

An effective curriculum is responsive to learner needs and reflects the context in which it operates. Adult ESL literacy programs in Alberta are diverse, serving different learner populations in both urban and rural contexts, in part-time and full-time settings. The ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework addresses this diversity by provided a general process for curriculum development, as well as information for specific program contexts. (https://esl-literacy.com/curriculum-framework)

References


ESL Literacy Readers:

Igniting a passion for reading in ESL literacy learners

“We do learn to read by reading”
Frank West (cited in Smith and Elley 1997)

I still remember my excitement when I learned to read. The bookmobile came to our school every two weeks and I would take out the full limit of books allowed. By the time the bookmobile returned I had read everything and was eagerly waiting to restock my stash. This early and extensive reading ignited my passion for reading and writing, a passion that still exists today.

Teacher and scholar Alan Maley researched and wrote at length about extensive reading and its benefits for English language learners. He compiled a list of characteristics of extensive reading, which includes the following:

1. Students read a lot and often.
2. There is a wide variety of text types and topics to choose from.
3. The texts are not just interesting: they are engaging/compelling.
4. Students choose what to read.
5. Reading purposes focus on: pleasure, information, and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Materials are within the language competence of the students.
8. Reading is individual, and silent.
9. The teacher is a role model...a reader who participates along with the students. (Maley 2009)

Simply put, extensive reading is reading a lot and reading for pleasure. The goal is “to create fluency and enjoyment in the reading process” (Clarity 2007).
Ample research evidence supports the benefits of extensive reading. It helps develop learner autonomy; provides massive and repeated exposure to language in context; increases general language competence (writing, speaking skills); develops general, world knowledge; extends, consolidates, and sustains vocabulary growth; improves writing (the more we read the better we write); and creates motivation to read more (Maley 2009).

It is clear that extensive reading would benefit adult ESL literacy learners for all these reasons. For them to begin, the first task would be finding books written at the appropriate levels for this diverse group. And that is where this story opens.

**The ESL Literacy Readers Project: Developing resources for ESL literacy learners**

In early 2010, Theresa Wall and Joan Bruce, ESL literacy practitioners in the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College, embarked on an ambitious project: to substantially increase the available reading resources for adult ESL literacy learners. As practitioners they experienced frustration with the lack of suitable reading materials for their learners. And like many practitioners working in the field, they created their own materials from scratch or modified existing materials intended for mainstream ESL learners. Out of this need, an idea emerged: to develop a series of books designed specifically for adult ESL literacy learners that would be openly accessible to practitioners everywhere.

The result was the ESL Literacy Readers project funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. By its end, the project created 40 readers intended to be used in conjunction with theme-based lessons for adult ESL literacy learners.

Theresa described the project’s early days. “When we started this project, there were very few materials available developed for adults who were new to reading. Our goal was to develop books for ESL literacy learners that were appropriate for adult readers. We wanted the characters to reflect the learners in our ESL literacy programs. The books would complement the settlement themes used in LINC1 classes.

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We wanted to create something that instructors could use as part of a larger unit in their classroom instruction and that learners would read with support at the beginning, and independently by the end of the unit. We wanted reading to be a successful experience for ESL literacy learners. In the end, the project team wrote eleven to sixteen readers at each of the different levels from introductory to intermediate.”

“The entire team of writers and editors were ESL literacy practitioners in Bow Valley College’s ESL Literacy and Practical programs in the CEIIA. In all, there were six writers and the two of us as editors directly involved. Other CEIIA instructors supported the process by piloting the readers in their classes and offering feedback on the stories.” Theresa explained, “Instructors worked in pairs, with two teachers writing for one phase. Some instructors worked together and would meet throughout the process. After writers finished a story, they would send it for editing, where Joan and I would run the stories through all of the criteria we had developed as a team earlier in the process.”

Joan added, “Our purpose was not only developing material for our learners, but also to create exemplars to demonstrate to instructors what they needed to take into consideration when they were developing [their own] materials.”

As part of the project, they reviewed other initiatives and related research to gather information about best practices in developing reading materials for new readers. They discovered ongoing work being done in this area at Newcastle University in England. Researchers Young-Scholten and Maguire (2010) found that there was a shortage of non-fiction and fiction books written for the lowest level second language learners.
They set up a pilot project to train undergraduate English language and linguistics students to write stories for low level ESL literacy learners. The purpose of their project was two-fold: to educate the student writers about the needs of low literacy English language learners and to increase the availability of books for this population. The pilot eventually led to the Cracking Good Stories project, an ongoing initiative that trains people on how to write books for low literacy ESL learners and contributes to the development of appropriate level books for this learner group.

Incorporating this and other research with the experience of practitioners working in the CEIIA, Theresa and Joan compiled a list of best practices for practitioners to consider in the creation of their own ESL literacy stories, which is included in the ESL Literacy Readers Guide that was written as an accompaniment to the readers:

1. **Choose relevant themes.**
   Learners will understand and better relate to stories that speak to their everyday lives.

   “It’s so important that the reading material we’re giving our learners to work with is something that is completely relevant, that they can connect to, that has to do with their day-to-day lives, or something that they already have experience with so that the text doesn’t become cumbersome. They are learning to read, learning the reading strategies, learning the vocabulary, learning the syntax, and so adding an unfamiliar topic that potentially has little relevance to the learners’ lives does not support the reading process,” Theresa explained.

2. **Keep vocabulary simple.** Stories should consist of vocabulary familiar to learners; only a few new words should be introduced in a reading. Repetition of key words is critical, particularly with lower Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) levels.
“Learners have to be able to read 98% of the surrounding text before they’re able to use context clues so that’s a very high percentage of words that they have to be familiar with in order to use that strategy. I think that’s something that often we don’t realize. It’s just too much of an overload with new words and new concepts, and unfamiliar situations or unfamiliar content. That whole scaffolding piece before they actually get to reading the text is so critical. Whether that’s oral language or work with the new vocabulary and different kind of games and that sort of thing. We need to set them up for success,” Joan emphasized.

3. **Choose fonts carefully.** Font type and size are both important. Fonts should be clear, easy-to-read, and larger than in non-literacy materials. At the lower CLB levels, the font used should not contain the script version of ‘a’; however, it should be introduced in the higher levels as it is found in most authentic print.

4. **Include plenty of whitespace.** An uncluttered page is critical in stories written for LIFE (learners with interrupted formal education). The amount of whitespace can decrease with higher CLB levels.

5. **Use authentic pictures.** Good pictures facilitate comprehension a great deal. The more realistic the pictures are, the more easily learners will interpret them – a photograph is better than a drawing, for example. (Bow Valley College 2011, 10)

After doing this project, I have a new awareness of how complex the process of reading text is, and what you need to take into account to come up with texts that are meaningful, relevant, level appropriate, and address the learner’s reality. (Joan Bruce, ESL literacy practitioner, personal interview)

The ESL Literacy Readers Guide is intended to assist practitioners in developing lessons for both the pre-reading and post-reading stages. It explains how the 40 stories are organized in levels from introductory to intermediate, and encompass the range of reading skills within each level.²

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² The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners document informed the development of the ESL Literacy Readers (http://www.language.ca/documents/e-version_ESL_Literacy_Learners_April_2010.pdf). This document organized the different ESL literacy levels into phases. It has since been revised, and the organization changed from phases to levels (Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Adult Literacy Learners (ALL), http://www.language.ca/documents/CLB_Adult_Literacy_Learners_e-version_2015.pdf). In the near future, the ESL Literacy Readers will be re-organized to reflect the levels outlined in the 2015 document.
It also explains the importance of themes, and how they were carefully selected in the writing of the stories and recur throughout the different levels. “Theme-teaching allows for a natural progression into practical, real-life extension activities – activities that go beyond the classroom and have a basis in authentic printed material and application in the community” (ESL Literacy Readers Guide 2011). The guide gives suggestions for extension activities corresponding to the themes and using authentic printed materials. Theme topics include food/shopping/money, housing, transportation, employment, leisure, health, school and clothing.

Both the Readers’ Guide and the Readers themselves are freely available and easily downloaded from the ESL Literacy Network.

I asked both Theresa and Joan about the success of the ESL Literacy Readers. Were learners using them and had they improved their skills?

Theresa replied, “I remember one of the things I was excited about was that one of the learners in our class told me she was actually reading her book at home. She had it in her bedroom so when she put her child down to sleep, she’d make some time to read. To me, there were two important pieces to this – first, there was a book she could (and wanted to) read independently, and second, this book was hers to keep and read whenever she wanted to. Now she had the tools to practice reading at home on her own.”

Joan added, “We sometimes also don’t realize the importance of a child seeing their parent read. That it is sending a message to the child that reading is important and that it’s something we enjoy doing. And so having this woman able to read to her child or having books in the home, the effects of that are far reaching because it affects the child and their attitude, and how they feel about reading.”
A Closing Note

The ESL Literacy Readers project is successful and innovative on many fronts. The Canadian-produced materials are specifically designed and written with the needs of adult ESL literacy learners in mind. The chosen themes are of high interest and pertinent to learners’ lives. The events and issues portrayed are those that a typical learner may experience in their new country. Deng goes to school, Lien buys food, Amir gets sick, and A Problem at Work are only a handful of titles in the 40 stories. An added bonus is that the photos accompanying the stories are of learners at Bow Valley College. Research and experience has shown that the more realistic a photo is, the more easily learners will interpret them and relate to them. The ESL Literacy Readers fill an important need for relevant, interesting adult-oriented reading materials targeted at beginning ESL literacy learners.

This project made it possible for instructor-created materials, developed specifically for ESL literacy learners, to be available to instructors across the country. And for learners to be able to take home and keep these books is a big deal for someone who has not had access to books that are both level appropriate and age-appropriate. (Theresa Wall, ESL literacy practitioner, personal interview)

References


Shaping and Reshaping Teaching Practice in ESL Literacy

This two-part article examines how experienced ESL literacy practitioners in the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College work to create transformative learning environments for their diverse learners.

Part One

The Computer Enhanced ESL Literacy Program: Embedding computer literacy in low-level classes

Norma Tersigni, Lois Heckel, and Joanne Pritchard work together in the Computer Enhanced ESL Literacy program, which serves learners with interrupted formal education. They talked to me about how the program works, and the advantages of working together as part of a team.

Joanne began by talking about who is in the program. “Our target audience is adult English language learners with interrupted formal education. In many cases, these learners did not have the opportunity to go to school in their home countries and now, many years later, they’re trying to acquire literacy in English. Many of the people that join our program are older adults who have been in Canada for quite a number of years. Some have worked at entry-level jobs for 20 or more years. Most are Canadian citizens, who don’t qualify for other funded programs. We also welcome many

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1 This program is funded by Calgary Learns with funding support provided by Alberta Innovation and Advanced Education.
learners who are referred to us from Bow Valley College’s full-time English Language Learning (ELL) program who haven’t been able to move to the next level of the program. Our learners have very little or no literacy in their first language, little or no literacy in English, and some may even have special learning needs, such as vision and hearing disabilities. To ensure foundational learning is accessible, this Calgary Learns’ funded program has a nominal registration fee that can be waived for learners who have little to no income.”

“Many of these learners live with relatives that have already come to Canada, so they do have access to a bit of a support system. However, we also have taught learners who were homeless,” Norma added.

The goal of the program is to help immigrant learners with interrupted formal education develop their reading, writing, and digital literacy (computer use) skills within an educational setting that respects their learning needs and individual learning rates. The emphasis is on creating a safe environment that provides the support and time these particular learners need to develop their literacy and language skills. This class also introduces computer use in a gentle way to learners who have little or no experience using computers.2

The program is divided into three levels with equivalencies to the Canadian Language Benchmarks for ESL Literacy Learners. Norma teaches level one, Lois teaches level two, and Joanne teaches level three; however, the three instructors work together as a united team sharing resources and effective teaching strategies. As well, they collaborated to develop internal in-take assessment materials for the program.

Offering three levels and having small class sizes is crucial to the program’s success. Joanne explained, “Because we have three instructors in our program, offering three levels – very basic, basic, and low intermediate – allows us to meet a diverse range of learning needs. Although these groups are by no means homogeneous, we’re able to work with learners at the three different levels, in groups of only 8 to 12 learners, so we’re better able to meet their needs than if we had larger, more heterogeneous groups. Small class sizes and the three distinct levels are vital to our program’s success.”

2 Computer use is one of the nine essential life skills every individual needs to successfully participate in learning, work, and life as identified by the Government of Canada. The nine skills are: Reading Text, Document Use, Writing, Numeracy, Oral Communication, Thinking, Working with Others, Computer Use, and Continuous Learning. (http://skillscompetencescanada.com/en/what-are-the-nine-essential-skills/)
The program runs for three 12-week terms over the year. Classes run for 3 hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and include 45 minutes of computer lab time. A unique feature of the program is that there are no set time limits. Learners move through the levels at their own pace and can remain in the program as long as they are progressing.

Lois explained, “During our program, learners make significant gains in their literacy and language development, but these gains occur in small increment steps. With time, learners develop an increased awareness of the significance of their learning achievements. I have one learner that has been in the program for quite some time. When he came into the program he was extremely quiet and didn’t ask any questions. Now, he actively engages, asking me questions, talking about his weekend, and writing in his journal.”

All three instructors emphasized the need to be flexible and responsive to the needs of learners, especially within a multi-level environment.

Norma gave an example of a lesson plan from her level one class that came from her observation of learner behaviour in the college campus. “I noticed when the learners were buying coffee that they would use a toonie or a five dollar bill, and when they got their change, they threw it in the garbage, because they didn’t know what to do with it and they didn’t know the value of it. Identifying this need created an instructional opportunity and I began to work with them on Canadian money and counting and making change. It is critical to build the financial literacy skills of ESL literacy learners – but it can be a real challenge for them. However, as a result of these lessons, I noticed that learners stopped throwing their change away.” Financial literacy, while not part of the formal curriculum in this program, is an important component of life in Canada, and ESL literacy instructors like Norma seize these real life opportunities to teach their learners the concepts of Canadian money and the value of money.

Lois spoke of the impact on practice. “I would say this program has changed my approach to teaching tremendously because I’m always thinking of new ways of doing things. I am constantly adapting my techniques to best meet needs. Working within a collaborative team allows us to share our materials and teaching approaches. I get many ideas from Norma. We try to create seamless transitions for learners from
one level to the next. At point of assessment, learners move into the level best suited to their needs, but once placed, the achievement of outcomes determines movement to the next level.”

When I asked them to describe a typical day in their classrooms, the three instructors provided a good picture of the scope of the program.

Norma began. “At my level [level one], instruction needs to be very explicit. Learners benefit from routine and repetition. Because they’re non-readers, I include activities that foster metacognitive skills. For example, they have a binder with dividers, and I colour code the dividers so that, initially, they don’t have to be able to read anything – if we start out with vocabulary, I ask them to flip over the green coloured tab. So there isn’t the stress and they’re relaxed. If they’re anxious or worried about performance, they won’t learn. I have them do quite a bit of work ahead of actually working on the computers. I use a template of the keyboard they have at their desks and we practice putting website addresses in, finding letters. We practice in the classroom that way. And then I call them up one at a time to the computer at my desk and we rehearse what they’re going to do in the computer lab.”

“When we go in the computer lab, we blend our classes, so Lois [level two] and I are in the computer lab together. My learners have a role model – they see Lois’ learners are generally more proficient on the computer. It’s an opportunity for some peer tutoring because some of Lois’ learners will stop what they’re doing and help my learners,” Norma added.

Lois described some of the level two learning activities. “We always try to incorporate authentic learning opportunities. For example, some of the learners will bring in letters that they get about their income tax or a phone bill. They require help in understanding what information is being forwarded to them. One of the goals at my level is to help learners independently complete short forms where they have to give their name, their address, their status, etc. We practice the skill of form filling. We also focus on oral/aural skill development, for example how to respond to questions about where they live, etc. We do lots of role playing. I have introduced this activity called ‘in the hot seat.’ In this activity one learner is in the hot seat and the other learners ask questions such as ‘Where do you live?’, ‘What is your address?’ This activity becomes a springboard for learners to pose new questions of their own.”
Learners in Joanne’s level [level three] are able to demonstrate higher literacy skills and are beginning to share their stories through print. “I spend considerable time at the beginning of each term with oral activities for learners to get to know each other. As we move into the term, classes often begin with several of the students reading their completed (and jointly edited) work from a previous computer class, usually just 3 to 5 sentences on a topic. As the other learners in the class listen to their classmates’ stories, they are asked to identify what their classmate had to say about the given topic. To introduce new material, I use the SMART projector in my classroom to project web-based resources such as the ESL Literacy Readers. Learners are provided with booklets that contain the same reading passages as well as activities that relate to our thematic unit to complete during class and for homework. I try to focus on topics that are relevant to their lives in selecting our themes, and I encourage each student to express their own personal ideas in their writing. When they share their written sentences with the rest of the class, it’s their individual ideas, not something I’ve given them to type or the ideas of someone else in the class. Because of the wide-range of literacy levels, I structure each activity so that each student can work at his/her level.”

The joint learnings of the three instructors working in the program have been gathered together to inform the development of an internal program handbook. The handbook includes the learning outcomes for each level as well as suggestions for thematic units and related online and print resources. The handbook continues to be updated as these instructors shape and re-shape their teaching practice to meet evolving learner needs.
Part Two

Experienced practitioners working to create transformative learning environments

Shelley McConnell and Julia Poon have 40 years combined experience teaching in the CEIIA. I spoke to each of them about their evolving teaching practices and philosophies.

In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Shelley McConnell shares her experience and learning through professional development workshops and webinars designed for ESL literacy practitioners. She started our conversation.

“The target audience that I work with is people who didn’t go to school before in their country and have primarily lived in an oral culture. Print literacy wasn’t a part of their lives to any great extent.”

Shelley also spoke about an additional and often overlooked challenge faced by these learners. “In addition to being from oral cultures, my learners may have another challenge when adapting to life in Canada and developing literacy skills here. I would say a good number of the people I work with have not fully acquired their traditional culture to the extent that their grandmothers and great grandmothers might have. A lot of them have gone through many sudden interruptions and been displaced from elders and other chances to take part in their traditional culture. They might not have had traditional knowledge, life skills, and strategies passed down to them.”

Like all ESL literacy practitioners, Shelley believes in building on learner strengths.

“That’s why I like Decapua and Marshall’s model of a ‘Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP)’. The idea is to start with the channels through which people have learned in the past and then build on those strengths. You show them that those learning channels are valuable rather than liabilities. And then starting from there, you build on those learning styles and then help them adapt and develop new strategies while not necessarily giving up their old strategies either. So instructors adapt to facilitating learning in a learning style that is not necessarily their own, and learners adapt to learning through new channels.”
Shelley spoke about the need for using different approaches to teaching ESL literacy learners. “A common characteristic our learners share is the need for a very kinesthetic and hands-on approach to learning. A lot of the literature talks about developing oral language and oral language awareness first, and I think this is the case, but I think it is in conjunction with hands-on kinesthetic modelling, since this is the mode in which those from more oral cultures have been learning their whole lives. It’s very different from how I learn. I’m a very visual kind of learner, and I’ve had to adapt to teaching in a very kinesthetic, tactile, and auditory mode of learning.”

Shelley added, “We work a lot with developing concepts and strategies as well as language. When I taught mainstream ESL learners, they transferred concepts behind pieces of vocabulary directly from their language into English, so it’s relatively easy. But with these learners, you’re often teaching or deepening the concepts behind vocabulary as well as the vocabulary itself. For example, if I’m teaching the word ‘address’. For somebody who is educated and has lived in places with addresses that word has a deep concept behind it. They might know or assume that the system of how we derive ‘addresses’ in Canada might be slightly different from their country, but they would know that there is a system by which we assign or describe a location through text to another person. Whereas, ESL literacy learners might not have been exposed to this concept before, or have only a very superficial concept of the word ‘address’. They might know they have an address and may even have memorized it orally, but they don’t know what an address is used for. We help them develop the concept of what that word means in addition to teaching the language around it. I think that’s a big piece of learning for people coming into teaching ESL literacy – that we’re facilitating learners to develop or deepen concepts as well as learning the language itself.”

Shelley also emphasized the importance of teaching concepts in context as opposed to the artificially created context of a classroom.

“We’re teaching in probably the most foreign context for them – the classroom, and add to that mix trying to teach concepts completely decontextualized from the place where those concepts are lived. The approach that I always start with is having them experience concepts in real life outside the classroom, or simulate those contexts in the classroom. The learning that they have done in the past has been much contextualized. They would have learned, experienced, and used concepts
in the location in which they would have been immediately relevant, practical, and useful. My approach is almost always to start with somekind of hands-on real experience and documenting that experience somehow, for example through photography, videotaping, or re-enactment, and that documentation becoming part of the content that we explore in the classroom.”

“Another thing that these learners don’t have is full print awareness. The best way that I’ve heard it described is, that when you’re reading, what you’re really doing is listening on paper or listening with your eyes, and when you’re writing, what you’re really doing is speaking with your pencil or speaking on paper.

And learners don’t have that concept – that they can get information, they can listen through their eyes, or they can speak through their hands with text or pictures they create. I’m trying to help them discover that in this society we listen and speak in this different way a lot – that it is often the most common way we deliver, receive, and recall information.”

Shelley gave me an example that aptly illustrates how an ESL literacy learner can miss the use of text in his environment. “I’ve had learners who are beginning to read independently and could potentially read new words decontextualized from the support of the classroom. But they don’t know to look for text in their environment – they don’t fully know they’re constantly being communicated to in that way. I had one learner, for example, who was working as a cleaner in an office building. He came to school one day with this hand-written note, in large lettering written with a black Jiffy marker: Please clean this table. He said, ‘I just about got fired today.’ He explained it was because an executive had left this large note for him, but he hadn’t noticed it on the table in the room he was cleaning. He didn’t understand that anybody would be giving him instructions that way, so he didn’t keep his eye out for a note like that. He could read that sentence well, but didn’t know to look for it.
He came to class that day with the note and asked to say something to the class. He held up the page, and said, ‘Hey everybody, did you know that Canadians talk to you like this?’ It was a ‘light bulb’ moment for him and for the other students, who assumed that bosses would always give instructions to employees orally.

Shelley’s professional development workshops and webinars are available on the ESL Literacy Network. She also gives in-person workshops sharing her philosophies and ways of working.

**Julia Poon** has spent the last 30 years teaching in the CEIIA. She shared her personal experience of the shift from teaching mainstream ESL to teaching ESL literacy and how it has shaped her teaching practice.

Part of Julia’s role in the department is doing a combination of summative and formative assessment as well as an informal interview to determine where to place ESL literacy learners.

“While I do give them a reading/writing test, I’m also assessing whether or not they can follow a certain format that I’m sharing. For example, we look at a calendar to see if they can follow it. I notice whether they track from left to right. I use photos and ask them to match them with words. If they have difficulties with spatial awareness, it can be an indicator that they are ESL literacy learners. And of course we talk about their life history, school background, rural or urban – those types of things tell me a lot.”

I asked Julia how her teaching practice has changed over the years to meet the needs of these unique learners. She explained, “From my experience working with these learners, I understand that they really need to start with the concrete and not from the abstract. Everything has to be concrete, or what I call experiential learning. They need to do tasks that situate the learning in their real lives.
When we focus on storytelling or developing stories, for example, the stories are told by the learners about a shared experience we have had, such as going to the zoo. Another understanding is that these learners need a lot more repetition, hearing or exposure to the same thing over and over in different ways. So I might do things like a song, chant, or story that uses the same words. I also use different media (art and music) to repeat the same vocabulary. And I use manipulatives as much as possible. Moving things around, doing things with their hands and bodies situates the learning in the physical. Kinesthetic learning is really important for these learners. Most importantly, I learned that they need time to absorb things. I learned patience.”

Julia shared one of her more unique learning activities as an example of kinesthetic and experiential learning. “One thing I have done a few times is hold a numeracy sale, which is similar to a garage sale. I asked teachers, everyone, to donate things that they didn’t need. I got the learners in my different classes to decide the prices – that way everyone has an opportunity to price items. They also take turns being the cashier and the supervisor during the sale. The whole activity gives the learners an authentic place to practice the numeracy skills they are learning in class. The money made goes to the student emergency fund. It’s a learning activity that everyone enjoys.” Julia created a video about this activity that is shared on the ESL Literacy Network: https://esl-literacy.com/community/showcase/numeracy-sale

Julia also emphasized the need to be spontaneous and flexible in the classroom. “We can take whatever happens in the class, and create a learning moment. I think those are actually the best lessons. It’s not the ones that are planned perfectly and stick to the agenda. I don’t know if the learners will remember them in the same way. But, for instance, a learner getting stuck in the elevator, as happened one time, can become a big lesson in itself. I’ve become more spontaneous and less attached to lesson plans – although learning outcomes are still a focal point.”

For Julia, success is measured in small steps and subtle changes. She explained, “It’s those subtleties that make me feel I have made a difference. It’s the little things that I see. Like someone who might be very quiet and shy and in class they don’t want to say anything, but by the end of the term, has come out of their shell and is interacting more and has more confidence. Those are the things that I think really make the big difference to me. But those things sometimes are hard to quantify.
When I see them from the beginning of term to the end of term, I notice the little differences in their personality, in the way that they approach things, in how they interact with other learners, how they adjust themselves to fit into the class routine. I think what supports them and helps make them successful in life is these other little things, like knowing how to adapt to a situation and demonstrating effective social skills.”

A Closing Note

These ESL practitioners are creative, adaptive, and intentional, and they work hard to provide a seamless and supportive learning experience for the more vulnerable ESL literacy learners. Their responsive curriculum can change to meet learners’ requirements. Perhaps most important of all, the ESL literacy learners in these programs are supported to move forward at their own pace, measure and celebrate their progress, and support each other as they learn and practice new skills.

References


Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Adult Literacy Learners has as its purpose to describe the needs and abilities of adult ESL Literacy learners, and to support instructors in meeting their learning needs. http://www.language.ca/documents/CLB_Adult_Literacy_Learners_e-version_2015.pdf
ESL Literacy Network website is an online community of practice that provides resources and information to support the professional development of ESL literacy practitioners. https://esl-literacy.com/


Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® is the website of Dr. DeCapua and Dr. Marshall, who have published articles and books on MALP® which provide both theory and practice, and contain many examples of lessons and projects for all types of programs and students, including those with limited formal education. http://malpeducation.com/resources/

Multi-lingual Minnesota has as its goal to increase access to language learning by providing an online resource center that collects and shares the many language learning activities taking place across the state of Minnesota. http://www.multilingualminnesota.org/