



BEST PRACTICES FOR Teaching Adults with Emerging Literacy



This article is an overview of best practices Literacy Network uses when lesson planning and working with students with emerging literacy. Many of our recommended materials and resources incorporate these strategies.

Use Multi-Level Content

Students with emerging literacy often have a higher level of speaking and listening than reading and writing. To meet students where they're at, the topic and content of conversation activities may be very different than literacy activities. That's ok! For example, a student working as a mechanic might practice saying the names of tools and pointing to a picture. They may not be ready to write or read the names of these tools yet. Instead, they might want to practice reading or writing part numbers from a form used in their daily work.

Check Pre-Reading & Pre-Writing Skills

Reading requires many skills and different parts of the brain. Before students practice reading or writing, they need to know: the orientation of the paper, how to hold a pencil, that English is read left to right, that words are made up of letters, that letters have sounds, that letters are different than numbers, and so on. You may want to assess, formally or informally, which prerequisite skills a student has mastered and which are difficult. For example, if a student's home language is character-based, check that they know English letters represent sounds.

Practice Phonemic Awareness

While more research is needed for adults learning English as a second language, most experts agree that it's crucial for students to learn to associate letters and sounds. This takes a lot of practice at many levels. For example, early in the literacy journey, a student might practice listening to a single letter's sound and pointing to the corresponding written letter. Later, a student may practice circling words on a worksheet or in an article that start with the same sound.

Value Their Adult Expertise

While students might be beginning readers, as adults they will undoubtedly have advanced skills and expertise in other areas of their lives. This could be related to work, hobbies, past experiences, or every day routines. We can help students stay motivated and engaged by incorporating opportunities in a lesson for them to be the expert. For example, a student with emerging literacy may have expertise in a trade such as sewing or cooking. They may enjoy putting pictures in sequential order or orally sharing a recipe from their home country.

Celebrate Successes Big & Small

Literacy can be a long, challenging, and non-linear journey. Just as with any language goal, celebrating gains supports students, instructors, and a classroom community. A students' goals and milestones can be a guide as to when and how to celebrate successes. For example, students might feel encouraged by playing their favorite review game at the end of a unit, receiving personalized certificates after completing a semester, or holding a class potluck once a year.