

## Executive Summary

This handbook is designed for instructors, program coordinators, and other stakeholders in ESL literacy. It is primarily intended to be a practical handbook, outlining promising practices in program considerations, strategies for the classroom, and four different levels of ESL literacy. The handbook also includes a toolbox of materials and ideas for teaching, a literature review of the field of ESL literacy, and an annotated bibliography of relevant sources in the field.

The information in the handbook is based on research into the literature, a series of focus groups held in Alberta and at two national conferences, and a survey of over a hundred ESL literacy providers worldwide. It also comes directly out of our experience in the classroom and is a reflection of what we have learned from our students about their lives, their needs, their goals, and what works best for them.

There is no widely accepted definition of ESL literacy, but most sources agree that it is the intersection of two fields, and that ESL literacy learners are facing two challenges: they are learning English at the same time as they are developing literacy. In this handbook we frame ESL literacy learners in terms of their educational background before learning English; we call our students Learners with Interrupted Formal Education (LIFE).

LIFE have between zero and ten years of formal education, which has often been interrupted by war, famine, displacement, poverty, or periods of social or political unrest. Because of this interrupted formal education, LIFE rarely thrive in mainstream ESL classes, and because of their lower levels of English, they face great difficulties in mainstream adult basic education. We 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.

The first section of the handbook examines program considerations. It looks at defining and identifying LIFE as Learners with Interrupted Formal Education, and then discusses learner needs, community needs, and program goals. Needs assessments are a key stage in setting program goals; an effective ESL literacy program is based on the needs of the learners as well as the needs of the community. This section also discusses developing program outcomes, whether a program uses the participatory or the competency approach; strategies for placing LIFE in levels; and the need to view learners holistically, supporting them inside the classroom and recognizing their need for support outside of the classroom.

The second section of the handbook focuses on strategies for the classroom, dealing with theories, methodology, approaches, and techniques, looking at the nuts and bolts of teaching with many practical ideas for the classroom. Several key themes emerge in this section, no matter what level or skill is being taught. The first is the need to teach oral fluency and vocabulary

before teaching the same ideas in written form; LIFE should already be familiar and comfortable with vocabulary and structure before encountering them in print. The second is the need to directly and explicitly teach strategies for reading, writing, and learning. The third is the need to scaffold, recycle, and spiral material. Scaffolding provides learners with the support they need to accomplish a task and gradually removes this support as the learner is able to function more independently. Recycling allows learners to encounter the same vocabulary, sight words, structures, and outcomes many times in different ways, helping them internalize the material, making it their own. Spiralling is similar to recycling, but over a longer period of time, as learners build their skills, expand their knowledge, gradually become more independent.

The third section of the handbook looks at four levels of ESL literacy in depth. These levels are based on the document *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners* and range from Foundation Phase, where learners acquire the foundational or pre-literate skills such as holding a pencil, to Phase III, where learners organize their writing into paragraphs and tackle more challenging texts.

The handbook concludes with a summary of promising practices in programs of excellence and classrooms of excellence:

**Programs of excellence:**

1. ESL literacy is recognized as a distinct stream of classes, separate from mainstream ESL and mainstream literacy.
2. The ESL literacy stream is comprised of a series of steps progressing in small increments along the literacy continuum.
3. The ESL literacy program offers higher-level ESL literacy classes.
4. The program provides professional development opportunities for teachers.
5. Instructors are given allotted time to make materials.
6. There is a program into which learners can transition.
7. There is a numeracy component in the instruction.
8. There is support for the program and for the learners.

**Classrooms of excellence:**

1. Learning must be learner-centred, meaning-based, and linked to community.
2. Learning is repeated and recycled.
3. There is a dedicated classroom for each ESL literacy class.
4. Class size is limited.
5. There is specific oral and vocabulary development.
6. There is a focus on strategies for reading, writing, and learning.