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## Section 1: Program Considerations

**Chapter 1:**  
**Identifying LIFE: ESL Literacy  
Learners**

**Chapter 2:**  
**Learner Needs and Program  
Goals**

**Chapter 3:**  
**Developing Outcomes**

**Chapter 4:**  
**Placing LIFE in Levels**

**Chapter 5:**  
**Supporting Learners**

# Chapter 1 Outline

Introduction: LIFE, ESL Literacy, and Formal Education

The Diversity of LIFE

How are LIFE Different from Mainstream ESL Learners?

Identifying LIFE

Identifying LIFE in Mainstream ESL Classes

Identifying Mainstream ESL Learners in ESL Literacy Classes

Conclusions



# Identifying LIFE: ESL Literacy Learners

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## Objectives

To define Learners with Interrupted Formal Education

To recognize the diversity of these learners

To identify Learners with Interrupted Formal Education

To recognize the importance of a separate stream for ESL literacy

## Introduction: LIFE, ESL Literacy, and Formal Education

The learners described and targeted in this handbook are in need of ESL literacy support. We have called them LIFE: Learners with Interrupted Formal Education. These literacy learners are a very diverse group, but they have two things in common: they are acquiring proficiency in English and, at the same time, they are developing literacy skills. Throughout this handbook, when we refer to LIFE, we mean the learners themselves; when we refer to ESL literacy, we mean the field of education.

The recommended place for this development is a separate, dedicated ESL literacy classroom. Learners with Interrupted Formal Education will not thrive in a mainstream ESL classroom, by which we mean an ESL class with no special consideration for the development of literacy. In this handbook we use “mainstream ESL” to refer to all non-literacy ESL classes. LIFE rarely thrive in mainstream ESL classes as they do not have the literacy skills and learning strategies necessary to handle the material. Nor is a mainstream ABE classroom (Adult Basic Education, generally intended for learners with a high degree of oral fluency) always the best place for them, as they are still learning spoken English, and they lack rich vocabulary and understanding of structure. It is important to note that in today’s society, many learners in an ABE are in fact ESL learners, but these learners speak English at a high level. ABE is a fine goal for LIFE, but not before they have had some time in ESL literacy.



LIFE come from a wide range of backgrounds – socially, culturally, linguistically, and in terms of their previous education – and it is a mistake to make any assumptions about what they have or have not experienced, or what they can or cannot do. However, it is still necessary to be able to recognize ESL literacy learners in order to provide them with the support they need to achieve their goals.

Generally speaking, LIFE have from zero to up to ten years of formal education, but this education itself can vary widely. As is indicated in the acronym LIFE, literacy learners almost always have an interrupted formal education. For some, their education was interrupted before it even began, and they have had no opportunity to go to school and study formally, while other learners have had to leave school after a few years. Some learners have continued in school, but have had their education interrupted by any number of factors, including conflict, war, poverty,

lack of access, or a changing social, cultural, or political climate. The result is that LIFE, to a varying degree, find it difficult to cope with the literacy expectations of their new countries.

It is also important to understand that not all education is the same and not all schools have the same access to resources, educated instructors, or safe, well-equipped classrooms. This means that learners who have had some education have not necessarily received the same education as they would have received in a western school system. Approaches to education vary considerably in different places. Most western approaches encourage learners to question and to analyze; however, these skills might be unfamiliar to many learners in an ESL literacy classroom. Some of these learners may have been taught through memorization; other learners may have been taught in an entirely religious context, where questioning the text or the instructor is often considered inappropriate. Some learners may not have been taught in their first language at all, but may have received some instruction in a second language, as is the case with many learners who speak a range of African languages as their first language, but who have received some schooling in Arabic. On the other hand, other learners may have been taught using a very similar approach to the western system, in a school equipped with science laboratories and computers, but may have had to leave school for a variety of reasons. The point here is not that the western system is ideal – all systems of education have advantages and disadvantages – but rather that instructors of LIFE must leave all of their assumptions about their learners' education at the door.

## The Diversity of LIFE

We have already seen that Learners with Interrupted Formal Education come from a very broad range of formal educational experiences. It is therefore not surprising that they come from an equally broad range of cultures and languages, and that they have varying abilities in spoken English and in reading, writing, and numeracy.

Although instructors might notice the effect of immigration and refugee patterns on the demographics of their classrooms – they may have a high concentration of learners from one particular country at one particular point – no assumptions can be made about a learner's cultural background or immigration or refugee status. Learners' countries of origin should never be used as an indicator of their literacy or educational background. LIFE can come from any country in the world, and ESL literacy classes are often extremely diverse.

Similarly, the abilities of LIFE are diverse. This is most noticeable in their level of oral English. When beginning, some literacy learners do not speak any English at all while other learners might have fairly fluent spoken English; typically, LIFE can be anywhere from a CLB 1 to CLB

6 in listening and speaking, or anywhere from absolute beginner to upper intermediate. The level of oral English alone cannot be used to determine whether a learner has literacy needs.

There is also a broad range of reading, writing, and numeracy skills found in ESL literacy classes. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB) recognizes four Phases of ESL literacy in their document: *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners*, referred to as the CLB Literacy Document in this handbook. The first Phase, the Foundation Phase, begins with foundational literacy skills, such as the fine motor skills to hold a pencil and the ability to distinguish between different symbols, while the final Phase, Phase III, involves an increased ability to read and to comprehend a variety of texts and the skills to express opinions in a paragraph form. Learners who are at any stage along this path will benefit from ESL literacy instruction. It is generally fairly easy for most instructors to recognize the lower Phases of literacy; it is learners in the upper Phases who are at increased risk of being misplaced in a mainstream class, with no extra literacy support.

## How are LIFE Different from Mainstream ESL Learners?

The biggest difference between Learners with Interrupted Formal Education and mainstream ESL learners is the years of formal education. LIFE have between zero and about ten years of education, but this education has almost always either been cut short or interrupted. What this means is that Learners with Interrupted Formal Education do not necessarily have the skills and strategies for coping with the literacy demands in a mainstream classroom or in their new communities.

This interrupted formal education has a variety of effects in the classroom. In reading, learners may have difficulty decoding unfamiliar words (using the sound-symbol relationship to figure out what a word says), or may have a very limited sight word bank (the words a person can automatically recognize without decoding; educated native speakers of English “read” almost entirely through recognizing sight words). In the higher Phases, learners are better able to decode and recognize sight words, but may have a good deal of difficulty in understanding the main idea of a text, in identifying the author’s purpose, and in a range of comprehension strategies such as distinguishing fact from opinion, identifying cause and effect, recognizing figurative language, and predicting. In writing, learners in the lower Phases are learning to do everything from holding a pencil to writing on a line to copying accurately. They move from this level to the ability to fill in words, to compose a sentence, and then to compose a paragraph. All of this learning requires considerable support from the instructor.

The other key difference between LIFE and mainstream ESL learners is the use of learning strategies and the placement of reading and writing in the process of learning. Generally speaking, learners with a previous formal education have learning strategies in place; they know

how to learn. First and foremost, they recognize that print has meaning and understand that there are many different kinds of texts, with many possible types of meaning. They can organize information, recognize patterns, generalize, and analyze. What is more, they can use their literacy skills – their ability to read and write at a higher level – to support their language learning. Mainstream ESL learners often have higher benchmarks in reading and writing than in listening and speaking. This gives them the ability to learn through reading and to make notes. LIFE, on the other hand, are learning to read and cannot rely on reading and writing skills in order to learn English. LIFE almost always have higher benchmarks in listening and speaking than in reading and writing; they learn English orally first and use their oral language to help learn to read and write English.

The following chart shows the key cultural differences between high-oracy and high-literacy societies. Many LIFE come from high-oracy societies, such as the Dinka in Sudan. Their new country is a high-literacy society, such as Canada.

Features of High-Oracy and High-Literacy Societies	
Traditional High-Oracy Society	Technological High-Literacy Society
oral communication	written communication
highly personal interactions	impersonal and bureaucratic
collaborative work	individualized work
tasks attended to as they come up	time is scheduled
figurative and allegorical	abstract and theoretical
self-referenced and intuitive	factual and logical
holistic interpretation of perceptions	analytical interpretation of perceptions
defers to traditional wisdom	speculative
hierarchical	democratic
fatalistic	focus on causality
hands-on training	hypothetical training situations
process modelled and imitated to acquire skill	theory taught to be applied to a process
community training	institutional training
informal training	standardized training

Instructors of ESL literacy are encouraged to think about cultural difference and the impact it plays in the classroom. LIFE often come to class with a completely different set of experiences and expectations and we do well to respect and understand these differences. For ideas for teaching LIFE, please see Section Two and Section Three of the handbook.



## Identifying LIFE

Identifying Learners with Interrupted Formal Education is one of the key stages to developing an effective ESL literacy program. This process begins with an understanding of literacy learners: it is critical that the assessor understand what he or she is looking for.

There are a number of ways of identifying LIFE:

**Canadian Language Benchmark Assessments:** Canadian Language Benchmark Assessments can be used to assess literacy learners, and Assessment Centres, such as ILVARC (Immigrant Language and Vocational Referral Centre) in southern Alberta and LARCC (Language Assessment, Referral, and Counselling Centre) northern Alberta, also look for signs that a learner has literacy needs. Even if a learner has not been flagged as a literacy learner by an Assessment Centre, a sign that a learner has possible literacy needs is that the learner has higher benchmarks in listening and speaking than in reading and writing, often significantly higher. When this information is paired with the years of formal education (zero to ten generally indicates a Learner with Interrupted Formal Education), the literacy requirements of the learner become even clearer.

**In-House Placement Tests:** Many programs and institutions prefer to develop their own in-house placement tools for assessing literacy. These tools often begin with easier reading and writing tasks and then become progressively more difficult. The amount of the assessment that a learner is able to correctly complete demonstrates the level of literacy. In-house placement tests should be carefully constructed to test **literacy** rather than the level of English understanding, so that a literacy learner can be distinguished from a low-level mainstream learner, such as a CLB 1. A good way to do this is to include tasks that require a higher level of strategy or format-recognition, but a low level of English vocabulary; the CLB 1 learner will be able to complete these tasks, while a literacy learner generally will not. CLB Assessment Centres also have a placement tool available for ESL literacy learners; there are two books, the first for Foundation Phase to Phase I and the second for Phase II. Currently there is no book for Phase III.

**First Language Assessments:** Albertan CLB Assessment Centres as well as some institutions have literacy assessments available in a number of languages. These are particularly useful tools for learners with very low benchmarks in listening and speaking, as they can show the level of the learners' literacy as opposed to their ability to understand English. A learner may have a CLB 1 in reading but have no difficulty with literacy; the issue is the language, not the ability to read. A difficulty with first language assessments is in the logistics: first language assessments often (but do not always) require that the assessor speaks some of the first language, and there are many languages for which there is no written code.

**Face-to-Face Interviews:** The chance to meet with a learner in person is a valuable literacy assessment tool. In these interviews, the assessor can ask questions about the learner's life and educational background, through an interpreter if necessary. Appropriate questions can include:

- How old were you when you left school? (You can also ask if he or she was a child, older child, teenager, or adult.)
- What did your school look like? (Did you have many books, did you have a computer, did you have a classroom, how many students were there in a class?)
- What language did you use at school? What language did you speak at home?
- Did you have a job in your country? What did you do?

In a face-to-face interview, the assessor can also ask a learner to do some reading. An effective way of doing this is to provide a variety of realia for reading, in a range of reading levels: a food wrapper, a can of pop, a flyer, an advertisement, a newspaper, etc. The assessor asks the learner what he or she would like to read. This gives learners some control in the assessment and the chance to demonstrate what they can read and where their interests lie.

## Identifying LIFE in Mainstream ESL Classes

Not every learner with literacy needs is placed in a literacy class initially, for a variety of reasons: perhaps there was no effective literacy assessment tool, or the learner seemed to have stronger reading and writing skills during the assessment than he or she demonstrates in the classroom. Higher level literacy learners in particular are at risk of being overlooked; this is perhaps more serious than it seems. Literacy learners rarely have the skills and strategies needed to thrive in a mainstream ESL class and may feel frustrated or discouraged, or may mistakenly believe that they are not intelligent enough for school. Misplaced literacy learners are at a high risk for dropping out.

There are signs that learners may have literacy needs. Learners with literacy needs may:

- be very disorganized
- have difficulty recognizing and applying patterns
- prefer to do assignments at home
- work very slowly
- copy from other classmates

- make slow or erratic progress
- be inconsistent with their work: one day they can do a task; the next they have forgotten
- have someone in particular to rely on for help in class
- rarely complete work independently
- have difficulty understanding and following directions
- have difficulty with comprehension and analysis

# Kwo Myo's Story

## ***An ESL literacy learner misplaced in a mainstream ESL class***

*Kwo Myo has been placed in a mainstream CLB 1 class and is a cheerful, friendly, and enthusiastic learner. His instructor is surprised by the blunt way he explains, with gestures and a few words, what happened to his family in Burma when he was a child, and even more surprised that he lived his life as a soldier in the jungle, struggling to keep his growing family safe.*

*Kwo Myo's listening and speaking skills are very low, so that when he arrives in his class, the information from the assessment centre reads as "pre-benchmark" – below CLB 1 – in listening and speaking. Because his oral English skills are so limited, it is difficult to assess his reading and writing skills as well. Kwo Myo's instructor quickly realizes that he has had limited exposure to text. It takes him longer than others to find the page in his text book, and he has unusual placement of writing on a page. It takes him much more time than the other CLB 1 learners to complete a task. Kwo Myo has likely never seen a binder either, so after his instructor gives him one, he puts all of his papers in the front pocket, or in his picture dictionary, until his instructor takes the time to help him find appropriate places for each page.*

*As Kwo Myo's listening and speaking skills develop, and his instructor gets to know him better, she begins to think that he has been misplaced in mainstream ESL and would be better served in an ESL literacy class. After two weeks in mainstream ESL, she finds a place for him in a Phase I class.*



## Identifying Mainstream ESL Learners in ESL Literacy Classes

Learners with Interrupted Formal Education are not the only learners who are commonly misplaced in ESL classes. Mainstream ESL learners may also be misplaced and put in a literacy class. This is not an ideal solution for anyone involved; it is not ideal for the learner who is misplaced, and it is not ideal for the rest of the learners in the class who have literacy needs. Learners who are most commonly misplaced in literacy classes fall into three general categories. The first are well-educated learners who have very little familiarity with the Roman alphabet and often very low benchmarks overall. These learners can appear to have literacy needs because they have difficulty decoding English words. They tend to fit into a literacy classroom for the first few weeks, because the pace of the class is slow and because there is a focus on decoding and building a sight word bank. However, once these learners build familiarity with the Roman alphabet, they progress very quickly, because the literacy skills and strategies they have in their first language are transferred into English. They very quickly outgrow the material in the class and realize that they have skills and strategies the other learners do not yet possess.

In the second category are learners who have only studied English in its written form, and so appear not to be able to decode because they have no understanding of sound-symbol correspondence. To be very clear, this is not a literacy issue; this is an issue with oral language. Once these learners begin to speak and comprehend oral English, they recognize the correspondence between the symbols and the sounds. Again, after a few weeks in a literacy classroom they quickly outgrow the material.

The third category is for learners who have a formal education, but for one reason or another do not seem to fit into a mainstream ESL program. In some situations, ESL literacy programs can unfortunately be seen as a catch-all for any kind of learning difficulty, including age. Whether or not this is appropriate is usually decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on whether the learner is thriving in the literacy class, and on the effect of the learner's placement on the other learners in the class.

Placing mainstream ESL learners in a literacy class is not an ideal solution for anyone involved. The mainstream learners usually quickly outgrow the material and are not appropriately challenged. The LIFE in the class can also be affected, because having mainstream ESL learners in the class detracts from focus of the instruction on developing literacy and can be discouraging.

# Mei Ling's Story

## ***A mainstream ESL learner misplaced in an ESL literacy class***

*Mei Ling has recently moved to Calgary from China, where she had eleven years of education, including some form of English instruction. She has basic Chinese literacy skills and effective learning strategies. She is twenty-two years old and came to Canada to marry the son of an established immigrant Chinese family. She is a CLB 1 in listening and speaking.*

*Mei Ling's Chinese education has given her very good learning strategies. She can apply abstract rules, she can recognize and follow patterns, and she has excellent arithmetic skills. Her rudimentary English instruction taught her to form the English alphabet and to copy neatly and accurately. Mei Ling can recognize and understand the meaning of certain written English words, but she has no capacity to say them because she has had no opportunity to hear or produce spoken English. She can write a variety of simple English sentences, but she can't read them aloud.*

*Mei Ling's lack of knowledge of the sound-symbol correspondence of English and her inability to read aloud has made it difficult for her to function in a regular ESL class, and so she has been placed in a Phase II class, even though Mei Ling does not have difficulty with literacy. What she really needs is practice in speaking and listening. Mei Ling does benefit from being with learners who speak at a much higher level, but the situation is far from ideal. Within weeks, she outgrows the material and the level.*



## Conclusions

The goal of any ESL program, literacy or otherwise, is to create an effective learning environment for the learners and to help them achieve their goals. LIFE are strongly in need of programming separate from mainstream ESL classes in order to meet their literacy needs. Accurately identifying which learners have literacy needs – which learners have had an interrupted formal education – is the first step to creating an effective program.

## Chapter 2 Outline

Introduction: Basing a Program on Community and Learner Needs

Community Needs Assessments

Learner Needs and Learner Goals

Learner Needs Assessments

Methods of Conducting a Needs Assessment

Conclusions





# Learner Needs and Program Goals

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## Objectives

**To define the role of a needs assessment in setting program goals**

**To recognize two kinds of needs assessments: learner and community**

**To demonstrate how to conduct a community needs assessment**

**To demonstrate how to conduct a learner needs assessment**

## Introduction: Basing a Program on Community and Learner Needs

In an effective ESL literacy program, the program goals are based on two factors: the needs of the learners and the needs of the community. For learners to thrive, they must thrive within a community, and for a community to thrive, it must educate the members of the population. Meeting these needs is best done by conducting needs assessments as part of the process of program development and as an ongoing part of program evaluation and evolution. A needs assessment is a means of asking questions about the requirements of the community and the learners, and a good needs assessment takes several things into consideration: who to ask, what to ask, and how to ask.

A needs assessment is a means of determining the needs of a community and a group of learners. It should be an early step in the development of a program, because it will help identify target learners and their needs, as well as possible gaps in existing programming, which are necessary steps in developing program goals. However, the development stage is not the only time that a needs assessment should be carried out; in fact, needs assessments should be conducted periodically in order to keep a program on track and to monitor whether the needs of the community or the learners have changed. Nothing about education is static; education is a process of change in its very nature and needs assessments are a way of actively participating in that change.

What a needs assessment provides to a program is accountability. It is a means of developing a program in accordance with the needs of the learners, and of staying accountable to those learners and to the wider community. There are two different kinds of needs assessments that a program can carry out, and they involve different groups of interested people, or stakeholders: the community and the learners.

## Community Needs Assessments

For a program to be truly effective in a particular area, it is not enough to meet the needs of the learners alone – a program must also meet the needs of the community. This is particularly important when a program is seeking initial or continued funding. A community needs assessment can be a critical step in attaining that funding.

When developing (or refining) an ESL literacy program, it is important to look at the wider community to determine what programs already exist and whether there are any gaps in programming. A program should look at several different kinds of programs and see what they offer: ESL literacy programs, mainstream ESL programs, and Adult Basic Education programs. This process helps eliminate unnecessary duplication, secure funding, and identify what makes a

particular program special and effective. Looking at community needs is a critical step in identifying learners and determining program goals. There are many possible types of programs, meeting many different kinds of needs. These include:

- community-based programs
- church-based programs
- library-based programs
- college programs
- private schools
- programs connected to the K-12 school system, particularly involving young adults
- programs connected to a particular group of learners (from a particular culture or gender, for example)
- employers

When conducting a community needs assessment, it is important to approach all of these kinds of programs to find out what they do, who their learners are, and where the gaps are. Although the logistics of conducting a community needs assessment seem easier than a learner needs assessment – interpreters and realia are not necessary, for example – identifying the right person to talk to in each organization and phrasing questions so that you get the information that you need is still a challenge.

In a community needs assessment, you are trying to determine the extent of existing programs in your area, the learners they serve, and the goals they set.

Questions can include:

- Who are your learners? What demographic do you serve? (Age, gender, culture, background education, etc.)
- What kinds of ESL and ESL literacy classes do you have? How many levels do you have? How many learners are there in each level? Is it a part-time or a full-time program?
- What are your program goals? (Settlement, employment, transition to further education, etc.)
- How do you measure program success?
- How are you funded? How are your learners funded?

- Where do your learners go when they complete your program?
- Who are your instructors? How do you support your instructors? (Continuous or casual positions, opportunities for professional development, etc.)
- How do you set outcomes? Do you use a particular set of outcomes, such as the Canadian Language Benchmarks or Phases?
- How do you develop curriculum? Do you use a competency-based approach, participatory learning, something else, or a combination?
- How do you assess your learners?
- What do you think the community needs? Are there learner needs that aren't being met?
- Are there people you must turn away from your program? Where do you send them?
- Are there people whom you think you serve inadequately?

One thing to be aware of are the possible differences in terminology. ESL is a field full of different acronyms and different ways of expressing similar ideas – just think of all of the different acronyms for ESL itself: ESL (English as Second Language), ESOL (English as a Second or Other Language), EAL (English as an Additional Language), ELL (English Language Learning), and so on. Another issue is the range of educational backgrounds of instructors and program administrators themselves; this is not a discussion of the validity of different qualifications, but a recognition that different ESL literacy instructors will have different backgrounds and be comfortable with different kinds of terminology. Some instructors have a background in education, others in linguistics, others in community programming, and so on. The implication of this diversity is that a community needs assessment should be written as clearly as possible.

## Learner Needs and Learner Goals

First and foremost, an effective program meets the needs of the learners; if students are not learning what they need to know to thrive in their communities and to achieve their goals, then their needs are not being met by the program. Learners can have a very diverse set of needs, and instructors often face as many sets of needs as they have learners in the class. One of the best ways to discover the needs of the learners is to ask them, through a needs assessment. However, in order to ask the right questions, instructors and program administrators must understand the kinds of needs individual learners have in common with each other. Learner needs can be directly linked to their goals, which can be grouped into three categories.

**Settlement:** Learners with settlement goals want to learn things that will be useful to their everyday lives in their new country. These are things that will help them to fully function in their communities. Settlement goals include the ability to:

- communicate with doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals
- fill in forms
- communicate with children’s schools and community programs
- write notes to excuse absences
- shop for food, clothing, furniture, a car, etc.
- find housing
- hook up utilities and pay bills
- negotiate government funding
- complete banking tasks
- get a driver’s license
- communicate effectively with children’s schools
- make literacy a part of family life



**Further Education:** Learners with goals for further education want to transition out of ESL literacy into a variety of educational settings. Most of these learners identify the first step as Adult Basic Education or high school upgrading but will often have goals that reach beyond a high school diploma. Some of these goals are ambitious, depending on the learner, and instructors sometimes face literacy learners who dream of becoming doctors or engineers. Learners do not always understand what is involved in such dreams, but an instructor can help a learner to identify shorter-term goals without destroying the dream. Instructors should expect that learners’ goals will grow or change as they learn and discover more about their new country and the possibilities available to them. This process should not be a surprise: the same thing happens to everybody as they progress from primary to secondary school to beyond.

Learner goals for further education can include:

- mainstream (non-literacy) ESL classes

- ABE (Adult Basic Education)
- high School Equivalency
- apprenticeships and trade training programs
- college career certificates and diplomas
- university

**Employment:** Employment goals vary widely depending on the learner. Some learners want employment of any kind; their goal is to be able to keep a job and earn an income. Other learners – many learners, in fact – are already employed, or were employed before entering full-time ESL literacy classes. They may set goals to keep or maintain a job (especially in a complicated job market), or get a job of a very particular type (perhaps something similar to what they did in their first countries, or perhaps a job that they have identified as being well-paid, interesting, supported by their communities, etc.). They may also be interested in getting a “better” job, and a needs assessment can reveal what they consider to be a better job; typically they are looking for better pay, better working conditions, or more fulfilling work, like the rest of us. Instructors and program coordinators may be aware of stepping stone programs, or programs following completion of ESL that assist learners in gaining employment. Learners cannot be expected to know about these programs without being told about them.

## Learner Needs and Needs Assessments

Learner needs assessments should focus on the needs and the goals of the learners. The best way to understand the needs of the learners is to talk to them directly. In a learner needs assessment, consider talking to:

- **Current learners in the program:** These learners can provide a wealth of information about their current needs and their goals for the future.
- **Potential learners:** Meet potential learners through referral agencies, open houses, community meetings, and focus groups.
- **Past learners:** They may be able to identify what worked for them, what didn't work, and what would have been useful.
- **Community settlement and cultural programs:** Many refugee aide or settlement programs will be able to discuss the needs of the learners.
- **Experienced instructors:** Don't overlook this important source of information about learner needs; experienced ESL literacy instructors have taught hundreds if not thousands of learners and have a good idea of the range of needs and goals learners have.

Although settlement workers and instructors can both be valuable sources of information, the prime source in a learner needs assessment is the learners themselves.



What to ask the learners is the next question, and it is the skill of the person developing and conducting the needs assessment that will determine the success of the process. This is especially true in learner needs assessments in ESL literacy. LIFE are adults, and have adult understanding of the world and an enormous set of skills. Their abilities can never be forgotten, underestimated, or devalued, and learners must be an integral part of the process of

determining the goals for any program seeking to meet their needs. However, LIFE cannot be expected to know exactly what they will need to know to thrive in a new country, especially in one that places extremely high value on literacy, a set of skills they do not fully possess or even

necessarily understand. Therefore, a needs assessment must provide them with enough choices to accurately reflect their interests, goals, and needs and must be conducted in a way that they can understand. One way to do this is to provide learners with a range of choices to consider – perhaps a series of photographs of common situations – rather than ask them to brainstorm a list from scratch.

The questions in a needs assessment must reflect the level of the learner, in terms of both oral fluency and literacy; Phase III learners with a CLB 5 in speaking and listening may be quite capable of discussing their goals for themselves regarding further education or future employment, whereas Phase I learners with a CLB 1 in speaking and listening do not possess the spoken English for this kind of discussion and may or may not be aware of the variety of possibilities opened up by literacy. What they will be aware of is the way that literacy affects their lives right now, and the interviewer must recognize the level of the learner when directing the questions so that they are meaningful to the learner and allow the learner to express his or her needs.

How to ask the questions is therefore as important as what to ask. A needs assessment can include all kinds of aides, such as:

- **Photographs or pictures:** Use large, easily understood photographs of situations learners might encounter, such as those that take place in doctor’s offices, children’s schools, the supermarket, apartment buildings, the bank, etc.
- **Realia:** Use actual items that learners may find challenging and are likely to have seen, such as utility bills, applications for housing, or common government forms. The important factor in realia is that it is real and recognizable to the learners; so, for example, choose bills from local utility companies.
- **An interpreter or a first language assessment:** An interpreter can be very helpful in a needs assessment. In some situations, a needs assessment can be conducted entirely in the learner’s first language.

The questions themselves can vary widely, depending on the program and the level of the learners. The needs assessment does not need to be a static event; the interviewer can follow up a question, or clarify, or use some of the learner’s responses to formulate new questions. It is a good idea to make questions as concrete and easily understood as possible. Many LIFE have difficulty with hypothetical situations, the conditional, or imagining the future, so try to avoid these constructions. Instead of asking “Where do you see yourself in five years?” you might ask, “What do you want to do when you finish ESL?” or “Do you want to get a job?” Instead of asking “If you could learn anything at school, what would it be?” you might ask “Does anyone help you with reading and writing English? Who helps you? When do they help you?” It is also important to ascertain whether learners understand the role of education and literacy in their new



country and whether they understand the educational system. Some learners might state employment as a goal without necessarily understanding what kind of education is required for the employment they have in mind. Questions to consider in a learner needs assessment can include:

- Does anyone help you with reading and writing? Where do they help you? (Give a list of possibilities: bank, doctor's office, supermarket, etc.)
- What do you want to read/write?
- Why do you want to improve your reading and writing? (Job, daily life, etc.) Or: Why do you want to go to school?
- Do you have a job right now? Do you like your job?
- Do you want a job in the future? What kind of job do you want?
- Where do you need help with reading and writing? (Give a list of possibilities.)

## Methods of Conducting a Needs Assessment

There are a variety of methods of conducting a needs assessment. When conducting a needs assessment with learners, the most recommended method is the face-to-face interview, especially with learners with lower levels of spoken English. When conducting a community needs assessment with other stakeholders, a range of methods can be used, each with their advantages and disadvantages.

## Methods of Conducting a Needs Assessment

Assessment Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Focus Group</b>	<p>Possible to elicit detailed answers. Discussions can provide additional useful information. Can be an opportunity to establish/improve community and stakeholder relations. Possible to include relatively large numbers of participants in one session. Less time-consuming than interviews.</p>	<p>Scheduling issues: arranging suitable time and date for all participants. Potential dominance of discussion. Costs involved: venue, refreshments, etc. Reliance on skills of the facilitator. Need to limit numbers participating. Difficult for learners with lower levels of spoken English to participate. May not have all key stakeholders at the table.</p>
<b>Electronic or Written Survey</b>	<p>Cost-effective way to contact stakeholders. Can be completed electronically. No scheduling necessary. No limit on number of stakeholders included. No reliance on a third party: comments are received “word for word” from stakeholders.</p>	<p>Designing an effective survey can be time-consuming and difficult. May receive limited numbers of replies. May have to follow up with phone calls to encourage responses. Answers may not be sufficiently detailed. May not be a good way of contacting learners. Requires knowledge of technology.</p>
<b>Interview: Face-to-Face</b>	<p>Possible to elicit detailed answers. Possible to follow up on and clarify responses. Often the most thorough way to collect information. Possible to use realia and visual aides. Possible to use an interpreter if necessary.</p>	<p>Scheduling issues for interviewer and interviewees. Time consuming: may mean limiting numbers of stakeholders contacted. Reliance on the skills of the interviewer. Potential costs: e.g. venue, participant travel expenses, use of interpreter, etc.</p>
<b>Interview: Telephone</b>	<p>Cost-effective way to contact stakeholders. Possible to elicit detailed answers. Possible to follow up on and clarify responses.</p>	<p>Scheduling issues. Time consuming: may mean limiting numbers of stakeholders contacted. Reliance on interviewer skills. Cannot use visual aides or realia; difficult to use an interpreter. Can be a challenge for language learners.</p>

## Conclusions

Conducting needs assessments is highly worthwhile in the development, evaluation, and evolution of an ESL literacy program. It is not a one-time deal: needs assessments should be carried out periodically, both with the learners and in the community, to make sure that a program is on track and meeting the needs of everyone involved. The result of conducting and following needs assessments is that learners become successful within the community, and the program serves its purpose.

# Chapter 3 Outline

Introduction: What are Outcomes?

Outcomes and the CCLB

Developing Outcomes

Types of Outcomes

Conclusions



# Developing Outcomes

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## Objectives

To define outcomes and their role in a program and classroom

To examine the role of the CCLB in setting outcomes

To describe two different approaches in setting outcomes: competency-based and participatory

To recognize the four areas in an ESL literacy program where outcomes will need to be set: core literacy skills, literacy and learning strategies, oral language skills, and life skills

## Introduction: What are Outcomes?





Outcomes describe what learners can do when they complete a class. Outcomes are a set of increasingly difficult skills and strategies in the key areas of a program. In this way, outcomes are the actual, demonstrable goals of the class, and, over a longer term, the program itself. They are always phrased as a task that is possible to accomplish and can be demonstrated to an instructor, to the learners themselves, and to anyone else witnessing the progress of the learners. For example, “The learner can read and understand a story” is **not** an outcome; it is too vague and cannot be demonstrated, since it is very difficult to demonstrate understanding in itself. In contrast, “The learner can read a simple, one-paragraph story and identify the main idea and some details” is an outcome that is precise and demonstrable.

Outcomes form the cornerstone of a program. There are a number of advantages to using outcomes in a program:

- **Outcomes define the goals of the program:** Outcomes define goals in terms that can be easily understood, measured, and demonstrated to all involved: instructors, program administrators, funders, and the learners themselves, who are motivated by tangible proof of their progress.
- **Outcomes can be broken down into small achievable pieces:** Outcomes can be scaffolded and broken down into achievable pieces, providing supported learning and an opportunity for success.
- **Outcomes work with themes and curriculum content:** Outcomes provide a series of goals that can be adapted to different themes or vocabulary units, providing instructors the opportunity to recycle outcomes while introducing fresh content.
- **Outcomes motivate learners to achieve:** Learners can see that they are progressing because they are able to do things that they couldn't do before.
- **Outcomes ensure accountability:** Since outcomes clearly define the goals of a program, all stakeholders become accountable to these goals, including the instructors, the learners, the program administrators, and the funders.

## Outcomes and the CCLB

The Centre for Canadian Literacy Benchmarks (the CCLB) has published two sets of outcomes. The first is *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000*, which defines outcomes for listening, speaking, reading, and writing at twelve different levels (Benchmarks). This first document is intended for use with adult learners who have had a formal education. The CCLB then followed this publication with *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners*. This document sets outcomes in three different skill areas: reading, writing, and numeracy, at four different levels (Phases). These levels are further divided into three stages: Initial, Developing, and Adequate. Please note that the Foundation Phase does not include numeracy and does not include all stages.

The CLB Literacy Phases					
Foundation Phase	 Initial Reading Initial Writing	→	Developing Reading		
Phase I	 Initial Reading Initial Writing Initial Numeracy	→	Developing Reading	→	Adequate Reading
		→	Developing Writing	→	Adequate Writing
		→	Developing Numeracy	→	Adequate Numeracy
Phase II	 Initial Reading Initial Writing Initial Numeracy	→	Developing Reading	→	Adequate Reading
		→	Developing Writing	→	Adequate Writing
		→	Developing Numeracy	→	Adequate Numeracy
Phase III	 Initial Reading Initial Writing Initial Numeracy	→	Developing Reading	→	Adequate Reading
		→	Developing Writing	→	Adequate Writing
		→	Developing Numeracy	→	Adequate Numeracy

The distinctions among Initial, Developing, and Adequate are particularly important in the literacy Phases, because learners can take a long time at each Phase, and the achievements made in the different stages of the Phase are significant. There is a considerable difference between a Phase II Initial learner and a Phase II Adequate learner.

Both of the CLB documents are relevant to LIFE; the CLB Literacy Document defines outcomes for reading, writing, and numeracy, while the original CLB Benchmarks Document defines outcomes for listening and speaking. The original CLB Benchmarks Document (for learners with a formal education) should not be used to set outcomes for reading and writing for literacy learners, because the reading and writing outcomes for the benchmarks assume a formal education and an academic understanding.

Note that the CLB Literacy Document includes not only outcomes but also conditions for these outcomes. These conditions describe the situations in which the learners can be expected to achieve the outcomes. They include textual features, such as font size, white space, legibility, length of text, and visuals; contextual features, such as relevance to the learners' lives; and the level of support expected and required from the instructor.

There are several clear advantages to basing program outcomes on the CLB documents:

- **The documents already exist:** Many years of work went into creating these outcomes and they are an excellent source when designing and implementing a program.
- **In Canada, the CCLB sets a national standard:** This means that if learners move to another program, city, or province, their new instructors will understand their level and what they have been studying.
- **The CCLB recognizes the broad range of literacy:** The CLB Literacy Document covers outcomes from the Foundation Phase (which includes many foundational literacy skills, such as fine motor skills) to Phase III (where students are learning to express themselves more accurately in writing and to understand far more complicated texts). Learners with many different kinds of literacy needs are recognized and included in the document.

Because we use the CLB Literacy Document in our own program at Bow Valley College and have found it effective, we use it in this handbook and recommend it to other Canadian programs in ESL literacy.



## Developing Outcomes

When developing outcomes for a program, less is more: it is a good idea to choose fewer outcomes but to ensure that each learner has ample class time to actually achieve and master each outcome. The number of outcomes depends on the type of program, the length of class time, the level of the learners, and specific program goals (settlement vs. preparation for further education, for example). While outcomes are defined in the initial stages of program development, an effective program periodically revisits, monitors, evaluates, and changes outcomes as necessary. As classes and programs evolve, outcomes will also evolve.

In actual classroom instruction, outcomes will be practiced, recycled, and repeated until learners achieve mastery. It is the challenge for the instructor to determine how to do this without making the lessons seem repetitive or boring. One excellent way of recycling outcomes is to teach a variety of themes in terms of content or vocabulary while practicing the same outcomes. Instructors can also recycle outcomes while providing decreasing levels of scaffolding, or instructor support, until learners are able to achieve the outcome independently (or as close to independently as their level will allow).

There are two clear approaches to developing outcomes for a program, and both approaches have their advantages:

**The Competency-Based (or Performance-Based) Approach:** In this approach, outcomes are set before instruction begins, often in the initial development stage of the program. The outcomes are generally based on a needs assessment or on a document such as the CLB Literacy Document, or on a combination of the two. In a competency-based program, instructors are expected to follow the outcomes set by the program, and learners are assessed on how well they can accomplish these outcomes at the end of the class. The main advantage to the competency-based approach is accountability and planning: it allows instructors and program administrators to develop a program with specific goals.

This approach is generally favoured by more formal programs, such as college programs or

In the **competency-based approach**, class and level outcomes are set before instruction begins. Outcomes are often based on a needs assessment or on a document such as the CLB Literacy Document. Learners have less input in the outcomes of the class, but this approach allows for accountability and planning.

In the **participatory approach**, learners and the instructor set outcomes for the class together, based on the needs and interests of the individual learners in the class. This approach views developing literacy as a process of empowerment. It allows learners ownership of their learning but means that outcomes can vary considerably from semester to semester.

programs intending to provide learners with a transition to further education or specific employment.

**The Participatory (or Emergent) Approach:** In participatory learning, the learners in the class play a large role in setting the outcomes for the class. This is different from the process of using a learner needs assessment prior to developing program outcomes in that it is the actual learners in each specific class who provide the basis for the outcomes for that class. In this way, the outcomes of the class will vary from semester to semester, and meet the direct needs of the particular group of learners. Proponents of participatory learning view the development of literacy as empowerment, arguing that participatory learning allows learners to take ownership of their education and their classroom and use their new literacy skills to make positive changes in their lives. The main advantage to participatory learning is motivation: learners can see the direct benefit to their lives of everything they learn in the classroom. The participatory approach is often chosen by community-based programs or programs with a higher degree of flexibility in their goals.

Although these two approaches might appear to be diametrically opposed to each other, it is entirely possible to use a combination of the two to develop outcomes. A program mainly using the participatory approach may still choose to set several core literacy outcomes at each level, while a program using the competency-based approach may allow some flexibility within the curriculum to meet the direct needs of the learners in each class. A competency-based program can also choose to set the outcomes but allow the learners to develop the themes. Any class where there is participatory learning involved will require an increased level of preparation for the instructor, who will not be able to rely on material used before. In a literacy class of any kind, however, this is often the case; many instructors create or adapt the bulk of their material themselves, based on what happens in class and the needs of the specific learners.

## Types of Outcomes

There are a wide variety of outcomes that an ESL literacy program can choose for its classes and its learners. These outcomes fall loosely into four categories: core literacy skills, literacy and learning strategies, oral language skills, and life skills.

Most educators consider the core literacy skills to be reading, writing, and numeracy, and certainly these must form the focus of any ESL literacy program. It is also possible to differentiate the skills required for reading, writing, and numeracy from the **strategies** involved in each area. An example of a reading skill is the ability to read a short, formatted text and identify the main message. An example of a reading strategy is the ability to predict meaning based on format, images, title, or other factors. Both are necessary in the development of

literacy. Many programs consider outcomes for reading strategies, writing strategies, numeracy strategies, and learning strategies.

In an ESL literacy program, however, learners are also deliberately working to develop their abilities in oral English. This is what differentiates ESL literacy from mainstream ABE (Adult Basic Education). This need for language development means that any literacy program must also set outcomes in listening and speaking. In fact, for literacy learners, the development of listening and speaking happens before the development of similar vocabulary and structures in reading and writing, and so listening and speaking are essential to a good classroom. It is also possible to further differentiate the acquisition of vocabulary from listening and speaking, and many programs set outcomes in vocabulary acquisition as well.

The fourth skill area to consider is life skills. HRSDC (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) have defined a set of Essential Skills for living and working in Canada. Some of these skills are possible to tackle directly in an ESL literacy class, while others require a higher level of literacy than LIFE necessarily have; however, it is possible to build towards the acquisition of all Essential Skills by teaching life skills, beginning at the lowest levels, and helping learners to actively participate in the workplace and other areas of society. Life skills involve skills directly related to employment, such as working with others; skills in understanding the culture of the new country, such as the importance of punctuality in western culture; skills involved in being a citizen, such as voting; and other life skills, such as asking for help before a problem becomes a crisis.

Consider developing outcomes in the following areas:

Skill Areas for Setting Outcomes			
Core Literacy Skills	Literacy and Learning Strategies	Oral Language Skills	Life Skills
Reading Writing Numeracy	Reading Strategies Writing Strategies Numeracy Strategies Learning Strategies	Listening Speaking Vocabulary	Employment Skills Citizenship Skills Cultural Skills

Remember that outcomes are precise, demonstrable, and appropriate for the level. There are quite literally hundreds of possible outcomes an instructor could choose in each skill area, as long as they are precise, demonstrable, and appropriate, and they are in keeping with the goals of the learners and the program. In the examples given below, the Literacy Phase is given for each outcome, except for speaking outcomes. Remember that the CLB Literacy Document does not include listening and speaking.

Examples of outcomes in each skill area include:

*The learner can copy his or her name to a line directly below the name. (Writing, Phase I Initial)*

*The learner can scan a familiar formatted text for specific information. (Reading Strategy, Phase II Developing)*

*The learner can tell a story in chronological order with adequate detail. (Speaking, CLB 5)*

*The learner is able to phone the instructor and leave an appropriate message when he or she is going to miss class. (Life Skill/Cultural Skill)*

## Conclusions

Outcomes, however they are developed, provide the cornerstone for a program, allowing all stakeholders to understand the goals and expectations of the classes. Outcomes are always phrased as achievable, demonstrable tasks. They bring accountability to instructors and program administrators and motivation and the joy of success to learners. In the process of developing outcomes, remember that outcomes must be:

- **Precise:** Outcomes must be precise, yet flexible enough to work for different learners, different instructors, and in conjunction with different themes or content.
- **Demonstrable:** Outcomes must be phrased as something that a learner can do.
- **Appropriate for the level:** Outcomes must also contain conditions that describe the textual and contextual situation for the outcome and the level of instructor support required.

Although there are key outcome areas that are addressed by most ESL literacy programs, there are many possibilities for the actual individual outcomes within these areas. For examples of outcomes appropriate to each level, see Section Three of this handbook or *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners*.



## Chapter 4 Outline

Introduction: The Need for a Separate Stream for LIFE and ESL Literacy

Recommendations for Placing LIFE

Meeting Challenges in Placing LIFE in Levels

Conclusions



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# Placing LIFE in Levels

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## Objectives

To demonstrate the need for a separate stream of classes for ESL literacy

To share promising practices in placing LIFE in levels

To recognize some of the challenges in implementing these promising practices

## Introduction: The Need for a Separate Stream for ESL Literacy

Learners with Interrupted Formal Education are facing the dual challenge of developing literacy skills and fluency in English, and they are often doing this having little experience with formal learning or classrooms and in a situation where instruction is in a second language. The best place for this learning to happen is in a separate class intentionally designed for ESL literacy. This is a class, and preferably a stream of classes, which solely teaches ESL literacy to LIFE. The instructors deliberately and explicitly teach the skills and strategies necessary for developing literacy as well as for developing oral English. A separate ESL literacy class provides many benefits to the learners (and to the instructor), most notably that the materials are appropriate, learning strategies are directly taught, and instruction can focus on the skills that the learners need to thrive. In a separate ESL literacy class, it is possible to determine outcomes based on the needs of the learners, recycle these outcomes as necessary, and move at an appropriate pace.

Note that while we are advocating for a separate stream of ESL literacy, it does not mean that our learners will not eventually be capable of joining mainstream ESL or mainstream Adult Basic Education classes, once they have spent time in ESL literacy and have acquired the language and the literacy necessary to effectively make the transition. Once learners move from ESL literacy to mainstream ESL (if that is their goal), they should not be placed in a CLB 1 class, as this will be entirely inappropriate. The ESL literacy stream is parallel and concurrent with the mainstream ESL stream. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks recognizes the parallel streams of mainstream ESL and ESL literacy and provides information to compare levels; please see *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners* for further information.

Unfortunately, not all LIFE are able to enrol in separate designated ESL literacy classes. There are two other possibilities for LIFE, neither of which is ideal. The first is that LIFE are placed in mainstream ESL classes, alongside learners who have had a formal education, often to very high levels.





There are several reasons this is not a good placement solution:

- **Lack of direct literacy instruction:** Mainstream ESL classes are designed for learners with advanced literacy and do not have direct instruction on the development of literacy, even at the lowest levels.
- **Pace:** Mainstream ESL classes are taught at a pace designed for learners with a formal education and move far too quickly for LIFE.
- **Materials:** The materials in mainstream ESL classes are designed for learners with advanced literacy and can leave LIFE stranded.
- **Strategies:** LIFE do not have the same strategies for learning as mainstream ESL learners. This means that they are lacking in certain learning strategies which mainstream learners are likely to use, but also that they have different learning strategies which mainstream ESL learners do not often use.
- **Cognitive development:** In a dedicated ESL literacy class, instructors can use the learning strategies of LIFE to foster the cognitive skills that are foundational for developing literacy in western education. Most mainstream ESL literacy classes do not focus on cognitive development, nor do they approach instruction from the specific strategies for oracy (strategies that LIFE typically use). These are the strategies LIFE bring to the classroom.
- **Listening and speaking vs. reading and writing:** LIFE nearly always have higher listening and speaking skills than reading and writing, while mainstream ESL learners nearly always have higher reading and writing skills than listening and speaking. This leads to a further difficulty in placement: if LIFE are placed based on their listening and speaking, then the reading and writing materials will be far too advanced.
- **Risk of dropping out:** LIFE placed in mainstream ESL classes are at a far higher risk of dropping out. The causes of this can vary; some major causes are a frustration at a perceived lack of progress, a feeling of failure, or a lack of support for their needs.
- **Invisibility:** Mainstream ESL classes are less likely to recognize the enormous range of skills and gifts that LIFE bring to a classroom. This recognition is vital to the development of self-esteem and confidence in learning.

In some programs, LIFE are grouped together with very low-level mainstream learners (CLB 1, for example). This is also less than ideal; literacy learners and low-level mainstream ESL learners have very different sets of skills, very different needs, and different strategies for meeting those needs. Mainstream ESL learners at a low level are working to improve their oral English more than anything. To do this they are able to draw on a range of literacy skills; they

can read to improve vocabulary, they can recognize patterns and make predictions, and they can access their prior knowledge of text. LIFE, on the other hand, need to be explicitly taught the skills and strategies for developing literacy.

The other possibility is that LIFE are placed in ABE (Adult Basic Education). Although this might be a medium-term goal for many learners, it is not an ideal situation until learners have a high degree of oral fluency in English and have spent time in an ESL literacy program. Although many ABE programs have a number of learners who do not speak English as a first language, most programs are designed for native speakers of English or for learners with high oral fluency. There is a considerable difference in approaches between ESL literacy and mainstream literacy. Learners with high oral fluency (like the learners in mainstream adult literacy) are able to rely more heavily on their oral skills while developing literacy. This means that they already have a sense of the sounds and the structure of English, allowing them a greater ability to predict what might come next or to recognize when a word “sounds right.” Learners with high oral fluency in English have another key advantage when developing literacy: they already have an enormous wealth of cultural knowledge and a familiarity with the stories, the expectations, and the patterns of their new country. Until LIFE develop this level of oral fluency and cultural familiarity, they are best served in a separate ESL literacy class.

## Recommendations for Placing LIFE

Although we recognize that it is not always possible to follow these guidelines, we recommend a series of promising practices in grouping Learners with Interrupted Formal Education in a program. For a discussion of what to do when it is not possible to follow these recommendations, please see the next part of this chapter. These promising practices give learners an opportunity to develop the skills and strategies they need to achieve their goals. Learners are placed with other learners of similar abilities, in designated ESL literacy classes, with a series of small progressions through the program. The following practices are recommended:

**Create a Separate Stream for ESL Literacy:** The most important consideration in the placement of LIFE in levels is to create classes that are specifically and solely designed for ESL literacy. This is the best way to meet the needs of this group of learners.

**Base Levels on the CLB Literacy Document:** There are several advantages to using the CLB Phases when determining levels. This is a national standard, understood by programs and institutions across Canada, which is an advantage both to the program and to the learners. There is material already created for the CLB Phases, most notably the document itself, which provides outcomes in reading, writing, and numeracy for each Phase. Additionally, the CLB Literacy

Document recognizes that literacy is more than just one level, and that learners with a range of literacy skills will still require support in the classroom. When possible, create literacy levels based on the Phases, or at least on a recognition of the range of literacy abilities learners will have. This usually means that more than one literacy class is necessary, as learners progress through the Phases.

**Place Learners with Similar Abilities in the Same Level:** Learners should be placed in levels with other learners with similar skills and abilities. This gives the instructor an opportunity to target the specific needs of a group of learners. It should be noted that no group of learners, no matter how carefully they are assessed and placed, will have identical skill levels or identical needs; all learners are different, and bring different strengths to the classroom. This should be acknowledged and celebrated – for one thing, it allows learners to help each other and learn from each other – but it is a good idea to keep the level of a class relatively uniform. Again, this usually means that more than one literacy class is necessary.

**Place Learners in Levels Based on their Reading and Writing Skills:** Learners should be placed in levels based on their weakest skills. In the case of literacy learners, this is usually their reading and writing. This means that there will be a range of oral abilities in the classroom, but that learners will have similar (although never exactly the same) abilities in literacy.

**Use Small Level Increments:** Acquiring a second language is often a slow process; acquiring literacy is an even slower process. This is not to say that

LIFE are particularly slow learners, although they do require a significant amount of time to meet their goals. Children acquiring literacy in their first language also require extensive time; depending on the measurement of literacy, this process takes native speakers seven to ten years. The Phases, from Initial to Developing to Adequate, are extensive, and the difference between each stage of each Phase is considerable. Therefore, it is a good idea to create classes with small increments. Learners will take time to progress through the different literacy Phases, especially in the lowest levels. Any progress should be celebrated. If classes are too broad, learners can feel that they are stagnating, even though they are acquiring valuable skills.



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**Limit Class Size:** LIFE need individualized attention and plenty of support from the instructor. This is easier if the number of learners in the class is limited. How many learners are in each class will depend on the program and the level – a Phase I class should have fewer learners than a Phase III class, for example – but in an ideal situation, there would be no more than ten to fifteen learners in a class.

**Pull Out Learners for Numeracy Instruction:** If learners are placed in levels based on their reading and writing Phases, they will have a huge range of abilities with numeracy. There is no strong correlation between the reading and writing Phase and the numeracy Phase of learners. The best way of handling this situation is to assess and regroup learners for numeracy instruction as part of the class. A full-time program with three literacy levels, for example, might choose to regroup their learners for numeracy instruction several times a week.

## Meeting Challenges in Placing LIFE in Levels

The set of recommendations in the previous section describes promising practices in teaching LIFE. Although it is a system that has been found to be highly effective, it is not the only possible way of placing learners in levels. It is also a system that assumes a certain number of learners and instructors, and the resources to support a number of classes. Depending on the program or the institution, this is not always possible. Smaller programs can have LIFE too, and still need to be able to meet the needs of these learners.

One situation that often occurs in smaller programs, or in programs with limited resources or limited numbers of learners, is the multi-level class. While every classroom is by nature a multi-level class – all learners have a variety of skills and needs – many instructors find themselves teaching classes with a very broad range of literacy learners. If not ideal, it is at least a common situation. It is still possible to run an effective program with a multi-level class; for very specific suggestions in instructional considerations in teaching a multi-level class, please see Chapter Twelve.

Another possible solution for programs that do not have the resources or the number of learners to support a full separate literacy stream is collaboration. Programs might consider working together with other ESL providers in the community, pooling resources and learners for ESL literacy.

ESL Literacy Assessment Sample

**Tips for Use**  
 Excerpt from an ESL literacy assessment tool  
 The tasks get progressively more difficult  
 A full assessment is longer and the tasks continue to increase in difficulty

**A. Circle the one that is different:**



2. L      F      F

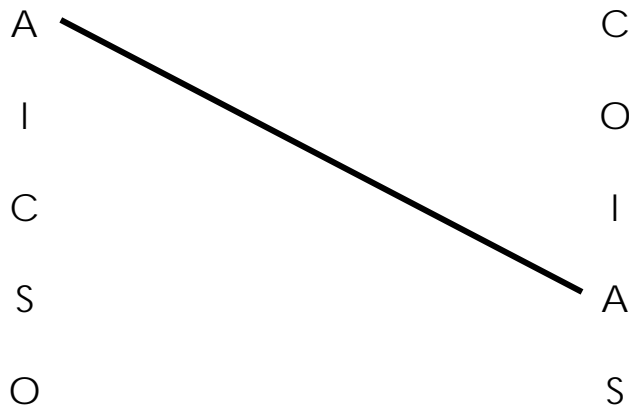
3. 1      7      7

4. E      E      T

5. 2      7      2

6. E      E      B

**B. Match the ones that are the same:**



**C. Copy:**

Ex. S S

V \_\_\_\_\_

P \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

**D. Print the big letters of the alphabet:**

A B C \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**E. Copy:**

I am a student.

\_\_\_\_\_

I live in Canada.

\_\_\_\_\_

## Conclusions

An effective program in ESL literacy provides learners with the skills and strategies they need to achieve their goals and thrive as members of their communities. The best place for LIFE is in a separate, designated program designed specifically for ESL literacy. Ideally, this program should provide learners with a series of levels to meet their needs as they progress through the Phases of literacy and language acquisition. These levels should be focused enough to give learners a feeling of success at each stage, and learners should be placed in the levels based on their core literacy skills in reading and writing. There are still many possible challenges in literacy instruction; for approaches, teaching strategies, suggestions, tips, and tricks, please see Section Two of the handbook.

# Chapter 5 Outline

Introduction: The Need for Learner Support

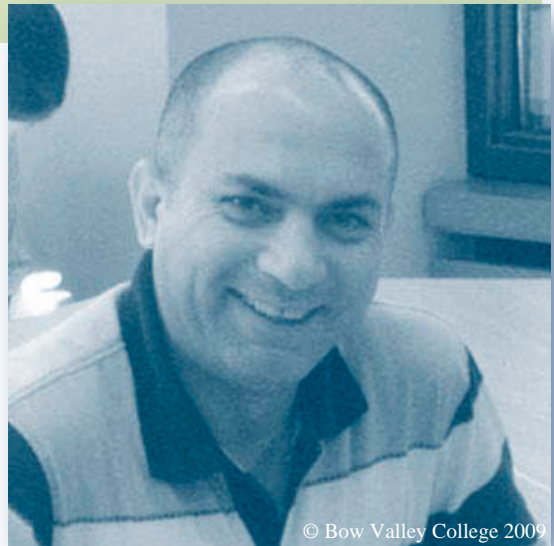
Common Barriers to Learning

Identifying Learners with Barriers

Academic Support

Setting Goals

Conclusions





# Supporting Learners

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## Objectives

To recognize common barriers to learning

To highlight the need for learner support

To describe four steps in helping learners overcome barriers: hire a support worker; view learners holistically; show flexibility and understanding; and promote support, empowerment, and respect

To show the need for academic support and help with setting goals

## Introduction: The Need for Learner Support

Learners with Interrupted Formal Education are working to improve their English and to develop literacy at the same time: a path that is filled with challenges and requires intense effort. Anyone who has seen a group of ESL literacy learners at the end of the day knows that acquiring language and literacy is hard, tiring work. This is compounded by the fact that LIFE are often unfamiliar with the expectations and requirements of the western school system and are being asked to learn something that is likely very different from the kinds of work they have done before.

The requirements of developing language and literacy are not the only challenges that our learners face, however; LIFE have full, complex lives as adults in a new country and they often confront a wide range of barriers to their learning before they even step into the classroom. These barriers can include issues such as finances, housing, transportation, past trauma, child care, a lack of self-esteem, and so on. There is no easy solution to helping learners overcome barriers to learning, but there are things a program can do to support and empower learners.

LIFE are also in need of academic support, to understand the educational system and their place within it, to meet the challenges of the classroom, and to set short-, medium-, and long-term goals for themselves. An effective ESL literacy program must recognize that learners need support and must work with learners to meet their challenges so that they can come to school, and when they are there, learn and achieve their goals.

## Common Barriers to Learning

There are a lot of possible barriers to learning, but there are common patterns of barriers that affect many learners. This is not an exhaustive list; any problem that keeps learners from the classroom, or keeps learners from focusing when they are there, is a barrier to learning and should be taken seriously by the learner, the instructor, and the program.

Common barriers include:

- **Financial barriers:** accessing funding, budgeting, lack of understanding of banking systems, not having enough money for routine costs such as food, housing, transportation, bills, and child care, as well as not having enough money for emergency situations, such as a sick child, a car breaking down, or an emergency back home
- **Housing:** inadequate housing, unsafe housing, a lack of housing, impending eviction, or utilities being shut off

- **Transportation:** inaccessibility of transportation, lack of money for public transportation, or in some situations, car problems, cost of parking, or lack of a driver's license
- **Child care:** lack of access to child care, lack of money for child care, lack of safe child care, or issues surrounding scheduling of child care
- **Lack of support:** no social support network, no one to talk to, loneliness, homesickness, or no one to support learning
- **Mental health:** depression, anxiety, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, or nightmares
- **Health care:** illness, lack of access, lack of understanding of the health care system, or lack of money for a dentist or glasses
- **Legal issues:** divorce, restraining orders, parking tickets, traffic violations
- **Abuse:** current or past physical, emotional or sexual abuse of self or family
- **Addiction:** alcohol, gambling, or drugs
- **Affective barriers:** lack of self-esteem, lack of confidence, fear of failure, fear of change, or fear of the unknown
- **Family problems:** illness in the family, family member in trouble, family member with criminal charges, family in danger, raising children in a new culture, or problems at children's schools
- **Employment:** unemployment, underemployment, lack of skills to write a resume or do an interview, current employment conflict with school, or balancing work and school
- **Changing expectations of new culture:** changing views and expectations of marriage and relationships, children, responsibilities, or gender roles
- **Scheduling:** fitting school, employment, housework, child care, etc. into the day

## Identifying Learners with Barriers

When learners are in a safe, supportive, welcoming, open environment, they will often volunteer information about their lives, including problems that they are facing. Some learners feel comfortable asking for help, in particular learners with higher oral skills, who are better able to identify and verbalize problems.

Not all learners are able to discuss what is bothering them, however; this might be a matter of pride, of not knowing whether it is appropriate to ask an instructor for help, or of not being able to either identify or express the cause of a problem. It still may be clear that a learner is struggling or facing difficulties outside of the classroom. Sometimes the signs are extremely obvious, such as a learner who comes to class exhausted, or one who constantly complains of headaches, or one who cannot see the board. In most cases, however, barriers to learning manifest themselves as problems with either punctuality or attendance. This is a sure sign that a problem is a true barrier to learning; it is such a barrier that it is stopping a learner from making it into the classroom. It is therefore important that instructors are observant of their class and know their learners. When a learner has an attendance issue, the first step is to have a discussion with the learner.

Not all barriers to learning are obvious, however, and some learners might struggle quietly with their problems. In an ESL literacy program it is really not enough to sit back and wait for learners to say when there's a problem; a program, and all those who work in a program, must be proactive. Without making assumptions about the needs of a specific learner, a program can still recognize that there are barriers that affect many LIFE. A program should have certain measures in place to help learners with common problems and emergency situations. One of the most common problems learners face is not having enough money, which in itself can lead to many other problems: eviction, hunger, utilities being shut off (which can be an emergency situation in a Canadian winter), further fines, or pulling children out of child care. Instructors, program administrators, or support workers can make lists of community services that help people in need, including food banks, services that provide glasses at reduced cost or for free, shelters, legal aid, and so on. A program might also consider implementing an emergency fund for learners. This can include bus tickets, taxi vouchers, gift cards for local grocery stores, and cheques to cover emergency rent or utility bills. These are admittedly stop-gap measures, and it will usually still be necessary to help the learner to find a long-term solution to the problem, but sometimes stop-gap measures are needed. When there is no food in the house it means that the children will be hungry tonight.

# John's Story

## **A learner overcoming challenges**

*John, a young man from Chad, was a learner in a Phase III class; he spoke English at a CLB 5 and often sounded Canadian in his use of expressions and idioms. In John's class the learners wrote dialogue journals with their instructor several times a week. John chose to discuss what was happening in his life, and over several weeks disclosed that his wife was returning to Africa for six weeks to visit family, leaving him in charge of their five-year-old son. He explained to the instructor that this was why he often was late or had to leave early; he needed to pick up his son from daycare.*

*John's instructor noticed that John was beginning to miss more and more school and was increasingly distracted in class. Normally a talkative, friendly man, always laughing and joking, John began to be quiet and distant. On break one day, John's instructor asked him if he was okay, and he began to cry, explaining that without his wife's income, he was really struggling to make ends meet, and that he hadn't had food in the house for several days. His son had been asking for milk, which John couldn't afford to give him. John's instructor, with the support of the dean of her college, was able to access the student emergency fund for John, providing him with a series of grocery gift cards that same day. They also connected him with a local food bank. This tided him and his son over until he found work the next week.*

## **The Instructor's Strategy**

John's financial barriers did not present themselves as financial barriers; instead, John began having problems with punctuality and attendance and became withdrawn and distracted during class time. Seeing through these problems to find the root cause was not something that happened overnight; John's instructor had built up a relationship with John over weeks. She knew him and could tell that something was bothering him. Instead of approaching his punctuality and attendance problems with rules and discipline, she gave John opportunities for open communication and showed him that she valued and respected him. He felt comfortable sharing his situation with her, and she followed up with him. There is no clear "recipe" to follow when helping learners overcome barriers, but respect and communication are key.

## Helping Learners Overcome Barriers

Helping learners overcome their barriers is not an easy thing to do; in many instances, it might not even be entirely possible. Many of the barriers learners face are unlikely to be changed by a quick fix; learners need long-term support to deal with ongoing problems, as well as any new problems that might arise. There are, however, a few things that an effective program can do:

- hire a support worker to discuss barriers and connect learners to community supports
- view learners holistically and build in program supports
- show flexibility and understanding
- promote support, empowerment, and respect

One of the key recommendations is to hire dedicated support workers who are available to learners. Support workers can help with any kind of issue, from filling out funding applications to setting goals to coping with loss, addiction, or trauma. A support worker is able to talk to learners, to provide information, and to give referrals to other programs or professionals if necessary. Support workers also work well within a program; they give learners a place to go when they need help, and they are aware of learners' situation in the program. Once a program has a dedicated support worker, it is important to regularly inform learners about the support available and encourage them to see the support worker whenever necessary.

The next stage to helping learners deal with their barriers is to view learners holistically and to recognize the wide range of barriers that often affect learners and the challenges these pose to learners achieving their goals, both inside the classroom and out. There is a clear need for anyone involved in ESL literacy education to view learners holistically. Learners are in fact more than just learners; they are people, coping with complex needs and wants, challenges, joys, dreams, experiences, intentions, strengths, weaknesses, fears, and so on, and they do not cease to be these full people because they are sitting in the classroom. This isn't to take away from the focus of the class on language learning and literacy development; it is to recognize that there may be many issues in learners' lives that affect this learning, both positively and negatively. Helping learners achieve their goals starts with viewing them holistically and recognizing their strengths and their barriers.

A program in ESL literacy should be flexible and understanding with the learners. While it is best to avoid making generalizations about LIFE, or about any learners, many instructors and programs observe that LIFE face considerably more barriers to learning than mainstream learners. This makes sense, as mainstream learners have a wider range of skills to support them in their lives and are therefore likely to be better able to manage when challenges arise. An effective ESL literacy program recognizes the degree to which our learners face barriers and thus

also the need for flexibility and understanding when dealing with learners. This can mean different things to different programs, but can include, for example, flexibility with punctuality or attendance in certain situations, or simply a willingness to work with a learner to brainstorm possible solutions to a problem.

After recognizing barriers and showing willingness to assist learners to overcome them, instructors and program administrators need to decide how they best can help. Learners facing barriers need three things from a program:

- support
- empowerment
- respect

A program can often best support its learners by providing information and referrals. Instructors and program administrators can do this, but they are not always the best people for this job; support workers are a good choice. They are available to answer questions; to listen; to help with funding, help agencies, or referrals; and to provide information. Once a support worker is in place, learners need to know about the worker and understand that they can talk to him or her about anything.

In order to provide learners with accurate information about other programs and with referrals, the program must then build connections with the community. There are many help and aide programs that provide a range of services to people in need. Learners may want information about many of these programs, including:

- doctors or medical care, including women's health
- dentists, especially subsidized dental care
- glasses and eyecare, especially subsidies for this or free glasses programs
- community housing
- justice or legal aid, including parking ticket payment plans
- community kitchens, food banks and hamper programs
- second-hand stores
- programs for free things, including bicycles, coats and winter clothing, furniture, etc.
- career fairs
- finances, including budgeting and taxes
- immigration, including family sponsorship

It is essential that a program does not view its learners, or even its learners' problems, as things to be fixed. First, it is unlikely that anyone will be able to "fix" all of the problems faced by a

group of learners, and second, any long-term change to learners' situations must come from the learners themselves. Therefore it is a much better idea to work together with learners to identify barriers they are facing and brainstorm ways of overcoming or managing these barriers. This process empowers learners; their voices are heard, they discover that they have some control over the problems in their lives, and they begin to learn problem-solving skills that they can use independently. Ultimately, an ESL literacy program is trying to create independent learners.

The third issue in helping learners overcome their barriers is respect; one of the cornerstones of an effective educational program is respect for the learners. This means respecting what learners say about their own lives; it also means respecting learners' right to choose when they are ready to deal with a problem, or to decide whether something is a problem for them at all.

This issue is particularly important when it comes to dealing with past – or current – trauma or abuse. Many LIFE have lived through or witnessed very difficult experiences, and an essential part of empowering them to deal with their problems is to respect their right to say when, how, and if they are going to deal with them. The best thing an instructor, program administrator, or support worker can do in this case is be a willing listener, when and if a learner is ready. It is also important to remember that most instructors and program administrators are not counselors, psychologists, or social workers; they are educators. An instructor cannot tackle all of the learners' personal problems, but he or she can refer the learners to people or organizations who can help.

LIFE need so much more than just language and literacy skills. Language classes are a place where other vital life skills are built. In one class in Calgary, during a winter with temperatures as low as  $-48^{\circ}\text{C}$  with wind chill, one student couldn't find her way to her new home. She got lost and wandered around for three hours until she found the building by chance. With her permission, the instructor used this as a "What to do when..." conversation, giving learners ideas of what they can do if they find themselves in similar situations. Strategies for managing crises like these are absolutely necessary in ESL literacy classes.



**Too Many Parking Tickets? What Next?**

Do you have too many parking or speeding tickets? Do you need to go to court?  
When you go to talk to someone, you should be ready to ask questions.

**Tips for Use**

Learners take this with them to appointments

Can be adapted for other levels or situations

**What do you need to bring?** A pen, paper, and this form

**Write:**

Name of the person you are talking to: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number of the person you are talking to: \_\_\_\_\_

**What questions should you ask?**

I have a parking/speeding ticket. What should I do?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do I have to pay a fine?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do I have to go to court?

\_\_\_\_\_

Can I get someone who speaks my language to help me?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do I need a lawyer?

\_\_\_\_\_

Will a lawyer cost money?

\_\_\_\_\_

What papers do I need to bring with me?

\_\_\_\_\_

What will happen if I don't pay the fine (money)?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do they tell you? If you are nervous and can't write it down, ask **THEM** to write the information here:

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**Words you should know:**

violation	offence	traffic ticket	plead	court	charge
lawyer	sentence	interpreter	fine	guilty	innocent

**Notes:** Write down **OTHER** information that will help you.

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**Contact:** Who else do you need to call?

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**Follow up:** What are the next steps? What do you need to do now? Is there anyone else you need to call? If you need to pay money, write down what you need to do. Write down important dates and information.

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## Academic Support

In any ESL literacy program, learners need academic support, both inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, the job of providing academic support falls on the instructor, and for a further discussion of what to do in the classroom, please see Section Two of this handbook. Outside of the classroom, however, learners still need support so that they can cope with the school system effectively and make informed choices for themselves.

Academic support may be necessary in the form of homework help, tutoring, or extra instruction in a particular area. Some learners find that they need help with one thing in particular; this is an excellent case for tutoring or for extra instruction. Other ways to support learners academically include providing a quiet space for completing homework (depending on the level of the learners) or a time when they can ask an instructor any questions they may have. Programs can also begin homework clubs, where learners can come together and support each other. This helps learners to value education and to create a support network for themselves.

Learners need help to understand the academic system in their new country and to understand their place within it. This understanding is essential to the process of setting goals and making informed decisions. In most urban centres, there are many programs available to learners as they develop their literacy. Some of these programs are academic in nature, such as high school upgrading programs, while some are designed to train learners for the workforce. Learners who are getting close to transitioning out of ESL literacy will need to be informed about what is available to them in order to plan their next step. This knowledge should not just be reserved for higher-level literacy learners; an awareness of future possibilities can be a powerful motivator for lower-level learners as well. It is also important for learners to understand the natural progression of the education system and the length of time required at each step in order to set short-, medium- and long-term goals.

ESL Literacy → ABE → High School Upgrading → College or University Programs

They need to understand that there are options outside of this pattern too; for example, not all apprenticeship programs require a high school diploma, or many learners may spend time in mainstream ESL following ESL literacy.

Are You Ready for School?  
Checklist

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tips for Use**  
 Makes commitment to school explicit for learners  
 Helps instructor assess barriers to learning

Think about the school year.  
Are you ready?

When your life is in order, you can study better.

Look at the checklist.  
Check the boxes to show you are ready.

I have a place to live

I have enough money for next month's rent

My bills are paid (phone, electric, etc.)

I have a job

My work hours are \_\_\_\_\_ (# of days),  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (time) each week

I have a low-income Calgary transit pass or I have applied for one

I have an Alberta Health Care card

I have a Calgary Public Library Card

Student signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Setting Goals

Although learning about the educational systems and a learner's place in it is a vital process, it can be a little disheartening for some learners to see "how far they have to go," especially if they have specific dreams or long-term goals in mind. Even if these dreams may seem unrealistic based on the learner's current level, age, family responsibilities, and so on, it really isn't the instructor's role to decide whether or not it is possible for a learner to realize that dream. Some learners dream of becoming doctors or engineers. An instructor doesn't need to challenge this dream but can help the learner to understand what is involved in that level of education and to set some short-term and medium-term goals. Instructors should expect that learners will adjust their dreams and goals as they get closer to realizing them.

Setting goals is a critically important learning strategy. Simply put, setting goals creates independent learners. It is also a process that involves a lot of transferrable skills: goal-setting involves identifying where you currently are, thinking about the future, and creating a logical step-by-step plan that will lead to that future, with an awareness of how long each step will take. For many learners, this is a highly complicated process, requiring a significant amount of cognitive development as well as cultural understanding of the education/employment system of their new country. That is why it is important to begin goal-setting at early levels in a highly supported environment and continue with learners as they develop their literacy.

Instructors need to help learners to understand the difference between short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals and how these goals can work together to get learners to where they want to go. In early levels, the time frame for goal-setting can be quite short, so that learners can understand the process and have the opportunity to quickly meet some of their goals. Some instructors have their learners set weekly or even daily goals. All goals are highly personal and depend on the learners themselves, particularly on their current level. The chart below illustrates some possible learner goals; for some learners, even the short-term goals listed here will be medium-term, while other learners are close to realizing the long-term goals on the list. The goals for an individual learner will be very specific. For more information on goal setting, please see Chapter Eleven. Goals can include:

## Short-, Medium-, and Long-Term Goals

Short-Term Goals	Medium-Term Goals	Long-Term Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Score 9/10 on a spelling test</li> <li>• Come to class on time every day for a week</li> <li>• Copy a model of a note, fill in the blanks, and send it to a child's instructor</li> <li>• Write a paragraph with help from the instructor</li> <li>• Share writing with the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete this level</li> <li>• Be able to talk to the landlord about painting the apartment</li> <li>• Be able to read bedtime stories to children in English</li> <li>• Be able to go to a doctor's appointment alone</li> <li>• Get a driver's license</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finish Phase III</li> <li>• Go to ABE (Adult Basic Education)</li> <li>• Finish High School Equivalency</li> <li>• Support family financially</li> <li>• Work in a store as a cashier</li> <li>• Help children with their homework</li> </ul>

## Conclusions

Support for learners is a vital part of an ESL literacy program, as it directly helps learners stay in the program and achieve success while they are there. This should take the form of both academic support, which helps learners understand where they are in the system, how to best succeed, and where to go next; and support in overcoming barriers to learning, whatever they may be. Instructors, support workers, and program administrators need to be aware of the difficulties many learners face outside of the classroom as well as the difficulties in helping learners overcome these challenges. It is not easy to “fix” a problem for anyone, but a program can help by viewing learners holistically; showing flexibility and understanding; and promoting support, empowerment, and respect. Once again, it is highly recommended that an effective ESL literacy program have a dedicated support worker for the learners.