



© Bow Valley College 2009

## Appendix 2: Literature Review



## Introduction to the Literature Review

More and more practitioners in the fields of ESL and literacy are accepting ESL literacy as a distinct area of language instruction with unique features separate from both mainstream ESL and first language literacy. With this acceptance, comes a plethora of literature addressing this specific area.

Canada was founded on immigrants and, even today, new immigrants form an integral part of our makeup. For humanitarian reasons, we also open our doors to refugees, some 12,000 in 2005 alone (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2007). In recent years it has become apparent that a small but significant number of these new arrivals are landing in Canada with little or no formal education from their country of origin. In 2004, 1376 of these new arrivals came to Alberta with 0-9 years of education (Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 2005). They are not literate in their native language and we can reasonably assume that the majority of them are English language learners as well.

These new immigrants and refugees are finding themselves in adult ESL classes without the necessary reading and writing skills needed to succeed. Some have never gone to school at all and speak a language for which there is no written code. Others have had their education interrupted because of war, poverty, or displacement. Now they are in Canada, a country which relies extensively on the printed word. To further complicate the matter, not only are they unable to use the print around them, but they also are unable to speak the language with any level of proficiency. Suddenly, they are expected to concurrently acquire oral, reading, and writing skills amid this highly literate society in which they are resettling (Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2005, p. 8).

The focus of this review is on these adult immigrants and refugees who are in need of both English language instruction and literacy instruction. The intersection of literacy needs and ESL needs will be explored by examining the various definitions of ESL literacy, different types of ESL literacy learners, and promising practices in ESL literacy programming. Next it will look at teaching strategies and, finally, it will identify some of the gaps in the literature.

The content of this literature review has been drawn from a variety of sources. These sources include current academic publications and websites related to adult ESL literacy, adult ESL instruction, national and international conference proceedings, and provincial studies. Generally, the issue of ESL literacy learners within Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs outside the scope of this review. Instead the review focuses on ESL literacy learners within ESL programs, with a particular focus on programs in Canada.

In order to define ESL literacy one must first look to literacy because ESL literacy is the meeting point of two separate fields, ESL and literacy. Definitions of literacy abound, but the one that is commonly accepted in Canada is the one used by both the International Adult Literacy Surveys and the Human Resources and Development Canada (Quigley, Folinsbee, & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006). This definition is also accepted by the Movement for Canadian Literacy. According to this definition, literacy is “the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (Human Resource and Skills Development Canada, 2003, p. 2).

ESL literacy learners, then, are adults who are learning to speak English at the same time as they are learning to read and write. Scanning the literature it becomes apparent that there is no single definition of ESL literacy that is unanimously accepted. The literature reflects some controversy over who our ESL literacy learners are.

One area under discussion is whether or not to include in the definition those learners who are literate in their first language but use a non-Roman alphabet. Bell and Burnaby (1984) acknowledge that learners who use a non-Roman alphabet “will have special difficulties in learning literacy in English no matter how competent their native-language may be” (p. 6). They clarify that such learners may or may not also have low literacy skills in their native language, and those “with literacy skills in their native language find it easy to transfer those skills to a second language” (p. 3). In other words, they may need to practice their English alphabet but may not be in need of literacy support. Others, however, have not interpreted it this way. *The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners* (CLB Literacy Document) (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) also includes learners who use non-Roman alphabets in their definition of ESL literacy.

Wrigley (2008), however, argues that “you only learn to read once” (p. 3) and then, after that, the knowledge that oral language can be represented in print is simply transferred to the new language. For evidence, she points to the fact that ESL learners with education in their native language transfer to English the underlying concepts of how print works, and their English reading skills “often develop quite rapidly after an initial learning period, although spelling problems may remain” (p. 3). Literacy learners, on the other hand, have not yet fully acquired these reading and writing skills in any language, thus they are unable to gain meaning from written text. They need specific instruction and practice that is geared to learning these literacy skills.

There are many other definitions of ESL literacy learners which all revolve around the central idea of learning English without the benefit of a formal education. The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005) defines ESL literacy learners as people who have difficulty

in the basics of reading and writing in their native languages: “They have had limited access to education in their home or residing countries. These learners, while learning a new language also have difficulty transferring skills from the first to second language” (p. 37). Achren and Williams (2006) define ESL literacy learners as those immigrants who have “little or no oracy in English and little to no formal education” (p. 1). Craats, Kurvers, and Young-Scholten (2005) describe ESL literacy learners by illuminating the difficulties faced: “While children develop literacy only after they have acquired much of their first language, non-literate adults often face the challenge of learning to read in a second language with little proficiency in that language and no familiarity with literacy” (p. 16). Instead of defining ESL literacy learners, Wrigley and Guth (1992) provide a definition of the teaching:

While there is no one accepted definition of ESL literacy, ESL literacy *teaching* could be defined as supporting adults with little English and little formal education in their efforts to understand and use English in its many forms (oral and written, including prose, document, and quantitative literacy), in a variety of contexts (family, community, school, work), so that they can reach their fullest potential and achieve their own goals, whether these be personal, professional or academic (p. 14).

Although there is no single universally accepted definition of ESL literacy, there is a general agreement that it refers to those adults who are in need of some literacy support while they learn English. The difficulties in defining ESL literacy arise from the fact that learners in need of ESL literacy instruction are not a homogenous group. Instead they are a very diverse population and have a full spectrum of literacy and language needs. Nor is this population static. The demographics change with the world events and Canada’s immigration policy.

When one first thinks of ESL literacy, the picture that might come to mind is that of individuals who have never held a pen and cannot understand the simplest English questions. While these truly are ESL literacy learners, they are not a realistic representation of what a typical ESL learner looks like. The CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) confirms that these learners are “a small minority of beginning ESL Literacy second language learners who need to develop and practice the specific visual and motor/mechanical skills that are needed in the pre-reading and pre-writing literacy processes” (p. 2).

Many more learners operate at a much higher level of literacy but are unable to function fully in a mainstream ESL classroom. Holisky (1985) states that in a regular, beginning ESL class “it is assumed that the student can already read in some language” (p. 1) and the teacher does not have to “incorporate the literacy skills needed to interpret the textbook” (p. 1). Wrigley (2008) explains that in a mainstream ESL classroom, the learner is expected to “pick up written English as they learn oral English” (p. 2), where the teacher presents the new vocabulary or ideas orally and then

quickly moves to the textbook or worksheet to reinforce the new material. These learners often lack basic academic concepts and need to be exposed to what is generally thought of as common knowledge, such as planets revolving around the sun or matter having three states, solid, liquid, and gas. Literacy ESL learners are often left behind, not having the basic concepts, being unable to use reading to learn, and instead struggling to learn to read. They also struggle with the material in mainstream classes, as it is generally far above their reading level.

Some literacy learners may function at a fairly high level and initially appear literate, but they still need literacy support. It is these learners who are often overlooked and placed into a mainstream ESL classroom where they fall behind. Because of interrupted schooling, they have not had a chance to firmly establish academic skills in their own languages, and, therefore, are not able to transfer these skills into English. Blanton (1990) explains that some learners can read and write but “their literacy is very limited, for their schooling in any language was not sustained long enough for them to develop the deep literacy that can evolve only from sustained interaction with written text” (p. 1). Learners who have been exposed to some formal education and have well-developed oral skills may still be in need of literacy support due to structural differences found in an oral culture. Burgoyne and Hull (2007) argue that learners from a highly oral culture may transfer some of these oral traits into their writing: “their written texts often exhibit features of oral cultural texts (for example, digression, repetition)” (p. 15). The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) and Wrigley and Guth (1992) refer to literacy as a continuum along which a learner grows, “rather than as a dichotomy or ‘great divide’ between literate and illiterate” (Wrigley & Guth, 1992, p. 16). Gunn (2003) concurs, stating that the dividing line between literate and preliterate is indefinable: “Consequently, the state of literacy is temporary; its duration is variable but participation in a range of definable activities should result in most learners developing a qualitative change in their capacity to read and write” (p. 46). Therefore, ESL literacy includes a wide spectrum of learners, included higher-level ESL literacy learners.

Because ESL literacy learners are such a diverse population, they are difficult to define. They come from a variety of countries, have a huge range in their reading abilities, and have different needs and goals. We need to get to know our literacy learners individually and not make assumptions about what they know or don’t know or what they need to learn. Instead, as we get to know them, we can find out their strengths and help them reach their literacy goals.

## Promising Practices in ESL Literacy Program Design

There are many promising practices supported by the literature that contribute to programs of excellence in ESL literacy. One underlying premise of a promising practice in programming is that of a distinct ESL literacy stream parallel to and concurrent with the mainstream ESL program. This premise of an ESL literacy stream is composed of two parts, that ESL literacy learners are in separate classes from mainstream ESL learners and that there are a series of ESL literacy classes, with progressively more complex literacy outcomes, rather than a solitary ESL literacy class where learners anywhere along the continuum are placed into a one-size-fits-all model.

The first premise, that literacy learners are in designated classrooms distinct from mainstream ESL classes, is mentioned throughout the literature. In a report by the Ontario Literacy Coalition (2007), instructors identify the need for dedicated ESL literacy classes, rather than classes containing both literacy and mainstream ESL learners. ESL literacy learners progress at a different pace than mainstream ESL learners, picking up the oral language more readily than the written language. This uneven skill base makes it difficult for them to fit well in a mainstream ESL classroom where much of the learning is text-based. As Bell and Burnaby (1984) point out, placing these literacy learners in a mainstream ESL class for beginners does not work because their oral skills are too high for the speaking activities, yet their written skills are too low. There is a general recognition that ESL literacy learners do not belong in mainstream ESL classes. Gunn (2003, p. 39) states that when learners who are literate in their native language and learners who are not literate in any language are combined into a single class, it usually results in the non-literate learners being left behind. Wrigley (2008) also argues that the practice of placing all learners new to English in the same class, regardless of whether they are literate or not, generally results in the learners who are not yet literate losing out.

Some researchers, such as Folinsbee (2007) and Jangles Productions (2006), claim that there is often not enough specialized programming for ESL literacy and these learners are instead put into mainstream ESL classrooms where they often do not succeed. Brod (1999) supports this and attributes the high dropout rate of ESL literacy learners at least partially to a lack of designated ESL literacy classes. Jangles Productions (Jangles Productions, 2006) contains a quote from a teacher who proclaims that “Literacy classes need to be separate from the regular stream. We must teach them how to learn before they can learn themselves” (p. 23). Indeed, DelliCarpini and Englemann (2007) indicate that the instructional strategies that lead to success for ESL literacy learners are different from those used for ESL learners with high levels of literacy in their own language (p. 7). Thus a general agreement in the literature is that separate classes for ESL literacy learners is fundamental.

The second premise of a distinct ESL literacy stream is the existence of a series of ESL literacy classes that progress in moderate increments. Some institutions, recognizing the need for ESL literacy classes, place all literacy students of varying abilities in a single literacy class where they remain until they are pushed on to a CLB 1 or 2 class, which is unable to address their literacy needs. Because literacy is a continuum, this single “one-size-fits-all” classroom approach is not the best solution for ESL literacy learners as it does not recognize their complex learning needs and does not lead to success for the learner. Croydon (2005) states that “There is no middle ground in a multi-level class” (p. 78) and argues that the key instead is to provide instruction and materials for each learners’ literacy level, even within the same classroom.

Instead of a single class for ESL literacy learners, the literature makes reference to having a series of ESL literacy classes, with several distinct levels each in their own class, much like CLB 1 classes are distinct from CLB 5 classes. Holisky (1985) also supports ESL literacy as a series of levels which she labels pre-literacy to level 3, each with an increasingly more complex array of outcomes. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) divides ESL literacy into four distinct phases which are used to describe learners’ reading and writing abilities, and these phases range from learning to hold a pencil in the Foundation Phase to learning to connect ideas in paragraphs in Phase III. They are a progression of reading, writing and numeracy skills for ESL literacy learners, describing what the learners can do at each Phase. A promising practice is to have each of these Phases be a separate class or, even better, each subdivision of each Phase, a separate classroom. For instance, there would be a Phase I initial class, a Phase I developing class, a Phase I adequate class, and so on.

In reality, however, for a variety of reasons, many programs are unable to have separate classes for each level. Instead they have only one or perhaps two literacy classes. If this is the case, instead of having a “one-size-fits-all” type classroom where the instructor teaches a pre-conceived curriculum regardless of the various levels of the learners, a better solution is to have a multi-level ESL literacy class where the learners are grouped according to their various literacy needs and strengths. The literature provides a variety of teaching techniques to deal with the reality of a multi-level ESL literacy classroom (Croydon, 2005; Bow Valley College, 2007; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; Massaro, 2004; Wrigley, 1992). In the case where the program has two literacy classes, it is best to provide as homogeneous a class as possible so that there is a beginning literacy class and a more advanced literacy class. The literature (Jangles Productions, 2006; Brod, 1999; Folinsbee, 2007; DelliCarpini & Engelmann, 2007) affirms that it is of paramount importance that the multi-level class be a multi-level ESL literacy class rather than a multi-level mainstream and literacy class in order to best meet the literacy learners’ needs. Although not perfect, having a multi-level ESL literacy class is a vast improvement over the mixed ESL and literacy class, and can create a successful learning environment for the ESL literacy learner.



The concept of a separate specialized ESL literacy stream comprised of a continuum of increasingly more complex classes which are separate from and parallel to mainstream ESL emerges repeatedly in the literature. TESL Ontario (2004), in its position paper on adult education, recommends that ESL literacy be recognized as a program distinct from mainstream ESL programs and from adult basic education. Jangles Productions (Jangles Productions, 2006, p. 22) examining ESL literacy in Ontario also recommends that there be a separate, formally recognized literacy stream so that adequate resources and effort can be allotted, instead of combining ESL literacy learners with mainstream ESL learners in multi-level classes. They indicate that, while the federal government has provided a framework for the four phases of ESL literacy, these phases have not been fully implemented into the Ontario programs reviewed in their report: “Only a few sites participating in the study were in the process of or had implemented the four phases of literacy development” (p. 16). Instead, ESL literacy learners are placed in mainstream ESL classes in many programs, making it challenging for them to meet success in their learning.

Not only does the literature recommend that ESL literacy be a separate stream from the mainstream ESL classes, but inherent within that stream, it also supports the continuation of ESL literacy classes to a high literacy level. Blanton (1990) argues for the existence of higher ESL literacy classes for learners who have had “no chance to establish a strong academic base in their own language” (p. 1). Although they may be nearly fluent in informal English, she argues that they need specialized literacy instruction to help them develop the deep literacy base necessary for academic reading and writing. The CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) recommends that specialized ESL literacy development continue until the end of Phase III and states that, “students with higher oral/aural levels may be ready to enter an ABE program. Others, whose oral/aural level is closer to their literacy level, would probably benefit from participating in a regular adult ESL” (p. V). The CLB Literacy Document also notes that learners may move in and out of the ESL literacy stream and may have interruptions in their learning.

Much of the literature supports the preference of small classes for ESL literacy learners. Because they have less academic resources to draw on, these learners are in greater need of individual support. Jangles Productions (Jangles Productions, 2006) recommends that literacy class sizes be limited to ten learners so that instructors are able to provide learners with “the time they needed on foundation reading, writing, and numeracy skills as well as the development of oral/aural English” (p. 40). McPherson (2007) and Bow Valley College (2002c) further support ESL literacy classes being small. Achren and Williams (2006) advocate for small classes based on “the intensity of literacy work, the demands of the students unused to a formal learning environment, and the requirements of individuals that cannot be adequately met in a ‘normal’-sized class” (p. 6).

Another promising practice within ESL literacy programs is the existence of professional development for the practitioners. Teaching ESL literacy is a specialized area and, as such, requires different skills than those needed in mainstream ESL. Since most ESL certification involves little or no course work aimed at teaching the specific needs of the adult ESL literacy learner, many instructors feel inadequately prepared to work with this group. The instructors are not confident that what they are doing in the classroom is, indeed, the “right” way to approach ESL literacy. Folinsbee (2007) states that many ESL literacy instructors don’t feel equipped to teach this specialized population. She claims that they “emphasized that there is little formal ESL literacy training when obtaining their ESL certification and few opportunities for professional development afterwards” (p. 40). The literature reflects the ESL literacy instructors’ plea for specialized professional development aimed at teaching this population (Millar 1997; Auerbach 1992). The Centre for Literacy (2008) points out that “There is little formal acknowledgement that ESL literacy is a separate field or that teachers need specific training to do their job” (p. 8), and there is little specific ESL literacy training available. Jangles Productions (2006) recommends that there be regularly scheduled professional development on topics specific to ESL literacy in addition to providing a forum for these instructors to get together to exchange ideas with each other. Further, they recommended that “best practice” ESL literacy training workshops be developed and delivered to fill the existing void. (Jangles Productions, 2006, p. 28) The Ontario Literacy Coalition (2007) affirms this lack of opportunities for professional development. Moreover, they indicate that, because ESL literacy is so different from teaching mainstream ESL, many ESL literacy instructors feel professionally isolated and unqualified. The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005) also declares that, in order to meet the learners’ needs, ESL literacy training has to be made a priority. Thus, the literature affirms the need and desire for specialized ESL literacy professional development. Yates (2008) states it succinctly when she proclaims that “good teachers are good learners, and effective teachers continue learning throughout their careers” (p. 1).

Another best practice in ESL literacy involves supporting the ESL literacy learner in a holistic manner. The need to support learners outside of the classroom appears throughout the literature. This support is for a myriad of obstacles which impede the learner, such as daycare, transportation, and counselling. In order to help learners overcome barriers to learning, Leong and Collins (2007) argue that ESL literacy “programs need to incorporate a social support component” (p. 18). In addition to simply being sensitive to these barriers that face the learner, programs “need to understand how critical such support is for learner participation and success”. (Leong & Collins, 2007, p. 74). Moreover, these programs need to be diligent in their commitment to delivering that support. Auerbach (1992), however, cautions in the delivery method of such supports because “the way services are presented can foster either reliance on others for assistance or self-reliance” (p. 35). She also warns against instructors acting as social workers, thus undermining the learners’ abilities to problem-solve. Although she advocates treating the learner in a holistic fashion, she deems the “students must be involved in a

participatory, problem-posing way” (p. 35). In other words, they need to be taught and supported in their efforts to solve their own problems.

Often, the goals for ESL literacy learners are more complex than simply improving their reading and writing skills. Many wish to become more independent within their community, to become less dependent on their family and friends for translation and reading, to get a better job, or to successfully navigate government agencies (Wrigley & Guth, 1992, p. 27). Folinsbee (2007, p. 19) sees something of a conflict in this area, stating that while government agencies focus on the ESL literacy learner getting a job, the learner is often more interested in improving their ability to deal with everyday practical considerations. Furthermore, Folinsbee (2007) notes that what she calls “multiple external barriers” (p. 31) must be removed if the ESL literacy learner is to experience success. She argues that the program needs to be flexible enough to accommodate various schedules and have financial help in place to assist in daycare and transportation. The living circumstances of these learners must be taken into consideration, according to Williams and Nicholas (2005) who give the example of young learners with huge family responsibilities. In order to become effective, we must think about the learner as an individual with needs that extend beyond the classroom.

A perusal of the literature suggests that, although there is not yet a consensus of an exact definition of ESL literacy, there is general agreement on several factors that are part of good programming in ESL literacy. These include the premise that ESL literacy exists as a separate stream from mainstream ESL and that professional development be available for practitioners in order to better support the learners. Finally the literature points to the need to support the learner in non-academic ways and to do so in small classes. With these practices in place, the ESL literacy program is off to a good start and instructors can focus on the task of teaching the learners to read and write.

## Classroom Instruction for ESL Literacy Learners

Theories of ESL literacy instruction abound. Two methodologies that dominate the ESL literacy literature are the participatory method and the competency-based method. The participatory method involves learners and the instructor working together to determine outcomes and curriculum for the class. The competency-based method uses a pre-existing set of outcomes for each level, based on a variety of possible sources, such as a needs assessment, or the Canadian Literacy Document. Auerbach (1992) is a proponent of the participatory method, stating that the “most effective curricula are those tailored to and developed with participating learners” (p. 1). Luft (2005) describes the Pebbles in the Sand project, which is modelled on the participatory method, as a way to empower female ESL literacy learners. In this project, the organizers believe that the participatory method will “actively work to empower them in overcoming the

barriers they faced, while still allowing women an opportunity to learn the fundamentals of English language and literacy” (p. 6). This method is also called the Freirean approach, named after the work of Paulo Freire (1985).

The other methodology often cited is the competency- or performance-based method. It is described in Peyton and Crandall (1995) as a model based on outcomes. It uses statements such as “students will be able to...” (p. 3). Brod (1999) asserts that the competency list keeps the instructor on topic and allows the learners to know when they have succeeded in each competency. This approach is also the underlying philosophy of the CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) which measures literacy outcomes and, as such, is a competency-based method.

In addition to the methodologies, the literature also refers to various approaches for use in the ESL literacy classroom. One such approach is the total physical response (TPR). TPR, developed by Asher and presented on his website (1995), works particularly well with learners with low oral skills. Brod (1999) claims that “‘hands-on learning’, the most neglected modality for adults, can be accommodated through such activities as TPR ... where movement is combined with directions and vocabulary” (p. 4). Bell and Burnaby (1984) advocate for its use in the literacy classroom as well, because it allows the learner with low oral skills to demonstrate their comprehension. However, they do warn of the limitations of TPR as it “does not always involve the vocabulary items which are normally considered the most immediately useful” (p. 56). Massaro (2004) also suggests using TPR as an initial method for teaching classroom language to ESL literacy learners.

Another approach that is referred to throughout the literature is the language experience approach (LEA). The LEA is described by Bell and Burnaby (1984) as an oral discussion that is eventually written down by the teacher using the learners’ own words. It is then used as text to be read in unison and then, perhaps, individually. Auerbach (1992) claims that this approach empowers the ESL literacy learners: “Seeing their own words written, photocopied, and presented as reading material gives the students a real sense of the importance of their ideas... For many students, it is the first time they have had the experience of seeing their own words in writing” (p. 72). Massaro (2004) presents the LEA as a way to encourage participation in the classroom while Croydon (2005) emphasizes its creative, communicative, and personalized qualities.

Even though ESL literacy learners need to learn reading and writing skills, the literature overwhelmingly indicates that they also need to develop their oral fluency, increase their vocabulary and expand their academic concepts. A report by the Indiana Department of Education (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of oral language development: “Phonics and phonemic skills, though important..., do not facilitate reading comprehension if students’ oral language proficiency is not developed to the level of the texts they are expected to read” (p. 7). In fact, the report argues that everything that the instructor does should revolve around

increasing the learners' vocabulary. Thus, the instructor should be "explaining, demonstrating, drawing, rephrasing, reading, writing and manipulating the words throughout every aspect of instruction" (p. 7) in an effort to improve the learners' oral skills. It is apparent that ESL literacy learners need to be continuously exposed to new vocabulary in order to improve their writing. They have not yet developed the skills to learn from reading so they need to understand the new vocabulary before they are exposed to it in print. This leaves them free to focus on the difficult task of reading. Because ESL literacy learners typically have strong oral strategies, Burgoyne and Hull (2007) propose that instructors "develop a repertoire of oral language teaching techniques which do not rely on written English" (p. 31) and in this way tap into the learners' oral strengths.

It is important for that learning first take place in the oral realm before moving to the written. Holisky (1985) is emphatic that oral language must be taught first: "Always be sure that the students have oral/aural control over the material before introducing the literacy objective... Do not attempt to teach oral and written meanings at the same time" (p. 11). A study into effective reading practices conducted by Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos (2007) supports this. They find that ESL literacy learners with strong oral skills make greater improvements in their reading scores than those with low oral skills. They speculate that the learners who have stronger oral skills are better able to improve their reading scores because "they already knew many of the words and were then able to apply the letter-sound instruction to the words they already had in their vocabulary" (p. 13). Wrigley (2008) supports oral development before written as well: "Expecting students to deal with the dual challenges of learning the meaning of new words and phrases at the same time as trying to understand the relationship between the sounds of a new language and the symbols on the page can be too much of a challenge even for those highly motivated" (p. 3). Throughout the lesson plans Massaro (2004) has developed for ESL literacy learners, she incorporates the teaching of the oral before the written. Vocabulary development is also highlighted in the literature. Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003) suggest that there be explicit and direct vocabulary instruction before learners are expected to read: "When readers struggle with the meanings of individual vocabulary words, they will have difficulties connecting the meanings of words in a sentence or passage" (p. 26). The literature focusing on low level learners emphasizes the importance of oral practice in the form of chanting and singing as a way to both tap into strategies familiar to the learner and increase vocabulary (McPherson, 2007; Achren and Williams, 2006).

Because ESL literacy learners have had limited or interrupted formal education, they may lack many concepts that western society deems to be common knowledge. The Indiana Department of Education (n.d.) state that ESL literacy learners may "lack the background knowledge necessary for understanding texts" (p. 7) so it is important to specifically teach these concepts in the classroom. Background knowledge and concepts can include geography, such as the location of countries in the world; basic science, such as the ability to classify bears as mammals or

recognize that the earth revolves around the sun; world history; and many other areas. Furthermore, they recommend having key concepts on display at all times and “using drawings, diagrams, graphs and other visual aids to help the students to develop concepts and understanding” (p. 8).

Moreover, the literature emphasizes the importance of specifically teaching reading and writing skills to ESL literacy learners. While there is lively debate over the exact method of teaching reading to ESL literacy learners, there is general agreement that the material must be relevant to the learners’ lives and the focus must be on comprehension, or making meaning, rather than on decoding. Although phonics is an important skill that must be taught, current thought agrees that comprehension should be the main focus initially. Wrigley and Guth (1992) state that there is “growing consensus that ‘real life’ reading should be the starting point rather than the ending point of teaching initial literacy and that skills such as phonics should be used as a tool in helping learners understand the ‘print’ they see around them” (p. 10). Bell and Burnaby (1984) also support the importance of meaning-based reading: “What is important is that the student begin with a meaningful text which can later be used for decoding exercises, rather than beginning with individual sounds and later building up to complete sentences” (p. 44). Vinogradov (2008) outlines reading instruction as first finding a meaningful topic to engage the learner, next focusing on the sounds and words, and then going back to the larger text. This is called the whole-part-whole method: “Building reading in emergent readers requires instruction that is both top-down and bottom-up. We cannot expect foundational students to learn within a vacuum of a de-contextualized lesson, nor can we expect these students to acquire alphabetic knowledge by osmosis, without deliberate attention paid to symbols and sounds” (p. 3). Croydon (2005) compares reading to a puzzle where no part has meaning unless it is connected to another part; thus, she believes in using a meaning-based approach with phonics incorporated into it.

The literature approaches learning to write in a similar vein with a general consensus that writing must be personally relevant to the learners and be taught with a drive for meaning. Wrigley and Guth (1992) claim that writing does not have to “wait until a person has mastered the entire alphabet or internalized the writing system...literacy learners are able to write down ideas using their own approximation of letters and words” (p. 10). Bell and Burnaby (1984) explain that writing is made up of several pieces such as format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation and letter formation, and learners are unable to focus on all these simultaneously. Instead, they recommend structuring the writing so that the instructor controls most of these pieces and the learner only has to focus on one or two aspects of the process, such as in a cloze exercise.

Threaded through the literature are many references to the explicit instruction of learning strategies. Because ESL literacy learners have interrupted formal education, they need to be taught to use the strategies that literate learners use automatically. An effective ESL literacy curriculum should include strategy instruction in order to develop reading, writing and metacognition. The CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks,

2000) claims that poor readers are less likely to use reading strategies to enhance their understanding even if they are capable of using them, so the instructor needs to “monitor learners as they use the strategies to ensure they are able to employ them independently” (p. XI). It asserts that learning to use strategies “gives learners a sense of control and independence in their learning” (p. XIII). Further support in the use of strategies is provided by the Indiana Department of Education (n.d.) . They state the importance of explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies and the importance of doing so at the learner’s reading level in order to meet success. Otherwise, they argue, “if students don’t experience successful application of comprehension strategies, they won’t even try to use them with other texts” (p. 8). Leong and Collins (2007) claim that strategies help learners “become more successful in the reading, writing, language learning, and test taking. They help learners become more effective language users and learners both inside and outside the classroom” (p. 125). Leong and Collins (2007) also provide a model of strategy instruction, outlining the steps to explicit strategy instruction. They conclude that in order to be successful, strategy use must be explicitly taught and practiced in the classroom. Another strategy that must be systematically taught is organizing their learning materials. Burgoyne and Hull (2007) note the importance, especially at the higher literacy levels, of instructors devoting “regular class time to teaching learners strategies for organising their learning materials” (p. 30). Bow Valley College (2003) indicates that ESL literacy learners need to develop the skills necessary to learn effectively” (p. 66). The literature strongly supports overt strategy instruction as a fundamental part of reaching this population.

The unique needs of foundational, or pre-literate, learners are the focus of several articles. These are ESL literacy learners who have had no development of literacy whatsoever. Before these learners can begin the onerous task of learning to read and write, they need an opportunity to gain pre-reading and pre-writing skills and concepts. Moore (2007) states that this includes developing “skills for ‘learning how to learn’ and how to build on their knowledge base” (p. 28). Because these learners have never before been to school, some may be totally unfamiliar with the use of line drawings and the mechanics of holding a pencil. To further complicate the learning process, foundational learners often have very limited spoken English. They are indeed a special group of learners and working with them requires a gentle approach and reduced set of expectations. Burgoyne and Hull (2007) stress that they have “very limited spoken English, very little experience in literacy in any language, and very little experience of formal education” (p. 10). With this in mind, they note the importance of predictable routines, a calm and welcoming classroom, and the use of songs and movement for foundational learners. Keeping class size small at this level is crucial (Burgoyne and Hull, 2007; Muir, 2003; Auerbach, 1992; Achren & Williams, 2006). McPherson (2007) argues that the small class size is necessary because in “the initial learning phase these learners need high levels of individualised teacher attention and intervention in order to develop a foundation of learning skills to support formal language learning strategies and to develop foundational literacy skills. Such learning can appear to be slow and painstaking in the early stages” (p. 3).

When working with foundational learners, McPherson (2007) further promotes teaching schedules that intersperse intense periods of literacy work with periods of less intense movement and oral development. Achren and Williams (2006) lament that foundational learners, in particular, lack confidence in a formal classroom learning environment and assert that these learners need “A supportive, appropriately paced learning environment that incorporates strategies for learning in a formal classroom environment” (p. 2). They recommend using teaching methods that establish routines, help them organize their work, and offer scaffolded exercises so that learners can experience success. Since these learners usually have very limited oral English, they further emphasize the importance of oral language development and promote theme teaching that remains on a single theme for an extended period of time, recycling the learning repeatedly.

When teaching ESL literacy learners, there are a variety of approaches and teaching methods examined in the literature including the participatory approach and competency-based method. The LEA assists learners in connecting print with meaning and TPR helps learners in their oral comprehension. Much of the literature points to the importance of the ongoing development of vocabulary, oral fluency, concepts, and strategy development. Finally, the literature addresses the special needs of foundational learners in their quest to gain the background concepts and mechanical skills needed to begin to read and write. As our learners become more proficient in their reading, writing and classroom learning, we need to be able to measure this learning and to teach them to measure it as well.



Assessment is an important component of learning. There are many different types of assessment. Although everyone seems to agree that it is a vital component of any ESL literacy program, there are many ideas about how assessment should be done. Some advocate for rubrics, others self-reflection, and still others portfolio. Wrigley and Guth (1992) note that it is important that “no single measure should serve as the basis for assessing and evaluating all aspects of student ability and learner growth” (p. 126) because sometimes assessment only demonstrates what learners cannot do, rather than what they can do. Leong and Collins (2007) outline the importance of linking assessment directly to instruction and that this linkage be transparent. Foundation Phase to Phase III, as outlined in the CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000), are outcome-based with specific indicators to “help the instructor decide if the learner is able to achieve the outcome” (p. IX). The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2000) stresses the importance of teaching learners to monitor their own learning: “We also need to encourage learners to think about how they learn” (p. XII).

Portfolio assessment is currently popular as a method of self-reflection and, using the CLB framework, Manitoba Labour and Immigration (2004) has developed guidelines on portfolio assessment. While they outline the benefits of using portfolios as assessment tools, they also admit the challenges facing ESL literacy learners who are attempting to use portfolio assessment. Even though portfolio assessment is somewhat teacher-driven initially, they advocate its use because it “is a means through which learners can compile examples of language tasks and document their language learning progress” (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2004, p. 1). Massaro (2004) also advocates the use of both portfolios and checklists to demonstrate learner progress. She states that “by making the review process part of the class routine, the learners learn to understand and appreciate the process” (p. 51).

Florez (1998) advocates for the use of authentic assessment which includes performance-based assessment, learner self-assessment, and portfolios. She argues that these types of assessment are relevant to real life contexts. In addition, authentic assessment provides “a venue to develop self-reflection and self-evaluation skills” (Florez & Terrill, 2003, p. 4). Leong and Collins (2007) cite the use of learner portfolios in the Bridge program at Bow Valley College. This program emphasizes portfolio use and incorporates it into its curriculum: “portfolios are an excellent way for learners to demonstrate progress within the program, show commitment to their studies, and build the confidence necessary to take control of their own learning” (p. 147).

Research by Moore (2007) outlines some of the difficulties associated with assessing foundational learners. One of the difficulties outlined is that the learners feel that assessment is a teacher issue and that it has nothing to do with them. Moore argues that foundational learners are not yet able to use self-reflection for their own learning and instead recommends using a grid

or checklist. Brod (1999) too advocates the use of checklists for literacy learners. She recommends the checklist be “small, explicit, and achievable” (p. 10). Florez and Terrill (2003) capture the essence of assessment, stating that “Learner assessment keeps both the teacher and learners informed of what has been achieved and what still needs work” (p. 5). Ultimately, there are many shapes that assessment can take, but it is imperative that it be directly related to the learning.

## Numeracy

In recent years, numeracy has emerged as an essential component of ESL literacy. Bow Valley College (2002) recommends the inclusion of numeracy in ESL literacy “because without basic number and math skills, individuals with literacy difficulties would find themselves at a disadvantage in many areas of daily life” (p. 18). Kerka (1996) states that numeracy is needed “in many everyday situations—cooking, shopping, crafts, financial transactions, traveling, using VCRs and microwave ovens, interpreting information in the media, taking medications” (p. 1). The CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) incorporates it into all of the literacy Phases except the Foundation Phase. Both the CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) and Kerka (1996) believe that numeracy is best understood if it is learned in familiar contexts, encouraging the instructor to integrate numeracy directly into the relevant curriculum. Bow Valley College (2002) and the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (n.d.) both model the incorporation of numeracy into their themes within the curriculum. Ciancone (1996) emphasizes the importance of incorporating “both the mathematical skills and the language for these skills...into the curriculum in order to prepare the learners to be successful” (p. 4). The Indiana Department of Education (n.d.) also indicates the importance of teaching the specific math vocabulary alongside the math concepts, suggesting various strategies for doing so. As vital as numeracy is to the ESL literacy classroom, there is a very limited amount of literature written on it at this point in time.

## Supporting First Language Literacy

While there are many advocates of developing first language literacy programs, this model is not reflective of the Canadian ESL literacy scene where the typical class includes a diverse group of learners from many countries, all speaking different first languages. Literature on the topic of first language literacy is prolific and the Ontario Literacy Coalition (2007) does a thorough job of providing a literature review this issue. Therefore, because first language literacy as a predominant method of instruction is not a viable option in Canada, this review will focus instead on discussions around the use of periodic first language support, such as that used for

occasional translation or explanation rather than on bilingual ESL literacy instruction as a methodology where much of the literacy learning is done in the learner's first language.

Many studies indicate the importance of having some form of bilingual support within the ESL literacy classroom when direct bilingual instruction is not possible. This bilingual support varies greatly across programs, from having none at all to having access to a bilingual translator once or twice per week. Some classes make use of those learners with higher oral skills to help translate for those with lower oral skills. In research conducted into the use of native language in ESL classes in Australia, Wigglesworth (2005) points out that even when instructors discourage its use, "learners often use their first language actively to help other learners in their classroom" (p. 3) and argues that it allows learners to access different cognitive strategies. Rivera (1990) states that some ESL literacy program have access to bilingual personnel who may be able to "help ESL teachers in and out of the classroom as translators, tutors... and sources of cultural information for teachers to incorporate into ESL literacy lessons" (p. 2). There seems to be a general agreement in the literature that having occasional bilingual support is beneficial to foundational learners. The CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) also acknowledges the role that first language support can play in conceptual development. In Gunn's (2003) work with foundational learners, she suggests having bilingual support for an hour or two each week, in order to provide learners with clarification and encouragement. Although bilingual literacy instruction as a methodology is not a good fit in the typically diverse Canadian ESL classroom, there is a support for having access to occasional bilingual support in the ESL literacy classroom

## Issues and Gaps

In recent years there has been a growing mass of literature written on various aspects of ESL literacy. There are still, however, gaps in the literature. One major gap is the existence of research on becoming literate for the first time in a second language. Most of the research on learning to read in English has been conducted on literate ESL learners, on low literate English speaking adults learning to read in English, or on children learning to read in their first language. Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten (2005) argue that "very little is known about non-literate adults who learn to read and write in a second language" (p. 15) and Burt, Peyton and Schaezel (2008) agree that more "Research is needed to better understand how adult English language learners with limited literacy skills in their native language and little education acquire literacy skills in English" (p. 7). Condelli and Wrigley (2005) also advise that further research be done to find out which specific instructional practices cause ESL literacy learners to improve their reading skills. In the Canadian context, Folinsbee (2007) proclaims that there is "no Canadian research found that shows particular strategies for ESL literacy learning and instruction that lead

to progress and positive outcomes” (p. 25). The Ontario Literacy Coalition (2007) indicates that there are “few longitudinal studies on ESL literacy learners, their classrooms, and their successes/failures” (p. 38). This indicates that more research needs to be done on precisely how ESL literacy learners develop literacy.

A further gap in the literature is the lack of a single, established definition of the ESL literacy learner. Part of this issue is whether or not to include in the definition of ESL literacy the non-Roman alphabet learners who are literate in their first language. This is a grey area in the literature; some researches argue that non-Roman alphabet learners who are literate in their first language can more easily transfer their literacy skills (Wrigley, 2008) while others include non-Roman alphabet learners, literate or not, in a broader definition of ESL literacy (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000). A larger issue, though, is that we need to have a firm grasp on who ESL literacy learners really are. The Centre for Literacy (2008) explains that “Identifying who makes up the ESL Literacy population and how best to teach them are key issues” (p. 10). Folinsbee (2007) stresses that in Canada we do not have a common understanding of who our ESL literacy learners are, nor what skills and knowledge they bring with them. Without a common understanding of who are learners are, it is difficult to meet their needs.

Another gap in the research is identifying to a greater degree of certainty the point at which ESL literacy learners can successfully be integrated into mainstream ESL classes or ABE classes. In other words, how proficient do ESL literacy learners need to be before they can experience success in a mainstream class? The CLB Literacy Document (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000) suggests that the end of Phase III is a time of transition and that this is approximately equal to CLB 5. Yet, learners who have completed Phase III are not always ready to fully participate in a CLB 5 class as they do not necessarily have all the background concepts, strategies, and academic skills necessary to thrive in this mainstream ESL class. A related issue is that many programs require entry benchmarks of CLB 6 or 7, which then prevents the ESL literacy learner who has completed Phase III from being admitted. The research on when an ESL literacy learner is ready for other programming is scant, leaving practitioners unsure at what point the ESL literacy learner becomes a mainstream ESL learner.

There is little published research into how best to teach numeracy in an ESL literacy program, so this is yet another area which needs further exploration. Very little of the current literature deals explicitly with the practical nature of how to teach numeracy in the classroom so this is an further area to be developed in the future.

Thus it is apparent that further research in several areas of ESL literacy could add to our growing knowledge of this area. Research examining precisely how ESL literacy learners first gain literacy skills will enable us to better teach these learners. An established definition of ESL literacy, greater knowledge on when these learners can successfully transition into mainstream

programs, and more on how to best teach numeracy to ESL literacy learners are all areas in need of further exploration in the future.

## Conclusions

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of literature on ESL literacy. This is indicative of the realities of the typical adult Canadian ESL classroom. There have been a growing number of learners in need of ESL literacy support, and the literature reflects this. This review has examined various aspects of this field, beginning with an overview of the many definitions of ESL literacy learners. The review reflects on promising practices in programming, including the importance of having a distinct ESL literacy stream which is apart from the mainstream ESL classes, providing professional development opportunities for the instructors, striving for small classes, and supporting the ESL literacy learner holistically. The literature discusses the importance of continuing to teach vocabulary development, oral fluency, and concept development, while at the same time helping learners develop strategies for reading, writing, and learning. This review also looks at how the literature addresses on-going assessment, foundational learners as a unique group, the role of first language support, and numeracy in the ESL literacy classroom. Finally, the review notes the gaps in the literature, where future research might be directed so that we are better able to serve our growing population of learners with literacy needs.

ESL literacy is an emerging field, and, even though there is a collection of literature already in existence, it is apparent that is an area ripe for future research. As Gunderson (2008) states “there is a need for deep ESL literacy expertise” (p. 250). It is promising to see the recent explosion of ESL literacy research out there.