

# A Guidebook for Volunteers Working with Adult Low-Literacy English Learners

Provided by The Literacy Program Teachers  
at The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.

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## **The Students: Their Learning Profiles and Instructional Needs**

Most of the students have limited or no literacy in their native languages. Many have never had the opportunity to go to school in their countries due to war, illness, the need for child labor, distance from the nearest school, poverty or attitudes toward educating girls.

In addition, the students may have other circumstances that affect their concentration and learning pace such as:

- Problems with visual or auditory processing, memory, attention, etc.
- PTSD from violence or disasters in their native countries
- Stress, depression, anxiety, loss and culture shock from their current situation as immigrants
- Chronic pain or medical conditions that inhibit concentration.

## **Standard ESOL Instruction versus Low-Literacy Instruction**

Standard ESOL instruction is for students who are *already literate* and are learning English. Low-literacy instruction is for students who need to learn both English and literacy.

## **What We Need to Understand about our Students**

### **Adult Literacy Learners**

What has become automatic to us (reading English) involves many discrete processes working simultaneously, for example:

- Visual recognition of letters
- Visual processing of letter sequences in words
- Recognition of individual letter sounds
- Association of letters with sounds
- Association of written words with meaning

The development of literacy affects the way the brain organizes information and thereby influences neural circuitry. To quote Robin Schwartz, "Adults who are not

literate are not just learning a new writing system; **they are learning a new way of thinking.**"

→ For more insight on emerging literacy in adults, see ←  
Robin Schwartz's website at <http://robinsadultesl.com>.

### Adult English Learners

Adult English learners face many challenges.

#### English Sounds:

The sounds of our language are hardwired in the adult brains. Recognizing and producing new sounds is a task that involves our ears, the muscles in our vocal organs (tongue, lips, throat, jaw), and all the neural pathways involved in hearing, understanding and speaking.

The infant brain is very quick. In a very short period of time, an infant learns to recognize native language sounds and to discriminate among them. All sounds extraneous to the native language become background noise. English speakers easily distinguish between "pat" and "pot" but may not hear the difference between the Spanish "r" and "rr", or between the double and single "l" in the Finnish words "veli" (brother) and "velli" (porridge). We don't hear these differences because they aren't relevant to English.

Likewise, because Spanish doesn't contain the short "a" sound in "pat", Spanish speakers don't hear the difference between "pat" and "pot". In fact, English has many more vowel sounds than most European languages. Trying to hear the difference among the following words is a nightmare for most adult English learners: Pete, pit, pet, pat, pot, putt, put / pan, pen, pin / lick, leak / lock, luck.

#### English Grammar:

In addition to the sounds of English, the grammar can be very confusing. Asking a question is relatively simple in many languages, whereas a whole assortment of

"helping verbs" are required to form correct questions in English: do, does, did, will, don't, doesn't, didn't, won't.

Or consider the three functions of the final "s" in "Jack's<sup>1</sup> father likes<sup>2</sup> apples<sup>3</sup>."

1. Possessive noun: Jack's
2. Third person singular form of the verb: likes
3. Plural noun: apples

### English Spelling:

Archaic spelling: night, right, brought, thought, etc.

Homophones: to, two, too; by, bye, buy; etc.

Terminology: "Long vowels" are not actually longer than "short vowels".  
Use of these terms can be confusing.

Names of vowels: The names of vowels are the same or similar among most European languages. However the English names for the vowels "a", "e" and "i" are unique.

### Conclusion

Learning a new language as an adult is a difficult task and for adults with no previous literacy, it's immensely challenging. Throw in the other factors that impact learning, mentioned above, and you can appreciate just how courageous these people are and how difficult their task is. Always keep this in mind as you work with them -- it will help you cultivate patience.

### **Essential Qualities of a Literacy Assistant**

Respect: Your students are mature, talented, intelligent adults.

Patience: Imagine learning to read Chinese or Arabic.

Compassion: Their path is not easy.

Sensitivity: They may not be accustomed to our culture.

Humility: Teaching low-literacy adults from other cultures is more challenging and entirely different from teaching elementary school, high school or university level English. We all have a lot to learn about teaching these students.

## The Role of a Volunteer Literacy Assistant

The role of volunteers is to facilitate the students' learning. This is done not through teaching, explaining or lecturing, but through modeling the language and encouraging the students' participation.

**Learning from Your Role Model:** Your role models are experienced teachers. They will limit lessons to what students can absorb at one time. They will work slowly and repeat often. Observe them carefully.

- What do they do?
- How do they do it? What methods? What sequence of steps?
- What do they avoid doing?

You will be given oral instructions, written instructions or a demonstration of how to work with the students. Carefully follow the guidelines. Do not improvise and always ask questions if you are in doubt about anything. It's better to interrupt than to proceed the wrong way.

Do not exceed the instructions. There are reasons for the limits. If the beginning level teacher introduces for example, "red, yellow, blue" please don't introduce additional colors.

Don't rush them. Work at the students' pace. It's important to understand that a lesson plan is not meant to be finished by the end of the day. A lesson can continue for two days or a week. Let the students set the pace -- give them the time they need.

### General Principles

- Focus on only one concept at a time.
- Use small steps.
- Avoid use of grammar terminology unless instructed to use it.
- Don't underestimate the value of repetition.
- Remain patient. If you become impatient, you increase the student's anxiety. If a student just isn't catching on, take a break and consult the teacher about an alternative approach.

- In groups, use gentle humor to remind students to pay attention and stay on task. Don't take anything personally and don't reprimand them as you would children. Remind them that their job and yours is easier if they listen carefully.

**Writing:** When writing, always use proper capitalization and punctuation. Do not write in all capital letters. Always model correct writing. Avoid cursive writing and try to write as neatly as possible.

**Conversation:** If you are helping a student with conversation, be a good listener. Give students time to get their thoughts organized and to find the right words. Don't finish their sentences for them. If conversation (not accuracy) is the goal, don't make corrections. Try to draw out each student and don't let the chatty students dominate the conversation. Use simple language and short sentences. Enunciate clearly. Speak slowly. Rephrase sentences they have trouble understanding.

**Cultural Sensitivity:**

- Avoid personal questions and physical contact.
- Avoid showing cultural bias or making cultural assumptions. For example, don't assume that Muslim women are forced to wear headscarves. We may have many erroneous assumptions about other cultures.
- In a group, don't refer to students as "bright, sharp, smart." This can be seen as a comparison to other students. Also don't discuss learning disabilities with students; in some cultures a learning disability is equated with lack of intelligence.
- Avoid giving personal advice or counseling. If a student needs help, please inform the teacher, and we will refer them for assistance by qualified personnel. As much as we are all well intentioned and care about the students, even experienced teachers can mistakenly give inappropriate advice.

**Remember: Patience, patience, patience. Anxiety inhibits learning. Always help students feel comfortable and safe.**

## **Responsibilities of Immigrant Learning Center Volunteers**

All volunteers should sign in and out in the office. Please arrive on time. If you will be late or absent, contact the school as soon as possible so we can plan accordingly. Your contributions are important and we rely on you being able to adhere to your schedule. If you need to change your schedule, just let us know.

**If you are given a lesson plan**, take your time to read through the instructions carefully. If you don't understand something, please ask the teacher to clarify. It takes time to write up the instructions, and the teachers have specific reasons for what they do and how they do it. PLEASE ASK IF YOU HAVE ANY CONFUSION and follow the plan unless explicitly told otherwise. It's counterproductive when volunteers change lesson plans. If something is not working, please give the students a break so you can consult the teacher. At the end of the period, mark the point where you left off.

## **School Policies**

Students may not be absent more than seven times a session.

Students are expected to arrive on time for class. Please let us know about students who habitually arrive late.

Cell phones are to be turned off during class time. Please remind students of this at the beginning of class and after break time. (If a student is expecting a call from a doctor, for example, he or she should notify you ahead of time.)

Students should refrain from speaking their native languages except during break time. Occasional native language interpreting may be done if necessary but should be discouraged in general.

The ILC follows the Malden Public Schools with respect to school cancellation for inclement weather.

Distribution of religious material is not allowed in the school.

## Literacy Program Volunteer Agreement

Working with adult ESOL low-literacy students is a very rewarding but challenging task that not everyone can master. It requires great patience, restraint and the will to view the learning challenge through their eyes. This is not easy and despite the best intentions, not everyone can become an effective volunteer in this program.

The initial training is followed by a trial period during which you will work with students under the guidance and supervision of a head teacher. The teacher will meet with you to give you feedback and suggestions. The length of the trial period depends on how many days a week you volunteer and how often the teacher is able to observe and meet with you. After this period, we will be able to determine if this type of work is suitable for you.

We will count on you to be here the days and times you have agreed to. If you need to be late or absent, you need to notify the office as soon as possible so that we can plan accordingly. The school phone number is 781-322-9777.

Please give us the following contact information so we can contact you about upcoming workshops and special events.

Print your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Write the days you will volunteer: \_\_\_\_\_

Write the hours you will volunteer: \_\_\_\_\_

Some teachers have classroom celebrations of birthdays. If you'd like to inform us of your birthday, you may write it here. \_\_\_\_\_

Please sign and date below to confirm that you understand and agree to the volunteer trial training program.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

