

# **Maestra! The letters speak: Understanding the needs of low literacy learners**

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# U.S. Literacy Facts\*

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- 14% of U.S. adults over 16 read at or below fifth grade
- 43% of adults with low literacy skills live in poverty
- 75% of state prison inmates did not complete high school or can be classified as low-literacy adults
- Patients with low literacy skills have a 50% increased risk of hospitalization

\**[www.proliteracy.org](http://www.proliteracy.org)*

# Characteristics of low-literacy learners

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- Learn through speaking and listening
- Recognize the meaning of pictures and symbols used in everyday life
- Possess strong memorization strategies
- Focus more on meaning in language learning, not form
- Have interrupted or limited formal schooling
- May hide low print literacy
- Strengths that adult ELLs bring to the learning process include funds of knowledge and strong oral communication skills

# What we know about literacy

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- Reading is a skill that you learn to do only once
- L1 literacy shapes one's thinking and facilitates the use of learning strategies
- Literacy includes numeracy
- There is more than one type of literacy
- Students can be preliterate, nonliterate and semiliterate, non-alphabet literate, non-roman alphabet literate, roman alphabet literate

# What does research say about teaching low literacy adult learners?

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- Whole  
(shopping unit)

Whole : Reading about shopping

Part

shoes, shirt, cash

Wash, shop

\*Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos (2007)

# Five Guiding principles

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- 1. *Contextualized Instruction:*

Contextualize ideas, initial print must be supported by pictures from magazines, family photographs, and pictures drawn by learners. By starting with the images, concepts, words, and expressions that are familiar to the learners, rather than with the alphabet.

Include: Problem solving, categorizing and sorting information, include vocabulary connected to job related area or life skill.

# A Balanced Approach

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## *2. Go up and down the ladder:*

**Top down instruction** begins with meaning, and gradually moves to print knowledge.

Students actively construct meaning by discussing their own previous experiences related to the text.

**Bottom-up instruction**, begins with the text and builds its way to meaning. It is more focused on the text itself, building decoding (sounding-out) skills, learning patterns of sounds, syllables, and word families in order to eventually construct meaning from texts.

### 3. Provide a Buffet of Learning Opportunities

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- Activities for different learning styles and multiple intelligences

Language Experience Approach (learner's self generated texts)

Sequencing a story, recreating the story word by word, typing the whole story and cutting out sentence by sentence, circling words that are repeated in the story, creating opportunities for word recognition strategies (flyswatter game)

Same or different activities: Shirt and Skirt

Blending words /s//h/ /o/ /p/

## 4. Tap into Strengths

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- Emergent readers are often defined in terms of what they lack: formal schooling, L1 literacy, print awareness, etc.
- Emergent readers often have more developed listening and speaking skills and this fact is a tremendous resource for literacy teachers
- ‘Whether it is music, gardening, cooking, automotive repair, child rearing, soccer, or something else entirely, effective literacy-focused lessons can be created within any context. The key is to keep listening to your students and to find the themes and strengths that they bring with them to class.’ (Weinstein, 1999).

## 5. Nurture Learners' Confidence

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- Older, struggling English learners often lack confidence. They may not see themselves as capable. They may not understand how schools work, or they may have concluded that schooling does not offer them any benefits.

Emergent readers need:

- ✓ a wide variety of reading texts
- ✓ Time and opportunity to practice
- ✓ work on reading fluency, to gain confidence in their ability to read
- ✓ Repetition is key