ESL and Literacy:
Finding Common Ground, Serving Learners' Needs

A Survey of the Literature

by

The Centre for Literacy

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PREFACE

This survey of the literature was originally produced for The Centre for Literacy's 2008 Summer Institute, *ESL and Literacy: Finding Common Ground, Serving Learners' Needs* that took place in Montreal June 26-28, 2008. It has been revised for publication.

The survey is not exhaustive, but brings together the main themes of research conducted on the topic of "ESL literacy" in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom in the past decade.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A NOTE ON TERMS

Although we use the term "English as a Second Language" (ESL) in this paper, this is not a universally accepted term. In the UK, writers use "ESOL" (English for Speakers of Other languages). Recently, some writers have been using the term "English as an Additional Language" (EAL), which is arguably more accurate. We have chosen to use "ESL" because it is still the term most commonly used in the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Immigrants form an important and growing part of the Canadian population. Governments recognize the need to help new immigrants integrate into Canadian society by learning to speak either English or French, and therefore offer or support language training programs. The federal government, through the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, runs the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada Program (LINC). However, three Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, and Quebec), provide their own programs in lieu of LINC, and Quebec supports only the learning of French. Provinces and territories also have programs to provide access to English (or French) as a Second Language courses.

Despite all these programs, figures from the 2003 *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey* (IALSS) suggest that language training efforts have so far been insufficient and that immigrants, even when relatively well-educated, continue to face greater literacy challenges than do native-born Canadians.

According to the *IALSS*, 42% of adult Canadians 65 years and under scored below Level 3 in prose literacy, which is considered to be the level at which one can deal with the demands of a knowledge society. If we split this group into native-born Canadians and immigrants, the native-born rate is 37% versus 60% for the immigrant population. Furthermore, 37% of immigrants scored at Level 1 (the lowest level) – double the proportion of those among the native-born population ("International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey", *The Daily,* November 9, 2005).

A difference in scores is seen even among university-educated immigrants. Whereas 2% of the university-educated Canadian-born scored at Level 1 prose literacy proficiency, 18% of recent immigrants scored at this level (ibid.).

This literature review looks at the segment of the immigrant population who are not literate in their native language, and who may require some combination of ESL and literacy education, or "ESL literacy" education. The literature reviewed includes discussions on definitions of literacy and who is an ESL literacy learner. It addresses issues such as the training and working conditions of teachers, instructional strategies, assessment, and policy.

The Scope of Materials Consulted

The print material consulted for this review was provided by The Centre for Literacy. From their website (www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca), the reviewer used links to other organizations, including the National Adult Literacy Database (www.nald.ca), the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (www.language.ca), LINCS (www.nifl.gov/lincs), the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (www.cal.org/caela/) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)(www.niace.org.uk). The reviewer concentrated on documents that addressed both ESL and Literacy. Papers that had only a peripheral concern with either topic are not included in this review.

What is Literacy?

The literature suggests that to date literacy is a concept with many definitions and categories, and there is no consensus on definition. A state of the field study published in 2006 by the Canadian Council on Learning (Quigley, Folinsbee & Kraglund-Gauthier), reviews various definitions used by agencies and organizations in Canada and in other industrialized countries. The most influential current definition in the industrialized world is the one used in the *International Adult Literacy and Skills* which 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" (Statistics Canada and OECD, 2005, p. 280). Many Canadian literacy organizations use the IALS definition, or a variation of it (Quigley, Folinsbee & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006). Since IALS is now the major official source of data on literacy in Canada, even organizations that have not necessarily adopted this definition still use it to some extent.

However, this definition is not universally accepted – many organizations prefer to use a broader definition. The Centre for Literacy, for example, defines literacy in relation to social and cultural context – what literacy means for a particular individual or community depends both on the demands made of them by the cultural context and on the social needs within that context (see www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca). The Ontario Literacy Council and the NWT Literacy Council (2005) are among other Canadian organizations that emphasize the cultural aspects of literacy (Quigley, Folinsbee & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006).

This aspect is discussed by Jill Sinclair Bell (1995) in her paper "The Relationship between L1 and L2 Literacy". While learning to be literate in Chinese script, Bell found that Chinese literacy meant something different from English literacy. Her Chinese literacy teacher stressed the importance of calligraphy, the need to proceed very slowly – perfecting one character before moving to the next (in Chinese, writing is an art.). Bell also observed a difference in learning styles: learning Chinese, she was expected to observe and digest, rather than analyse and comment. To Bell, this experience suggested that literacy is not 'neutral', but affected by class, gender, culture, ideology and ethnicity.

In their report *Adult ESL language and literacy instruction,* the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, 2000) goes further, including in their definition the ability to use technology effectively in both an educational and work setting:

> Literacy involves more than the ability to communicate effectively; it includes as well the ability to advocate on behalf of ourselves, our families, and our communities and to use technology effectively for education and work, in whatever languages are appropriate for the task and the purpose (p. 6)

Expanding the definition to include technology raises the stakes considerably. It requires that literacy learners, including ESL literacy learners, be given access to computers and computer training as part of their education and their work preparation.

Who is an "ESL Literacy Learner"?

There is no commonly accepted answer to this question. "ESL literacy" is a concept that is even more difficult to define than "literacy". Furthermore, we know very little about the learners themselves. In a 2007 discussion paper for the Movement for Canadian Literacy, Sue Folinsbee (2007) affirms that "Overall, there is not a complete or common understanding of who might be considered an ESL literacy learner." Furthermore:

> "Nor is there is systematic, detailed, and formalized knowledge about immigrants and refugees with low education and literacy in their own language in Canada. (…) Overall, we do not know what literacy skills and learning strategies people bring in their own language. We do not know the proportion of those immigrants and refugees who have high oral skills in English or French but limited literacy skills. Additionally, the particular needs of refugees with ESL literacy needs are not reflected in the literature." *(*Folinsbee, p.12*)*

In the literature, individuals are generally categorized as ESL literacy learners based on level of education and native language alphabet. However, the designation is defined differently by various organizations or researchers. Florenz and Terrill (2003) define a literacy-level learner as a person with 6 or fewer years of education in their native country. They also place people into six groups, depending on their native tongue:

- Pre-literate (the learner's native language has no writing system)
- Non-literate (the learner cannot read the native language)
- Semi-literate (the learner's reading abilities are minimal)
- Non-alphabet literate (the learner can read a non-alphabetic language)
- Non-Roman alphabet language literate (the learner can read a language that has a non-Roman alphabet writing system)
- Roman alphabet language literate

The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2000) include in the category of "ESL literacy learner" people with up to eight years of schooling who have not acquired "study skills" and may have "preconceived notions of reading and writing that may hinder progress in the class" and anyone who comes from a country with a non-Roman alphabet

whether or not they are literate in their first language (p. ii). By contrast, the U.S. organizations The National Center for Family Literacy and The National Center for ESL Literacy Education at the Center for Applied Linguistics (2004) exclude those who are literate in a non-Roman alphabet, on the grounds that such learners know that written language represents speech, which is a necessary piece of prior knowledge for second language acquisition, and so are able to transfer their skills and adapt more quickly.

Placement and Assessment Tools

Placement of learners with ESL literacy needs is a recurring topic. Studies ask to what extent they are being placed in inappropriate classes, and why. The literature suggests that a good assessment process, which looks at listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is the basis for placing the learner in an appropriate program. However, it is generally agreed that there are currently no ideal assessment tools for ESL or for ESL literacy. Standardized tests, which have school-based formats, may not be appropriate for people with little schooling (Barton and Pitt, 2003). Often, students are assessed only on their English proficiency; however, The National Center for Family Literacy and The National Center for ESL Literacy Education at the Center for Applied Linguistics(2004) argue that first language literacy should also be considered. (IV–9)

Most studies included in-depth discussion on their assessment of subjects. The frequently cited U.S. study *"What Works" Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students* aimed to provide a profile of ESL literacy students and identify best practices for teaching them. One of the main challenges was to "select and develop assessments to measure the English reading and writing skills of the students in the study." (Condelli & Wrigley, 2003, p.114). For example, to measure speaking and listening, they needed an assessment tool which would not require that the student be able to read.

Teachers

"Adult literacy students often identify their teachers as instrumental to their learning." (Cronin, Silver-Pacuilla H., Condelli, p. 32). Yet the literature suggests that ESL literacy teachers are often poorly paid, work part-time in crowded classrooms without suitable instructional materials and receive little or no professional development (Cronin, Silver-Pacuilla and Condelli, Condelli, Wrigley, 2003; Jangles Productions, 2006; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007). Receiving ESL certification does not mean that an instructor has had any literacy training. There is little formal acknowledgment that ESL literacy is a separate field or that teachers need specific training to do their job (Jangles Productions, 2006; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007). A 2007 study on ESL literacy in Ontario by the Ontario Literacy Coalition, reports that:

> The instructors emphasized that there is little formal ESL literacy training when obtaining their ESL certification and few opportunities for professional development afterwards…. there is a lack of suitable instructional materials that [are] specifically related to ESL

literacy students in a Canadian context. The OLC study indicated that a great deal of time is needed to prepare lessons and materials for ESL literacy learning. (Folinsbee, p. 30)

In 2000, TESOL stated that the field needs staff who are both highly qualified and adequately compensated, whose salaries and benefits are on a par with K-12 teachers, and who get paid preparation and professional development time. Millar (2008) found in analysing a set of case studies from across Canada that "[t]he most successful teachers were trained and experienced in both language and literacy education, adapted their curriculum as needed, and were culturally aware." (p. 103)

Instructional Strategies

There is a lack of research into ESL pedagogy for adults; however, the discussions of effective pedagogical practices that do occur emphasize the complex and multifaceted nature of ESL learning processes. They suggest that a multifaceted teaching approach is therefore required to accommodate different learner backgrounds, interests, learning styles and literacy levels. Most authors cite the *What Works* Study, which concluded that three instructional strategies were instrumental in improving literacy and language development (Condelli & Wrigley, 2003):

- connection to the outside world;
- use of the student's native language for clarification in instruction;
- varied practice and interaction.

"Connection to the outside world" means bringing in content such as flyers, government communiqués, utility bills and the like. This kind of material contains information of practical interest and importance to the learner. TESOL (2000) recommends that the curriculum be "aligned with what adult English language learners need to know and be able to do." They also suggest involving community resources and groups in ESL programs.

"Use of native language for clarification" is often cited as a positive measure. If instructions are given to students in their native tongue, they are able to focus on the task, and not be stressed over whether or not they have understood the directions correctly. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2000) suggests using the learners' first language for conceptual work.

"Varied practice and interaction", the third strategy, refers to using multiple modes of teaching. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2000) says:

> "Many ESL Literacy learners prefer "experiential" learning and so the connection to real life in both content and skills developed in the classroom is important. As much as possible, think about the real-life applications of any skills you plan to cover." (p.xii)

Another study as yet unpublished that deals with instructional methods is the *Explicit Literacy Impact Study* (Cronin, Silver-Pacuilla, Condelli). This study examines the effectiveness of an "explicit literacy intervention" targeted to ESL students with low

literacy levels. Explicit instruction differs from implicit in that the "rules" (and the exceptions) of the language are taught explicitly instead of being "implied" in the teaching. The authors believe that this approach holds promise for learners, although there has been no supporting research. As complicating factors, they note that different first languages present different challenges, and that there is lack of professional development and no reliable assessment tool. The research paper, "An Evaluation of the Impact of Explicit Literacy Instruction on Adult ESL Learners" was not available at the time of writing.

Another question on instructional strategy is whether first language literacy helps or hinders the ESL Literacy learner. Will it lead to more successful outcomes if the student first becomes literate in their native language, or might it make second language acquisition more of a challenge?

The answer to these questions is…maybe. It depends on what the first language is. Barton and Pitt (2003) note both the potential and the difficulties:

> A study was done in the United States, where learners were first taught literacy in their native tongue (either Haitian Creole or Spanish), and then switched to transitional bilingual ESL classes. The report recommended that students first gained literacy in their native language. However, this is a logistically difficult approach. (p.18)

Barton and Pitt mention favourable outcomes when teaching first language literacy, but also quote Bell's paper where, based on the author's experience of learning Chinese, she disputes the global belief that:

> learners who are literate in their native language generally make better progress than those without native language literacy…the relationship between first and second literacies is highly complex, so that not all aspects of the L1 will necessarily aid the development of L2. (pp. 687-688)

Bell says that studies done on the transfer of literacy have focused on children, or have involved learners where both L1 and L2 are European languages. She uses her experience in learning to be literate in Chinese script to suggest that literacy in one language or culture cannot necessarily be assumed to be helpful in developing literacy in another.

Some of the case studies presented by Millar also illustrate "… the complexity of helping students to use their analysis of their mother tongue to learn English." (p. 106). One student felt that because the orthography of her first language was so different from English, it did not help her. A Chinese student not only had a very different alphabet, but also mentioned that she thought in Chinese, and needed to translate. This student had the same experience as Bell – the cultural differences add a layer of complexity to the learning experience.

Policy Issues

Jurisdiction

In the countries studied it has fallen upon government to create the funding and regulatory infrastructure to provide education for ESL literacy learners. Several government departments are potentially involved – typically Immigration and/or Education, but sometimes also Employment. In Canada, this jurisdictional ambiguity is further complicated by the federal system where language training for immigrants is a federal concern (except in Quebec), while education is provincial.

In reality, there is no standard national program in Canada to provide language training to newly arrived immigrants. The Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada Program (LINC) is a federal government program, but British Columbia, Manitoba and Quebec have their own programs in lieu of LINC. Quebec only supports immigrants' learning in French. Quebec's policy of francization complicates the possibility of a coherent pan-Canadian policy on language training. Nevertheless, the issue of second-language literacy obviously also affects the teaching of FSL.

The complexities of federalism also play a role in the United States. Adult ESL classes are offered through the adult education system, private language schools, community and volunteer literacy organizations, notes the National Center for ESL Literacy Education. (2003):

> The field is highly decentralized by nature. States and individual non-federally funded programs make programming decisions independently. This makes the creation of an effective common infrastructure to support program work more difficult. (p. 14)

Even in the United Kingdom, where the Skills for Life policy attempts to provide a coherent national policy governing adult literacy and ESOL provision, it does not apply to Scotland – the Scottish Executive has its own policy.

Curriculum

Among the countries covered by this review (Canada, the U.S. and the U.K.), only the U.K. has standardized curricula for adult literacy and adult ESL, although, as mentioned earlier, Scotland is exempt. The Skills for Life policy introduced a standard ESL core curriculum for England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2001. According to a recent study, because adult literacy programs are usually specific to the learner, and ESL courses are considered more of a group teaching experience, "research into classroom practice in the U.K. is needed to investigate how the two educational practices are being brought together successfully to support the learner." (Barton and Pitt, p. 21)

Funding

The papers that address funding issues state or imply that the field of ESL literacy is under-funded, calling for more investment in assessment, teacher training and professional development, best practices, demographic studies, classroom materials, class aides, day care, and more free classes (Folinsbee, 2007; Jangles Productions, 2006; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; TESOL, 2000).

For example, TESOL (2000) calls for programs to have "adequate resources to provide the salaries, benefits, working conditions, and paid professional development for their staff; financial assistance for learners…and appropriate and innovative technology for instruction."(p.13) They also suggest that money be invested in research to study such things as program design, best practices, desired educational outcomes and the success or failure of programmes.

On the other hand, it is difficult to find actual figures on funding levels for "ESL literacy" although one can find figures in some jurisdictions for ESL and for literacy separately. For instance in England and Wales funding has been substantially increased for both ESL and literacy in recent years. The *More Than a Language* report (NIACE, 2006) indicates that "very substantial public resources" were going to ESL by 2003-04. Funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) increased from £170 million to £279 million between 2001-02 and 2003-04. Yet it cannot indicate how much of that went to teach ESL learners at the most basic levels of literacy. It does find evidence that, in at least some parts of the country, the teaching of ESL learners at the lowest literacy levels is given low funding priority, partly because the progress of those at higher levels counts as success in the national targets system.

Problems in the field suggest either a lack of resources or badly allocated resources, but until we have figures on how much funding is actually allocated to the specific area of ESL literacy, we cannot know whether programs require substantially more funds, or better use of existing funds, or both.

Accessibility

Access is a recurrent topic of discussion. Who provides what classes, and what funding is available for the students? In England there is a debate over the rules on who gets charged fees and who does not – currently immigrants below a certain level of English language literacy and refugees are eligible for free classes, but the increase in demand for ESL classes prompted the government to consider tightening the rules (NIACE, 2006). The authors of *More Than a Language* recognized the need to restrict access to free ESL classes in order to keep ESL programs sustainable in the face of growing demand, but recommended that a core of free provision be retained and that assistance be provided to maintain access for those in financial need.

In Canada, those eligible for LINC (or for equivalent provincial programs in British Columbia and Manitoba) can take up to three years of free ESL courses. However, many

people do not meet the eligibility requirements. People are sometimes unable to attend programs due to a lack of funds to pay for the course itself, day care, or transportation. Folinsbee (2007) recommends that immigrants should be offered adequate social support so that they can attend classes.

A further issue is the availability of programs. The only class offered might not suit the learner's needs – especially in less populated areas. This means that ESL literacy students often end up in an ESL class unsuited to those with low levels of literacy, or perhaps a literacy class for English speakers. Students who should join ESL or ABE courses may end up in literacy classes. Folinsbee (2007) states that:

> "…there is a policy gap for those adults with low literacy and education in their first language who do not meet LINC requirements and may have been in Canada a long time. They may bounce back and forth between ESL and literacy programs or end up in the wrong program. There is also a geographical inequity where there are fewer relevant programs for the range of ESL needs in rural areas. In these cases, adults with ESL oral needs or high education in their own language may end up in literacy programs. Ultimately, this policy gap leads to a situation where these adults do not have equal access to services they need or they may get services that do not meet their needs." (p.38)

ESL and Literacy

ESL literacy, by definition, lies at the meeting point of the ESL and literacy fields. Does there need to be a clear borderline between those fields, or should it be porous and ambiguous? Folinsbee found that people involved in the field in Canada wanted public policy to recognize that ESL and literacy are connected, wanted an 'integrated policy framework' that:

> "recognizes and addresses the need for second language literacy for adults who have low literacy and education in their first language. This recognition includes the fact that second language speakers with low literacy in their first language are attending mainstream literacy programs. "(p.33)

According to Folinsbee, they would like policy that recognizes the connections between ESL and literacy and that enables different ministries and jurisdictions to work together "to address the range of needs including those in rural and remote areas". This suggests that the distinctions between ESL and literacy are necessarily ambiguous, but the points of connection between them need to be made clearer in order to better meet the needs of ESL literacy learners.

Reporting on an exploratory study of learner placement practices in the U.K., Simpson, Cook and Baynam (2008) find that learners tend to be placed in either the ESL *or* Literacy stream, without recognition of the complexities of many learners' needs that are to be found in the fuzzy borderline:

> (T)he boundary between ESOL and literacy is not clear-cut, and…the range of learning needs encompassed by the two subject areas is more complex than a rigid distinction can allow for" (p.5)

What We Don't Know About ESL Literacy Learners…and About ESL Literacy

Identifying who makes up the ESL Literacy population and how best to teach them are key issues addressed in many papers. The Ontario Literacy Coalition (2007) recommends using more precise immigration intake data and census taking data collection in order to better identify literacy levels among newcomers. In a similar vein, Barton and Pitt (2003) feel that in Britain, there is not enough information about who ESOL learners are and would like to see better identification and tracking of progress.

What emerges from this review is how little we know specifically about ESL literacy and those who may need a specialized form of instruction. This seems to be due to the amorphous nature of the field itself – existing in a grey area between two fields (ESL and literacy) that tend to operate under different certification, funding and policy frameworks. We do not even know if "ESL literacy" is best thought of as a "field" in its own right or as the intersection of two fields. We do not know how many classes currently offered in each of the two domains actually provide appropriate ESL instruction; nor do we know how many learners in these two domains should be receiving such instruction but are not, although the small body of research suggests that there are many.

The gaps in our knowledge will only be filled as recognition grows within the ESL and literacy fields, and among policymakers, that a group of immigrants exists who need both ESL and literacy training and when the issue is addressed more coherently through policy, program and research.

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