

# LEARNING PRINCIPLES

## **Introduction**

Language and literacy development are complex processes that cannot be reduced to a single set of skills to be acquired through memorization and practice. If adults are to learn to communicate, solve problems, and write and read more widely, they need extensive opportunities to use different modes of learning and engage in a variety of tasks that are both meaningful and cognitively challenging. They also need a chance to process ideas by reflecting on them and by discussing them with others. They must see the connection between the skills to be acquired and the tasks they are trying to accomplish in their daily lives. Finally, adult learners must have occasion to say what they feel and want to say (in oral communication and in writing) in a supportive environment that encourages experimentation, so they gain both the confidence and competence to continue learning on their own.

This section represents key aspects of what we know about second language acquisition and literacy development for both native speakers and immigrants learning English. We hope that the principles will encourage developers to consider the underlying concepts that govern learning, while the learning opportunities will suggest activities and task that keep adults actively involved in the learning process. Later versions of this document, revised after input from the field, will include examples of tasks and activities that operationalize these learning opportunities.

## **Principles**

1. Adult learners are goal driven.
2. Language and literacy are social processes that involve interaction with others.
3. Language and literacy development require risk taking.
4. Language and literacy develop when the target language is slightly above the current level of proficiency of the user.
5. Language and literacy development require focus, engagement and practice.
6. Language and literacy are multi-dimensional and require different kinds of interactions with different kinds of genres.
7. Language and literacy develop through interactions with tasks that require cognitive involvement.
8. Language and literacy develop more deeply if skills are connected to an overall topic or theme.

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## 1. ADULT LEARNERS ARE GOAL DRIVEN.

Adult learners are not much interested in learning for learning sake. They get involved in education in order to improve their skills in specific areas (to read and write better, to finally learn to spell, to communicate in English, to build their vocabulary). And they come to education with a purpose in mind (to get a better job, to help their children with their home work, to deal more effectively with the health care system or the police, or to hold their own in conversations with neighbors or co-workers). Adults look for materials that reflect real life challenges that advance them toward these goals. In addition, most adults learn best if the knowledge, skills, and strategies to be acquired are linked to real life contexts that either mirror their own circumstances or illustrate a reality that they would like to know.

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- explore and discuss where they are in their learning, where they would like to be and what keeps them from getting there.
- identify short term and long term goals; overarching and specific.
- self-assess current knowledge and skills and evaluate progress.
- be both challenged and supported as they try to upgrade their skills and acquire new strategies.

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## **2. Language and literacy are social processes that benefit from interaction with others.**

Reading, writing, and spoken language represent communication among people (and sometimes with the self). Language and literacy grow as learners gain experience in expressing their ideas and communicating with others. Skills get refined through a process of discussion and reflection. In life, language and literacy are often assisted and mediated activities, as forms and applications are filled out jointly, friends and children translate for immigrants and as “literacy brokers” assist others in dealing with paper work.

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- process information by talking about ideas and discussing them with others.
- think about how they learn, what helps them and what gets in the way.
- get meaningful feedback from both peers and those who are more expert.
- see how others similar to themselves deal with challenges.
- observe someone more experienced tackle tasks.
- work in groups where they learn collaboratively and be a resource to others.

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### **3. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT REQUIRE HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND RISK TAKING.**

Acquiring another language and mastering the writing process requires hypothesis testing and risk taking. While discovering how language works, learners must generate their own notions of rules and principles since it is not possible to acquire all the words and structures one might need to communicate through memorization. Similarly, reading and listening comprehension are not accomplished through the mere identification of individual words and phrases, but require a certain amount of guessing so that the overall meaning of a message can emerge. Since language and literacy development require communication with others and interaction with print, learners must be willing to engage in these processes, even if it means using imperfect language forms to start. As a result, errors in grammar are likely, misspellings may abound and whatever language is generated is likely to represent only approximations of standard English.

#### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- see language as a system and discover patterns.
- generate their own rules of how language works.
- speak and write spontaneously even at very low levels of proficiency.
- guess what a text (oral or written) might be all about based on background knowledge, context, and what they know about the language.
- get their point across (in listening and speaking) as best as they can without being immediately corrected.
- see how well they can do in authentic situations even with limited skills.
- use language and literacy in a supportive environment that encourages experimentation.

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## 4. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LEVELS ARE NOT CONSTANT.

Language and literacy learners who fall into similar levels of proficiency are often quite different in terms of the tasks they are able to handle. In reality each group, whether designated as beginning, intermediate, or advanced, is multi-level when it comes to dealing with different kinds of language and literacy challenges. In fact, individual learners have multiple levels of language and literacy skills as well, and most are clearly better able to deal with some tasks than others. Background knowledge of the topic, and experience with how things work influence competence in handling particular challenges and even tasks that seem doable on one day, may provide difficulty on others.

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- work with different types of texts (oral and written) created at different levels.
- deal with challenging materials that they find interesting and compelling although it appears to be above their level of proficiency.
- work with tasks and materials that take advantage of their background knowledge.
- tackle a wide range of tasks, so that both boredom and frustration are minimized.
- recognize that skills they have mastered in a lesson might still be difficult to apply accurately in daily life.

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## **5. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT REQUIRE FOCUS, ENGAGEMENT AND PRACTICE.**

Language and literacy develop as learners engage in different kinds of reading and writing and communicate with various kinds of native speakers. While a great deal of language can be acquired through mere engagement with texts and opportunities for communication, language learning is helped when learners focus on particular elements of the language to be learned, whether those be common phrases, vocabulary needed for specific purposes, or language structures (tenses, grammar, etc). Similarly, focusing on particular aspects of literacy (how a letter is constructed, how a contract is laid out, what typical components of a phone message are) aids in learning especially for those with little experience in literacy. Engaging in activities that require the use of particular types of language and literacy (trying to understand a recorded message, leaving a note for the landlord; reading information that comes from a child's school), deepens understanding since we learn to read by reading, learn to write by writing, and develop language through meaningful interaction with others.

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- understand what a unit or lesson is all about before getting involved in details.
- spend sufficient time on a skill in order to get it.
- select and stay engaged with tasks that are of interest to them.
- alternate between focusing on meaning and fluency and focusing on accuracy and correctness.
- practice skills through tasks and texts that are interesting and compelling so that engagement is maintained.

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## **6. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY ARE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL AND REQUIRE DIFFERENT KINDS OF INTERACTIONS WITH DIFFERENT KINDS OF TEXTS (ORAL AND WRITTEN).**

Language and literacy are complex processes and can neither be learned nor taught all at the same time. If strong skills are to develop, various dimensions of literacy need to be addressed, including interpersonal, expressive, reflective, linguistic, socio-cultural, political, affective and cognitive elements. Language and literacy also represent interaction between those aspects that are form and structure oriented (grammar or writing conventions) and those that are more meaning oriented. Similarly, functional literacy with the purpose of getting things done is different in nature than literacy focused on inspiration, reflection or self-expression. Both are an integral part of learning.

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- gain experience with both functional literacy and more expressive styles.
- interact in different modes (reading, listening, speaking, writing).
- engage in tasks that address the various dimensions of literacy, separately or combined.

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## **7. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOP THROUGH INTERACTIONS WITH TASKS THAT REQUIRE COGNITIVE INVOLVEMENT.**

Literacy development and second language acquisition are processes that require engagement by the mind. Memorizations and drills, while helpful in making some patterns stick, are not sufficient. We now know that active learning occurs when the mind readies itself to take in information and uses background information and prior knowledge to interpret and make sense out of new information. Meaning occurs when knowledge about words, sentence structure, and sound symbol relationships interact with an understanding of how the world works and the kinds of messages that make sense.

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- think what a text, task or problem is all about before tackling it.
- connect what is already known and familiar to them to what is new.
- engage in problem solving tasks by themselves and with others.
- use a variety of cues (syntactic, grapho–phonemic, semantic) to make sense of oral and written texts.



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## **8. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOP MORE DEEPLY IF INFORMATION IS CONNECTED TO AN OVERALL TOPIC THAT MATTERS TO LEARNERS.**

Learning different bits and pieces of language makes it difficult for learners to see a system and to remember what they learn. Learning goes much deeper if adults can make associations among ideas and are able to see connections between various concepts. In addition, adults tend to learn best when what is to be learned is related to a real life context that they are familiar with or associated with topics they find compelling. Relating ideas to a central topic and presenting skills within that context deepens learning, as does presenting concepts through multiple modes (print, visual, auditory).

### **Learning Opportunities**

Learners need the opportunity to:

- make connections between familiar ideas and new ideas to be acquired.
- see how skills relate to an overall theme.
- associate skills and strategies with real life contexts.
- select from a variety of themes so they can engage with topics that they find compelling.
- use different kinds of modes and styles.