

# Capacity Building Series

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SECRETARIAT SPECIAL EDITION # 36

## Feeling too low ...

"I'm standing alone in a new, strange world.

This is not my place.

Disoriented.

Which way to go?

Afraid to ask.

Feeling too low.

No person I can talk with.

No person I can walk with.

Does anybody notice me?

Oh...I see.

I am just an invisible stranger."

— Biljana Josifova

*Turning a New Leaf: A Collection  
of Writings and Reflections  
from New Canadians*

**April 2014**

ISSN: 1913 8482 (Print)  
ISSN: 1913 8490 (Online)

## English Literacy Development Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling

Ontario policy identifies all educators – classroom teachers, ESL/ELD teachers, guidance counsellors and administrators – as responsible for the social and academic integration of English language learners. But when there are large gaps in literacy and numeracy skills, what can educators do? This monograph, developed by a team of experienced ESL/ELD educators, provides an overview of promising practices to build and accelerate the acquisition of literacy skills so that all English language learners, including those with limited prior schooling, can begin to meet the expectations of the Ontario curriculum.

## Imagine what it is like ...

Most educators in Ontario have had the experience of learning a second language and can relate to this experience when supporting students who have age-appropriate literacy skills in their first language and are learning English for the first time. Imagine what it is like to be not quite literate in your first language and then have to learn the linguistic system of another language in an environment that is very different from your own. This is the day-to-day reality for many English language learners in Ontario classrooms.

These students come from many regions of the world – from countries experiencing war, conflict or environmental catastrophes. They come from refugee camps and isolated rural communities and many have been in transit for a number of years. In all these circumstances, their formal education has been limited, interrupted or even non-existent (Brubacher, 2013). For many, discrimination, culture shock, isolation, identity issues and socio-economic constraints further complicate settlement and education (Strkalova & Hoot, 2008). Sometimes the chronic trauma they have experienced manifests in anger, inability to concentrate, avoidance and emotional unresponsiveness.

Student Achievement Division

The *Capacity Building Series* is produced by the Student Achievement Division to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools. The series is posted at: [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/). For information: [Ins@ontario.ca](mailto:Ins@ontario.ca)

support every child  
reach every student



## When I was five ...

"The year 1997 was the worst year of my life and it has influenced me greatly ... This is the year when my father was kidnapped by the Taliban and was beaten up very badly. This is the year when we had to leave our village and our home behind to be in a safer environment. Most importantly, this is the year my mother passed away. All this happened when I was 5 years old."

– Ashrafi

*Turning a New Leaf: A Collection of Writings and Reflections from New Canadians*

## Ontario's policy in brief ...

Ontario's policy for English language learners, released in 2007, is unique in the world in the academic and social provisions it makes for students with limited literacy skills. Here is the vision that informs the Ontario policy:

*Every English language learner with limited prior schooling:*

- can learn to be successful when given the appropriate supports and opportunities
- can thrive in a school where everyone has a shared understanding of their backgrounds and where all educators share a vision of high expectations for every student
- needs to see himself or herself as a learner, with a place and a contribution to make in the classroom and the school community
- will often require more time than most English language learners to achieve academic proficiency

## Some terminology

An **English language learner** (ELL) is a student, not a program! His or her first language is a language other than English or a variety of English that is significantly different from the English used for instruction in Ontario schools.

**English as a Second Language** (ESL) is a program for English language learners who have had educational opportunities to develop age-appropriate first-language literacy skills. ESL programs are for students in Kindergarten to Grade 12.

**English Literacy Development** (ELD) is a program for English language learners who have had limited opportunities to develop language and literacy skills in their first language. Students in ELD programs are most often from countries where their access to education has been inconsistent, disrupted or even completely unavailable during their childhood and adolescence. As a result, they arrive in Ontario schools with significant gaps in their education. ELD programs are for students in Grades 3 to 12.



For more information about the Ontario policy, you may wish to refer to: *English Language Learners, ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools Kindergarten to Grade 12* (2007).

## Adaptations for students in ELD programs

The ELD program combines language learning with literacy development. At the elementary level, students are expected to learn English and develop literacy skills through the elementary curriculum with appropriate adaptations. At the secondary level, students have the option of taking five ELD credit courses before moving into ESL credit courses. Secondary students are entitled to modifications and/or accommodations, as outlined in each subject curriculum document.

**Modifications** are adjustments to the expectations and/or performance criteria made when a student is unable to meet the curriculum expectations. Information from the student's profile is used to determine the modifications.

*Examples:* revising the expectation, reducing the number of expectations and/or substituting alternative expectations that are more appropriate.

**Accommodations** are strategies and provisions provided by the teacher to help students meet the expectations; they do not alter the provincial curriculum expectations for that subject. Accommodations ensure equal and fair participation in a learning environment so students can meet the same academic standards as their peers.

*Examples:* instructional strategies such as extensive use of visual cues, learning resources such as adapted text, assessment strategies such as extra time.

### Tips for practice ...

When developing a timetable to support students in ELD programs, consider:

- strengths, interests and career goals as well as age
- courses that encourage student participation such as music, health and physical education, art and international languages



For additional information about modifications and accommodations, you may wish to refer to: Chapter 8 in *Growing Success* (2010).

## How can I determine the appropriate adaptations?

Determining the adaptations for English language learners cannot be made outside of knowing who those learners are. That is the vital first step for ensuring access to the curriculum. Creating a student profile, based on personal/cultural/educational information and experiences, is a useful starting point for building this more comprehensive understanding. Equally important is an assessment of English language proficiency and literacy development in oral language, reading and writing. *Steps to English Proficiency (STEP): Elementary and Secondary Continua* has been designed by the Ministry of Education for this purpose. Because the *STEP* framework describes language behaviours along a continuum, from beginning steps to proficiency, it enables educators to identify both the learner's strengths and the subsequent instructional strategies to ensure a differentiated and responsive approach.

A *STEP* framework, specifically created for teachers with students in ELD programs, is presently being piloted in Ontario schools. Teachers will also find the *STEP Orientation to School Life in Ontario* helpful in supporting students to learn routines and understand expectations of school life.



For more information on the *STEP* ELD continua, you may wish to visit the EduGAINS website <http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/ell/index.html>

## How can I incorporate student identity into the learning?

When working with all students, but perhaps most urgently with English language learners with limited prior schooling, we need to take an asset stance – to build on the vast funds of knowledge and unique insights that these students have as a result of their life experiences (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). Building on student knowledge and experience, educators have found that students can become highly engaged in school and school life when given the opportunity to share information about themselves and their experiences. Student-created texts can be combined with digital photos or illustrations and can also be transformed into dual language books. Cummins and Early (2011) have described this genre of student writing as “identity texts.”

### They don't listen to me ...

“I born in 1994, but they put in 1993. That's big mistake but they don't listen to me about. I say to my counsellor to change my birthday because it's wrong. It's not my birthday wrong. It's my whole family birthday wrong. My whole family's in January. Sometimes my father is kidding and jokingly say bring one cake in January, then we come together and cut the cake, a family birthday ... but if I come in school then I see the school rules. There are lot of rules. They say you are 21. After 6 months you go in another school. Now is for me a big problem because I'm not really 21. I'm 20. I've missed my one years more.”

– Samim

Identity texts are a wonderful addition to any classroom because they reflect and affirm the cultural background and experiences of the student authors who are motivated by a sense of purpose to write and read one another's books. Students share their life experiences with others, which helps to build a sense of community within classrooms and schools. Cummins (2006) suggests that "students take ownership of these artifacts as a result of having invested their identities in them. These texts (written, spoken, visual, musical, or combinations in multimodal form) hold a mirror up to the student in which his or her identity is reflected back in a positive light."

### Tips for practice ...

Identity texts can be created by providing scaffolding so that students can write their own texts or by using a language experience approach (Stauffer, 1970).

In the language experience approach:

- Students engage in conversation with one another and their teacher about some background experience.
- Students and teacher synthesize the notions and ideas of the conversation and create a shared composition which they then transfer to the page.
- The process of transferring information to the page is referred to as the "construction stage" during which the teacher can introduce literacy and print concepts.



For ideas on ways to affirm student identity, you may wish to refer to: Student Identity and Engagement in Elementary Schools, *Capacity Building Series*, #20 (2011).

### When I cried I said I can't learn English ...

"A lot of times when I cried I said I can't learn English. She [my teacher] was there for me and encouraged me to learn the language ... she brought some students that came before us who were finishing the school and then she showed us – See those people were like same as you did, didn't know the language. See they learned and you can learn and you can do it."

– Malyoun

## How can I help students catch up on foundational skills?

Academic success requires being able to navigate the world of print-based literacy. The foundational literacy skills, which are the building blocks for higher-level reading and writing skills, include: knowledge of letter-sound relationships, concepts of print, phonological awareness, comprehending meaning from text and being able to write letters, words and sentences (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009, p. 41). These skills are interrelated and build on one another. They must be taught in the context of literacy activities that are meaningful and interesting to the students.

### Role of oral language ...

For English language learners who are just beginning to understand that their thoughts can be talked about, written about and read about (Perry, 2008), it is paramount to begin with their strength of spoken language. This is the basis for all instruction. As Fisher, Frey and Rothenberg state, "Oral language tasks do not end with the conversation but serve to scaffold learning, allowing students to activate their thinking before they read, or to clarify their use of language in preparation to write" (2008, p. 4).

## The power of pictures ...

Educators have found that “pictures are immediately engaging and often less daunting for English language learners than written texts.” They “often push language development and thinking skills within a unit/topic” (<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/ell-engagement-using-photos>). The activity below shows how personal pictures can be used to provoke classroom conversations and generate an authentic collective text for word work and reading comprehension activities.

### Tips for practice ...

- Have the student produce visuals or bring in personal photographs. This acknowledges their experiences and allows them to share their lives outside the school context.
- Brainstorm vocabulary – What do you see? Students can use these words in both their storytelling and their writing.
- Invite students to make connections to text. The connections build a collective experience for students and support teachers in gaining a better understanding of the students’ lived experiences.
- Encourage students to generate a story orally.
- Write the story – then explore literacy concepts together like word spacing, punctuation, syntax, etc. The context-embedded experience deepens literacy learning for students.
- Use the story for word work and reading comprehension activities.

(Adapted from Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009, p. 47)

## I can’t find my way in school ...

“I was always lost. I can’t find my way in the school because if someone tried to tell me the directions to go to the classroom I won’t understand and it’s hard for me because I have low vision. So it’s a little bit harder to find my way.”

– Muntaha

## The use of first languages ...

As Cummins states in *Many Roots, Many Voices*, “It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the school house door” (2005, p. 73). Providing opportunities for students to use their first language to discuss new learning or clarify their understanding of a concept or task allows them to share their thinking without the barrier of their limited proficiency in English. These conversations facilitate the group’s ability to then share their thinking in English.

Inviting students to use their first language also eases the social and emotional transition into a formal school setting. It provides students with a sense of cultural stability and continuity. Other students in the class become aware of the value of a culturally diverse classroom and the multiple perspectives that English language learners bring to their learning.

Circumstances of when it is appropriate to use their home language and the expectations about when they will be asked to respond in English need to be explained. Student talk in a language other than English can be monitored in the same way we monitor students speaking in English by walking around, interacting with groups, asking guiding questions and probing for more information (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008).

## Small group work and running records ...

An essential component of all ELD programming, regardless of grade level, is small group work. It is adaptable to a wide variety of instructional settings in both the elementary and secondary panels. Small group instruction can be implemented equally well with homogenous groupings within an ELD class or mixed groupings of English language learners and their peers within integrated classrooms. Further, the purpose

## Before I came to Canada

"My father, he was not in work because he was sick. Me and my brother worked three times – in the morning, in the evening time and in the night. I worked 4 o'clock am to 10 o'clock am at butcher shop. Then 11 am to 9 pm at salesman. After that I go 9 pm to 11 pm at medical-like Doctor clinic. I went to clean for her. Then it is closed then I go home. I sleep 4 and 5 hours ... I'm 10 years old and I work to 17 years old, then I come to Canada and I leave work. I worked 7 years."

– Anas

for groupings can range from level of English language proficiency and literacy and numeracy skills to sharing the same language, skill development needs and student interest and choice.

Small group strategies such as guided reading or "mini" shared reading sessions are described as "gateways" into English language and literacy learning since they allow teachers to provide explicit teaching during the reading process focused on developing fluency, reading comprehension and language skills as identified in the student's assessment data (Cloud et al., 2009). Engaging students in conversation about the texts they are reading allows the teacher to assess comprehension and literacy levels and to be responsive to individual student needs. Such conversations can also engage students in using the academic vocabulary and the sentence structure in the text to share their thinking (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 275) and build upon their strength in oral language to develop academic language proficiency.

Ongoing running record assessment informs teachers how to target and adjust instruction to support students in becoming more proficient and independent readers. For emergent readers, running record miscue analysis reveals information related to comprehension, concepts about print, tracking and identification of known and unknown words. For higher-level readers, reading fluency and comprehension become areas of focus. The information from running records gives teachers a tool to communicate progress with students as well as a tool for students to become more metacognitive of their reading behaviours.

### Text selection ...

As Fountas and Pinnell (2012) state, "to become proficient readers, students must experience successful processing daily" (p. 276). Given the range of literacy needs in this unique student population, individual student profiles must be considered when selecting resources. Choice of text should reflect:

- student's English language proficiency/literacy levels
- student's background knowledge and experiences
- student's culture and family situation
- content that is age-appropriate and that enables the student to make connections with the text
- a broad range of text forms (e.g., picture books, news articles, websites, graphic texts, charts, posters, short stories, informational and literary texts)

*Selecting Texts to Align with STEP* is a tool designed to support teachers in choosing texts that reflect students' current language and literacy levels. For example, if a student in Grade 10 is working on the *ELD STEP 1 Reading* continuum, he or she will be able to "locate some basic information or familiar words in highly visual texts using visual cues and recognize familiar words in very simple, predictable, age-appropriate, visual texts." Appropriate texts for this student would incorporate such characteristics as a simple, predictable layout with high-frequency words, short simple sentences and clear visuals. The topics explored would be familiar to the student and relate to his or her personal experiences or interests.

Identity texts, discussed earlier, can also be used in small group reading instruction though the teacher will need to be aware of each student's approximate reading levels. If levelling books with readability formulas alone, caution should be exercised. Readability formulas only consider sentence length, word count and syllable count; they do not consider any of the characteristics related to text difficulty such as genre, text structure, vocabulary, book and print features (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

There is a wide variety of commercially produced levelled books available in both fiction and non-fiction. Generally, a balance of fiction and non-fiction titles is recommended for small group instruction. While students of all ages enjoy folktales, older students benefit greatly from non-fiction levelled texts. This is especially important for students who enter the school system in adolescence and have limited time to learn the content area knowledge and vocabulary that they require for specific subjects.

## How can I integrate the curriculum into language and literacy instruction?

Many researchers observe that students acquire language through the process of using it. Pauline Gibbons writes that students “learn through the language when they use it to construct knowledge across all areas of the curriculum. And they learn about language when there is a focus on ‘language as object’” (2002, p. 138).

Identifying the goals for instruction is critical, for this ensures the intentional design of many opportunities for students to meet all objectives. Some guiding questions are listed below to help educators explore the development of these explicit goals:

### *Curriculum goals:*

- What in the curriculum is critical for the student to understand, know and be able to do?
- Which expectations can the student successfully achieve with the appropriate adaptations based on his or her *STEP*? How will they be expressed as learning goals and shared with the student? Which expectations will require modification based on his or her *STEP*? What accommodations can be provided to support the student?

### *Language goals:*

- Based on the *STEP ELD Reading, Writing and Oral* continua, what are the student’s language and literacy learning needs?
- What opportunities need to be provided to support the student’s language and literacy acquisition?

### *Social goals:*

- What types of interaction will engage the student throughout the lesson/unit?
- What social skills will the student need to support his or her learning?

### *Orientation goals*

- What are the student’s needs based on the *STEP ELD Orientation to School Life in Ontario* continuum?
- Where are there opportunities to support the student’s orientation to school life?



For strategies on how to support students in ELD programs, you may wish to refer to: *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 3 to 12* (2008) and *Supporting English Language Learners: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 1 to 8* (2008).

## I am actually very happy ...

“In the refugee camp, there is no schooling or anything like that. We wake up in the morning and we do nothing. There is no jobs. There is no school. When I first came to the school in Canada, I was scared, I was nervous, I was afraid that if I talk or speak they don’t understand me or they would make fun of me, so I was very afraid to engage with anybody, but now I am actually very happy. I’ve make friends. I am able to speak a little bit of English with them and I feel a little bit more comfortable.”

– Mus

## There is a future here ...

“Back home there is no future. There is no school ... Life is good here. There is a future here. Actually when we came to Canada we were looking for a future. We got a future here. Life is good.”

– Mohammed

## Considerations for educators ...

Cummins (2008) and Collier (1989) state that students with significant gaps in their formal schooling may need 10 years or more to acquire the academic language proficiency that will enable them to understand and express concepts and ideas that are relevant to long-term success in school – almost double the catch-up period predicted for students who have literacy skills in their first language. Ontario programming aims to bridge this gap first by identifying each English language learner's unique literacy needs and then by adapting instruction, assessment, resources and the learning environment to enable his or her full participation in the curriculum.

In your work with English language learners with limited prior schooling, you may wish to keep the following considerations in mind:

- Get to know your students. Each student is unique and needs to be considered on an individual basis. View each student's knowledge and real-life experiences as assets and build upon strengths and skills. Recognize that a student's needs may go beyond academic needs.
- Identify each student's English language proficiency and literacy development using *STEP* (across the *Oral, Reading and Writing* continua) and the *Orientation to School Life in Ontario*. Use a variety of assessments to support identification, programming and monitoring of English language and literacy development.
- Identify what is critical in the curriculum. What does the student need to understand, know and be able to do? Identify language and literacy, social and orientation goals based on the student's profile. Provide appropriate and timely interventions to help the student meet these goals.
- Implement differentiated learning and teaching by selecting strategies and texts that are age-appropriate and reflect the interests of the students in the class.
- Scaffold the student's language and literacy development by providing explicit instruction and opportunities for practice.
- Monitor the student's English language proficiency and literacy development.

**The Ministry of Education thanks the students of the Waterloo Region District School Board for sharing their voices in this monograph. Readers may wish to explore the board's publication, *Turning a New Leaf: A Collection of Writings and Reflections from New Canadians*.**

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