



LITERACY AND HOW TO TEACH IT

Professor John Munro

Because of the language difficulties, it's possible for the kids to read texts without actually understanding them. You can help combat this by preparing them for what they're about to read and consolidate what they have learnt by discussing everything with them as they go along.

Whether you are reading to the students or them to you, it's a good idea to start off by talking about the book, even before you read it. Look at the cover. What do you think it might be about? If it is clearly about, say, bears, what words do you know about bears? What sort of words might be in the book?

As you read the book, discuss what is happening. What are characters saying to each other? What can you tell about them from looking at the pictures? What do you think is going to happen next? These activities can also be done with older readers. It's also good to discuss the choices, motivations and experiences of characters, asking questions like, what would you do if you were so and so? Do you think he/she made the right choice? How do you think they are feeling?

When you've finished the book, go over what you read in it. You could write down some words that they may have had difficulty with, write definitions or draw pictures of any new ones they may have learned. Write a book report, or a letter to a storybook character, or do a drawing of what happened in the book – these are all great ways to reinforce what's been learned.

Phonics

Phonic are the sounds that make up words. SAIL students find reading very hard because they don't always know what sounds letters or groups of letters make – they don't know what sound 'th' makes, so reading 'teeth' will be hard, or what 'tion' sounds like so reading 'information' will be hard, and so on. We strongly recommend tutors do a lot of work based around phonics, which might be as simple as making a list, or flashcards, of whatever sounds they are having trouble with, and spending a set amount of time of them each week. Repetition is the key to learning these.

You can try games, like - write various sounds onto little cardboard cards, and go through them with the students. Then place them in front of them, get them to close their eyes, and take one away. Which sound is missing? Or, which is upside down/out of order? Make two sets of sound and play a 'memory/matching pairs' game. It also works well to have them 'test' you on things (especially if you sometimes get them wrong!) – it's a nice change for them to have the power.

Grammar

This is more of a problem for the older students, particularly those in high school. There are a lot of books and worksheets in the library designed to help the students improve their grammar. A few things to watch out for include the use of full stops and capital letters, phrasing of questions and use of question marks, and the ever tricky past present and future tenses. Again, lots of reading can help, and if you want to get a general idea of a student's ability, have them write you a short story or letter, and look for any patterns of mistakes.

Basic English vocabulary

For the younger students and those with little English, this should probably be done orally, but for older students can be written, too.

Some vocabulary for *low level English* students:

- * Colours
- * Animals
- * Common household objects (bed, chair, window)
- * Days of the Week
- * Things in their community (school, church, hospital)
- * Body parts
- * Items of clothing
- * Food
- * Methods of transport (car, bus etc)
- * Shapes
- * Weather

Higher level English (once they have mastered the first lot!):

- * States of Australia
- * Months of the Year
- * Seasons
- * Emotions
- * Actions (running, jumping)
- * Occupations
- * How to fill in a form
- * Sport/Leisure activities
- * Countries
- * Things in nature

Using only worksheets to teach these things can get a bit boring. If you are structuring a session around one or more of these themes, you could perhaps experiment with using a variety of different materials, like games, pictures, books, puzzles etc. Try to make the learning as 'tangible' as possible – eg. if you are teaching colours, instead of just pointing to colours in books, you could get some paints from the library, or flowers from the gardens. You might like to review what you have learned at the beginning or end of each week.

Writing

Teachers report that the Sudanese student's writing skills are letting them down. Even students with confident, fluent spoken English struggle to get words down correctly. Again, practice, and lots of it, is going to help in this area. Most of the worksheets have a focus on the student's writing ability, but it's good to compliment these by encouraging them to write stories, letters, cards, book reports, songs, poems, etc.

They might want to write a letter to a parent, teacher or friend, write a story pretending they are a character from a book, or cut a picture from a magazine and write about it (there are some pictures in the drawers in the library for this exact purpose, and even younger students can do this, just writing a sentence or even a word). You might need to stress that making mistakes doesn't matter, as long as words are getting down on the page.

Handwriting

This is a major problem for some SAIL students. We now have several great books of handwriting worksheets and if you think your student has a problem in this area, by all means use them. A few other tricks to improve handwriting include tracing, coloring and completing mazes (getting them to do a maze without their pencil touching the sides is a good one!). It is much easier for the students to write on lined paper, and paper where the spaces between the lines are big, especially for those students who are young or have a very low level of English.

Games and other things

Board games, bingo, puzzles, flashcards, songs, rhymes and poems – all terrific and they help keep the students interested. Not to mention the world around you...take a look around in immediate neighbourhood and see what you can find to teach them – it might be botany, mechanics or hip-hop moves. Do it in English and you'll get away with an unorthodox lesson every now and again!

Some more ideas:

A magazine can provide enough material for a whole session. From chats about the pictures, vocabulary (point to something blue, are there any cars in this one?), letter/ word identification, reading practice, discussions about issues or events (for the older students in particular), cutting out and pasting. If you find that your student has a particular interest (soccer, animals, hip-hop music) you could even find a magazine on that topic.

Bring a photo/s of you and your family/pets/house/the time you bungee jumped. The students will be really interested and it's a great way for your student to get to know you.

Using a ball or beanbag, you can play word games and keep their interest up by having a rule, like every time they catch the ball they have to say a word beginning with a particular letter, and the person that follows has to say a word that starts with the last letter of the first word, or a word that rhymes, or one that starts with the next letter in the alphabet.

