

Do some of your low level learners seem to have problems with reading and writing? This lesson looks at kinds of literacy problems that students can have and makes some suggestions on how you can deal with these.

Task 1 – An unusual student

Joshua has a student called Tony in his pre intermediate class. Tony is very communicative and, for his level, speaks English well. However, Joshua has noted that Tony is reluctant to copy examples of new language from the white board. He sometimes seems to struggle with reading, but can often give answers to tasks after student-centred feedback. Joshua wonders whether Tony might have literacy problems.



What do you think?

Jot down your ideas on a notepad, then check the answer key below. 



Task 1 Feedback

It is quite possible that Tony does have literacy issues. Students who find reading and writing difficult can often be good at listening and speaking and can hide their literacy problems with a series of coping strategies. For example, Tony might not be able to read texts at all, but is able to pick up answers to reading tasks from his partner during student-centred feedback.

Key Skill

In English language classrooms, literacy problems can arise because a student's first language does not have a Roman script and they need to learn this. However, in other cases, students may have literacy issues in their first language and learning English may mean they are having to deal with written and spoken language for the first time.

Task 2 – What kind of problem is it?



Numbers 1 to 8 describe typical literacy problems for students. Sort the problems into ones primarily associated with reading and ones associated writing.

Reading problems	Writing problems

Typical literacy problems

1. Students can't spell words.
2. Students have problems dealing with left to right orientation of texts.
3. A word written in cursive and the same word written in italics seem like two different words.
4. Students find it difficult to hold a pen correctly.
5. Students are unsure whether they should use upper or lower case for certain words.
6. Students cannot see where a word begins and ends when it is placed in continuous text.
7. Students are unable to form letters in Roman script.
8. Students find it difficult to work out where sentences begin and end in continuous text.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

While the problems described above seem very basic, it is useful to consider how well native English speakers would cope with a non-Roman script that is not familiar to them, for example, Arabic. In this situation, being able to perform simple tasks such as recognising the correct number on a bus becomes extremely difficult.

Task 3 – Getting started



Below are some general ideas for when you get started with helping students with literacy problems. Choose the best alternative a) or b) for each idea.

Ideas to help students with literacy problems	
1.	<p>a. You should use small fonts for words and texts</p> <p>b. You should focus on large fonts for words and texts.</p>
2.	<p>a. You should begin with listening and speaking then lead to reading and writing.</p> <p>b. You should begin with reading and writing then lead to listening and speaking.</p>
3.	<p>a. Start out by focusing on individual words.</p> <p>b. Start our by focusing on short and simple sentences.</p>
4.	<p>a. You should try and use visuals together with words and text as much as possible.</p> <p>b. You should try and avoid using visuals with words and texts.</p>
5.	<p>a. It helps to use a published picture dictionary.</p> <p>b. It helps for students to build up and create their own dictionary.</p>
6.	<p>a. When it's time to deal with sentences, students should try and create their own.</p> <p>b. When it's time to deal with sentences, students should copy examples.</p>

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

A general principle when teaching literacy is to move from reading and writing to listening and speaking, and to begin with letters and words. It is difficult to get students to reproduce what they cannot perceive. Secondly, it is not a good idea to expect creativity too soon in the literacy development process.

Task 4 – Some specific activities



Below is a list of some specific activities to help develop literacy (1-12). Decide if each activity will help develop reading skills or writing skills.

Reading skills	Writing skills

- Activities to help develop literacy**
1. Give regular spelling tests.
 2. Students do dot joining and tracing tasks to create letters.
 3. Students match the same word written in two different fonts.
 4. Students recognise and/or match letters words written on flashcards.
 5. Students match words to pictures.
 6. Students copy written work that has been rewritten and reformulated by the teacher.
 7. Students are given words from a simple sentence to order.
 8. Students are asked to identify very simple texts such as a bank deposit slip or a bus timetable.
 9. Students complete simple gapped sentences.
 10. The teacher highlights core spelling rules and patterns.
 11. Students labels pictures and diagrams.
 12. Students complete simple forms.

Check your ideas in the answer key.

Thinking about your teaching ...

Try learning the alphabet (or characters) and some words in a language that has a script that you are not familiar with. What frustrations do you experience? How does this experience inform the way you can deal with students who have literacy problems.

Note your observations in your Teaching log.

Taking it to the classroom ...

Often learners with literacy problems are placed in classes with students who do not have these problems. This will mean adapting materials that you use and providing these students with a bit of extra support. For example, rather than getting them to do a controlled written practice task, you could ask them to copy the correct answers.

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 323 - 325 of *Learning Teaching* (2nd edition) by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on literacy.

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

Reading problems: 2, 3, 6 and 8

Writing problems: 1, 4, 5 and 7

Task 3 – Feedback

1. b. You should focus on large fonts for words and texts.
Comment: Larger typeface is clearer and easier to read.
2. a. You should begin with listening and speaking then lead to reading and writing.
Comment: This means you move from what students can already do to what is new for them.
3. a. Start out by focusing on individual words.
Comment: Students needs to become familiar with words first so they can then begin to recognise word boundaries in a sentence.
4. a. You should try and use visuals together with words and text as much as possible.
Comment: Visuals are a very straightforward and concrete way of conveying the meaning of new language items.
5. b. It helps for students to build up and create their own dictionary.
Comment: Words students have collected are likely to be more meaningful for them.
6. b. When it's time to deal with sentences, students should copy examples.
Comment: For students to create their own sentences puts pressure on the grammatical ability when they are still trying to deal with the way in which we record language in a written form.

Task 4 – Feedback

Reading skills: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 10

Writing skills: 1, 2, 6, 9, 11, and 12