

How *Building Strong Families* Facilitators Can Help Participants with Limited Language Skills

Written by Gail Rice, Adult Literacy Specialist

Adapted by Lucy Schrader, Building Strong Families Program Coordinator and Suzi McGarvey, Extension Associate

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This paper is designed to help any Building Strong Families facilitators who work with people with limited reading, writing, and English-speaking skills.

How Bad Is the Problem of Illiteracy?

Our definitions of literacy and illiteracy have undergone many changes over the years. The 1998 Workforce Investment Act defines literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society.”

This is a broader view of literacy than just being able to read, and it reflects the idea of functional competency levels used by the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), an assessment carried out in 1992 and reported in 1993. The NALS profiled the English literacy skills of adults aged 16 and older in the U.S., using test items based on everyday life tasks to measure literacy skills. They classified results into five levels, from level 1 (least proficient) to level 5 (most proficient). The NALS showed that illiteracy is a serious problem in the U.S. today.

Results showed that between 46-51% of adults (about 90 million adults) functioned in the lowest two proficiency levels. While it is impossible to equate grade levels with the NALS functional competency levels, it is estimated that the average reading level for adults is at 8th-9th grade level, which is between levels 2 and 3 of the NALS functional competency levels. Even adults reading at an 8th-9th grade level would probably have trouble reading and understanding newspapers (written at 9th-12th grade level), apartment leases (college level), insurance policies (12th grade level), or medicine bottles (often 9th grade level or above). For many tasks, they would be functionally illiterate.

Why Should This Problem Concern Building Strong Families Facilitators?

1. Because so many people are affected by illiteracy, facilitators are likely to work with many people with language difficulties.

Many facilitators are working with low-income and/or “at-risk” participants. Many of these participants are especially likely to have difficulty with their reading and writing, although problems are certainly not limited to these groups. Still other facilitators have participants who are learning English as a second language; these participants may have trouble with any listening, speaking, reading, or writing tasks.

Moreover, even though the problem is widespread, facilitators should not expect that they will easily recognize their participants' literacy problems. Many people are very embarrassed about their lack of literacy skills and have spent several years successfully hiding their inabilities. Some may be hesitant to pick up a book or a pen, but others may carry reading materials with them, pretend to read or write, and talk about doing reading and writing tasks. They may be very hesitant to complain or to ask questions. When reading or writing tasks are forced on them, they may make excuses: they are not feeling well, they forgot their glasses, they'll wait and do it later. (English as a Second Language participants, whose need is more obvious, are usually more willing to ask for help in reading, writing, and speaking English. They are not usually ashamed of their lack of skills unless they are also illiterate in their native language.)

2. Many participants with limited language skills may not be able to succeed with the program modules. They may not be able to read some of the materials (handouts, overheads, guidesheets, and other materials), understand some of the vocabulary used, or carry out the writing tasks involved (filling in handouts, filling out evaluation forms, etc.).

The results of studies like the NALS make a powerful argument for writing Extension materials below an 8th grade reading level. However, even materials written at these lower levels may not be low enough to assure success for some people. And even if participants can read the words aloud or have the materials read to them, they may not understand the vocabulary, or they may be unable to understand the basic concepts.

3. Participants' limited language skills affect not only the m but their families as well. Illiteracy is like many problems that can threaten a family: it can destroy people's self-esteem, affect their functioning in their families, and affect their families' well-being.

BSF facilitators will caution participants never to call their children "stupid" because it will affect the children's self-image. Yet their illiteracy has already given people many chances to call themselves "stupid" because they have failed at so many tasks. Regardless of other successes, they often feel like failures. Their limited literacy skills may threaten their job performance, job security, parenting skills, and even their physical safety. And their limited language skills make it more likely that their children will fail to develop necessary language skills as well. Thus, illiteracy is passed from one generation to the next.

Who Are People with Limited Language Skills?

While Extension staff have appreciated and worked well with many different types of people, one of their first thoughts might be, "*How could people go for so many years without being able to read or write?*" It's a natural question. Hopefully, their answer will not be what many in the general public assume: "*They must be either stupid or lazy.*"

Adults may have poor reading abilities because of a combination of factors. It is usually more a matter of circumstances, environment, and lack of necessary resources than it is a case of mental

retardation or lack of motivation. Here are some possible reasons why adults may have poor reading abilities:

- Severe problems in the home or neighborhood made schooling or reading a lesser priority, or interfered with them. Such problems might include poverty, racism, poor schools, poor housing, homelessness, illness, unemployment, gangs, substance abuse, other abuse, or neglect.
- Parents were unable to read and thus could not read to them, help them with reading, or assist them with homework.
- Never heard good readers read and thus had little idea of what was involved in the reading process.
- Little or no reading material in the home.
- A limited listening and speaking vocabulary limited their reading ability.
- The family frequently moved from place to place. Thus, they attended several different schools.
- Inadequate teachers or poor reading instruction in the schools.
- Physical or mental health problems.
- Unrecognized, undiagnosed, or untreated learning disabilities that affected reading or learning.
- A learning style that didn't match the teaching styles they encountered.
- Needed to move at a slower pace or needed more repetition to understand.
- Never encouraged to read, and others around them did not see reading as essential to success.
- English was not their first language, and they had difficulty with listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks.
- When they fell behind, they were either held back or were socially promoted from grade to grade anyway by their teachers or principals, who failed to give them the help they needed. Eventually, they dropped out of school, were pushed out of school, or graduated with low skills.

Why Limited Readers May Have Trouble

Reading is actually a very complex, meaning-making process. Beginning readers often focus on *learning to read*, which involves developing several skills simultaneously: building a growing sight vocabulary of words that they recognize instantly; increasing their general vocabulary of word meanings; learning to figure out new words (by using clues in sound-symbol relationships, word length and shape, word parts, and especially the context); using context clues to figure out new words and word meanings; building some basic comprehension skills; and developing some fluency in reading.

As these skills become more automatic, reading becomes easier and the focus shifts more from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. Adults constantly dialogue with the material, ask and answer questions, confirm or disprove their predictions, make new predictions, and summarize what they have read. They need to comprehend not only what is said literally but what is not

said, and they must relate new ideas to the concepts and ideas they have in their mind. They also need to learn to monitor their own reading, making sure that what they are reading makes sense to them.

These are the kinds of problems more limited readers might have with Building Strong Families workshops:

- Based on their past experience, they may have a great fear of failing at the reading process. They may not expect reading material to make much sense, or they may try to read without seeing any purpose for reading. They may not know how oral reading should sound. They may not understand that they should draw on their background experience in reading any material.
- If they view reading as a process of sounding out words rather than one of making meaning, they might not stop and correct themselves or monitor their reading when what they are reading does not make sense to them. They may read slowly rather than fluently and thus lose the sense of what they are reading.
- Their listening/speaking vocabulary may be limited. They may not know the meanings of many of the words used in the materials, even if those materials are read aloud to them.
- If the material is significantly above their usual reading level, they may not have many of the words in their sight vocabulary, and they may not have the decoding skills or context clue skills to figure out new words. They may stop at words they don't know and make no attempt to figure out unknown words. If they have great difficulty decoding or figuring out words, their comprehension will break down.
- They may find it difficult to comprehend or summarize the important points in materials that are very detailed.

Why Limited Writers May Have Trouble

Moreover, reading progress affects writing progress. For most people, writing is the last skill to develop. Never make the mistake of thinking that because an adult can read at a certain level, he or she can also write at that level! It is common for adults' writing levels to lag several grade levels behind their reading levels. Many adults have had such failure and difficulty in writing that they will avoid writing tasks whenever possible.

It may be very hard for them to compose their thoughts, express them understandably in words, and write down those words from memory in legible handwriting. Some adults may feel that they have nothing worthwhile to say. If they believe that writing should be error-free, they will fear making mistakes in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, etc. Spelling is a major problem for many adults; they may freeze at every word they don't know how to spell. Still other adults are embarrassed by poor handwriting.

Adults with these fears and problems will likely be worried by any writing tasks involved in the workshops: filling in some of the handouts and filling out the Participant Evaluation Forms, for example.

Why English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Participants May Have Trouble

ESL adults face many of the same problems that adults with limited reading and writing skills face, along with the additional problems of adjusting to American culture and learning English. ESL adults watch, listen, and imitate. They must hear sounds and produce them and learn a new sound system (including intonation, rhythm, stress, and pronunciation). They must learn a new vocabulary and new patterns of sentence structure and grammar. They must hear good spoken English in the context of meaningful situations. And in order to speak well, they must integrate all that they have learned into appropriate oral communication, while learning the gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal communication that exist in the cultural patterns and (largely unspoken) social rules of the U.S. If they want to read English, they must learn to use a system of written symbols, recognize those words in print, and associate those words with ideas and meaning to comprehend the writer's message. Writing may be a big struggle for many ESL adults too, especially if they are not used to a roman alphabet.

If the workshop session cannot be conducted in the ESL adult's native language, you may want to have a person accompany the adult who can translate or give help. Be willing to go more slowly, explain vocabulary, and answer questions. Do not expect an ESL person to have the listening, speaking, reading, or writing skills of other participants.

Making Participants Feel Comfortable

Since many people have had very negative school experiences, you may want to avoid terms like "student," "class," or "workshop." Instead, you can call your session a "discussion group" or something similar.

Announce that anyone can say "Pass" and skip over any speaking, reading, or writing tasks. Talk at your participants' level without talking down to them. Leave out explanations, overheads, transparencies, guidesheets, etc., that you think will frustrate or confuse them. Reword or rephrase things to eliminate or explain any words or concepts that the group may not understand. Encourage them to ask questions at any time. Validate all attempts to understand and add to discussion.

Make yourself available to give individual help with reading and writing when working with handouts or other materials where reading or writing is required.

Helping Participants Avoid Reading Difficulty

- Read overheads, handouts, etc out loud. If overheads or handouts have several points, you can number them. As you call out the numbers, it will be easier for those with reading problems to follow along as points are being read.
- Have competent readers do the reading. Ask for volunteers for reading tasks. Do not call on someone to read who hasn't volunteered.

- For things that are not to be read to the whole group, announce that you will help anyone who needs extra help or who has questions about the material.
- If working with an individual, alternate reading, assist with any unknown words, or read right along with the person.
- Have the group read together in chorus.
- Have participants work together in twos or threes, and make sure there is a competent reader in each group.
- Create audiotapes for the session that can include explanations in the manual, readings of transparencies and handouts, readings of guidesheets, and possibly group discussions.
- Create videotapes of the session in which there are explanations, read-alouds of materials, etc.
- Be calm and affirming even when errors occur. Be sensitive about whether or when to correct, especially in a public situation. Let participants feel that errors are okay and that questions are appreciated. Encourage people to ask you or others how to read words if they wish.

Make the Written Material Easier to Read—Tips for Rewriting and Making It Look Good

- Simplify material that is too difficult, or create written material from scratch.
- List potentially difficult words or vocabulary (e.g., words that are not phonetically regular or may be more difficult to read, words that participants may not know the meanings of, etc.) Decide which words can be eliminated or replaced by easier words, and which words are essential to learn.
- Present new vocabulary and explain terms clearly, with concrete examples and sentences to illustrate meaning.
- Many participants have vision problems and find smaller type difficult to read. Use larger type. It's best to use 14-point type; you should never use smaller than 12-point type. Type for transparencies or printed material on flipcharts should be especially large. You may want to make posters of some of the most important handouts or information.
- Use more readable *serif* type styles (like Times New Roman) for the main body of print. Reserve *sans serif* type (like Arial) for titles, subheadings, captions, etc. Avoid decorative or unusual typefaces.

- Make your sentences shorter. Make sure that there are at least two spaces between sentences (i.e., avoid the common practice of many publishers of saving space by leaving only one space between sentences).
- Make your paragraphs shorter. Break up long blocks of text with graphic organizers, pictures, subheadings, titles, etc.
- Leave in the “need to know” information, but cut out the “nice to know” details, or make them available on a separate piece of paper. That will give participants less to have to read. You may want to list resources on a separate handout.
- Use fewer words on transparencies unless the words are needed to explain the idea or concept.
- Highlight important points with larger type, boldface type, capital letters, underlining, italics, etc. But don’t overdo these features in any one piece.
- Left-justify your text, so that it has the same amount of space between words and a ragged right margin.
- Use pictures or other illustrations, with appropriate captions. Make sure these illustrations are sensitive to your audience, clear and understandable, and helpful in conveying your message.
- Use picture icons along with or in place of words to illustrate ideas.
- Use different colors of paper for different handouts. You might color-code handouts by different subjects, different activities in the session, purpose (such as making anything that they have to write on a specific color), or simply to make them easier to refer to (e.g., “Next, look at your yellow sheet.”) Whatever colors you choose, make sure there is a very clear contrast between the color of the type and the color of the paper—hopefully, dark type on a lighter background.

Helping Participants Avoid Writing Problems

- Encourage writing by having lined and unlined paper and pencils with erasers readily available.
- Write on a chalkboard, flip chart, or overhead transparency, making sure that the writing is big enough to be seen easily by all. Allow people plenty of time to copy on sheets of paper or handouts if they want. Model the kind of writing you want the participants to do (e.g., observe margins, indent paragraphs, spell words correctly,

write legibly and not all in capital letters, etc.) Use print rather than cursive writing unless you are sure that everyone will be able to read the cursive writing.

- If working with an individual, alternate writing, assist with any unknown words, or offer to act as a scribe or recorder and do the writing. Be quick to help anyone who you think may have difficulty filling in the session evaluation forms or handouts.
- Tell participants that they can leave forms blank, and that they don't have to do any writing if they don't want to.
- When there are writing tasks, announce, "Don't worry about handwriting or spelling."
- Be calm and affirming even when errors occur. Be sensitive about whether or when to correct, especially in a public situation. Let people feel that errors are okay and that questions are appreciated. Encourage participants to ask you or others how to spell words if they wish.
- Have participants work together in twos or threes, and make sure there is a competent writer in each group.
- Work in small groups, and have each group appoint one person to act as a "recorder" who will write down the reactions or ideas of the others. This person may or may not report to the whole group.
- If participants have done writing on their own, avoid setting up a situation in which they show their papers to others unless you know the group will be affirming. You can say, "These handouts are for your own use."
- Let participants express themselves by drawing pictures instead of writing words. Unlined paper is good for this. You can also provide magazines with pictures for them to cut out.
- Let participants express themselves by speaking and by acting things out instead of by writing words.
- Create materials in which people don't have to do much writing. For example, handouts can require them to write only a few words or to check items off or mark things in a multiple-choice format.
- Have a list of words visible that are likely to be needed in the writing that participants do. Read through those words once or twice to familiarize people with them.

- Have people record what they want to say on an audiotape or a videotape. You can use tapes for evaluating sessions, because participants can simply talk and not have to worry about filling out an evaluation form.
- Do a “group evaluation.” On a flip chart, draw pictures and label them “lego activity,” “handouts,” “bag activity,” and “other.” Go over the list with the group, and then give participants dot stickers to place on the flip chart evaluation form to show which part of the workshop they liked best.

For the other parts of the evaluation (what I’ve learned and what I plan to do), divide the group into smaller groups and appoint a person in each group to be the recorder, who takes notes and writes down responses. Also, you can supply people with magazines and markers so that they can cut out pictures or draw pictures to answer questions or share in discussion. (From facilitator Stacy Eikermann)

Helping People Who Are Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)

- Announce that anyone can say “Pass” in a conversation and not have to read or contribute to a discussion.
- If possible, use an interpreter for people whose English is so limited that things need translating.
- Pair ESL participants up with others who can help explain less familiar vocabulary or who can answer questions.
- Consider having someone rewrite the handouts and written materials, translating them into the participants’ language.

Help Your Building Strong Families Colleagues

Note any difficulties on your “Session Summary Form.” If you have suggestions for how to change, add, or adapt sessions for people with limited language skills, write these on the form too.

Send your suggestions and ideas to Lucy Schrader:

Lucy Schrader

Building Strong Families Program Coordinator
 Outreach and Extension
 162 Stanley Hall
 Columbia, MO 65211
 573-882-4071
SchraderL@missouri.edu