THEORIES OF ESL LITERACY INSTRUCTION

There are a number of theories about ESL acquisition and ESL literacy acquisition. These theories focus on different ideas of how people best learn literacy in an additional language. The list below introduces a range of theories. While some of these theories are widely accepted today, not every theory listed here will resonate with every instructor. Most instructors tend to collect and use pieces of several theories in their instruction.

The Participatory Approach

Paolo Friere (1972) viewed teaching literacy as empowering the oppressed through education. He believed that education and knowledge only have value when they enable people to free themselves from the conditions that society forces upon them. This highly learner-centred approach seeks to build literacy through discussion of the learners’ real-life issues and concerns. Initially, “generative words” are chosen to help learners begin to discuss these issues and concerns as well as begin reading (decoding) and writing (encoding). Learners and instructors can then sit face to face and engage in meaningful discussion. This approach stresses instructor and learner as collaborators. Learners and instructor use objects, pictures, and written texts to help them describe and examine relationships between the different aspects of the issue they are discussing. As they clearly articulate the problem, they are able to propose solutions. The instructor is seen as the facilitator of language learning and is an equal participant in the class, learning along with the learners. Learners become equipped to transform themselves and the society around them (Peyton & Crandall, 1995; Huerta-Macias, 1993).

The Whole Language Approach

Whole Language proponents believe that language should be learned from top to bottom. That is, language must be first considered in its whole and complete form before it is consistently broken down into smaller, decontextualized pieces. Language is a social process to be used for the purpose of interaction. Learners, whether children or adults, bring a tremendous amount of background knowledge to the classroom. Instructors must respect and value each learner’s personal expertise and use it as a platform for building language skills. Like the Participatory Approach, Whole Language centres on the needs of the learner and considers the learner to be the driving force in the development of his or her language skills. The learner is encouraged to take risks, both orally and in writing. Function (the ability to communicate) comes first and form (standardized spelling, grammatical endings, etc.) follows. The Whole Language Approach emphasizes the importance of a collaborative approach to learning. Both published and learner-produced texts are useful. Instruction focuses more on strategies for
reading and writing, while issues such as spelling and grammar are taught in response to learner questions (Peyton & Crandall, 1995; Huerta-Macias, 1993).

**The Language Experience Approach**

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a teaching technique or strategy which is consistent with the Participatory and Whole Language Approaches. Language Experience capitalizes on the learner’s background knowledge and allows instructors to provide target experiences designed to enrich language learning. Learners’ experiences are dictated and then written down, either by the instructor or by another language learner. This can be done either as a whole group, in small groups, or one-on-one. The transcribed text is then used as reading material. There is some debate as to the instructor’s involvement in correcting the text; some instructors argue that true language experience stories are entirely in the learners’ own words, regardless of mistakes in grammar or structure, while other instructors prefer to help shape the text. Whichever approach is taken, the substance of the text comes entirely from the learners (Peyton & Crandall, 1995; Taylor, 1992).

The instructor can take learning deeper by developing vocabulary lists, using the text to produce cloze exercises, or focusing on other more mechanical aspects of writing. Many Learners with Interrupted Formal Education have strong oral language skills and a relatively weaker ability to translate what they know into a written text. This technique capitalizes on a learner’s ability to verbalize his or her experiences and provides a way for reading and writing to grow naturally. The LEA also helps to solve a common problem in literacy teaching: finding age-appropriate reading material for low literacy adult ESL learners. LEA is a very common approach, especially at the lower levels of ESL literacy, because it allows instructors access to texts that are entirely based on the vocabulary of the learners, and it allows learners a chance to author and own their own texts.

**The Competency or Performance-based Approach**

This approach begins with the instructor asking the question, “What do the learners need to learn?” What follows is a list of “competencies” or task-based instructional outcomes, such as The learner can read and follow signs in the environment. Learner evaluation is based on whether or not the learner can perform the tasks on the list. The intent of this approach is learner-centred in that each group of learners is assessed and instruction is based on their needs. (Peyton & Crandall, 1995) A good example of this approach is the CLB Literacy Document, which indicates what a learner must be able to do to be considered competent at a given Phase.
The Functional Approach

Life and workplace skills are at the heart of this approach to teaching. A needs analysis allows the instructor to assess which functional skills the learners need to learn. Learner outcomes are usually written as competencies and are sequenced according to priority. This approach focuses on skills the learners need in order to function at home or at work. Communicative and behavioural skills are combined with linguistic objectives. This approach tends to neglect the development of creativity in language and avoids social issues (Mora, 2008).

The Communicative Approach

Abstract concepts such as when, where, how far, and how much as well as culturally appropriate communication are the core of the Communicative Approach. Functional language such as apologizing, complaining, contradicting, and offering allows learners to communicate well with native English speakers. This approach will suit learners who want to become bi-cultural and who see learning English as a way of “fitting in” with the society around them. Like the Functional Approach, this teaching method tends to downplay the expressive and creative aspects of language (Mora, 2008).

The Ethnographic Approach

Combining aspects of the Communicative and Participatory Approaches, the Ethnographic Approach considers the socio-cultural aspects of language as well as linguistic and cultural awareness to be the focus of language teaching. This approach helps learners to become aware of how people communicate in their own lives and the community in which they live. Instructors use ethnographic strategies to examine the struggles their learners face. Learners become observers of language as it occurs naturally around them: on the bus, in the doctor’s office, and in the supermarket. As learners identify what they need to learn, they become invested in language learning (Watson-Gegeo, 1998). This approach is more effective with higher-level literacy learners who have the cognitive and oral language skills needed to analyze the language they hear around them.

The Task-Based Approach

Task-based teaching primarily involves the importance of pair and group work as opposed to instructor-fronted instruction. The instructor provides learners with tasks that are intended to foster genuine and meaningful communication. These tasks are interactive and can concern topics that are new or unfamiliar to the learners. Most effective are topics that involve a
problem or ethical dilemma of some kind. Participants must exchange information and opinions with each other and the task must have a specific outcome – such as making a decision by reaching a consensus. Information gap exercises where all learners have information to share with their group or partner are also effective as they require all participants to take roughly equal parts in completing the task. Research indicates that learners who are working through these kinds of tasks speak in longer sentences and work harder to understand what others are saying (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003).

The Project-Based Approach

In this approach, learners are involved in lengthy projects instead of short-term tasks. Like the Task-Based Approach, projects are heavily dependent on pair and small group work and involve the pair or group solving a problem or producing a product. The learners must communicate clearly and cooperate to plan and achieve their goals. Also, like the Task-Based Approach, projects require learners to use both language and cognitive skills to deal with real problems. This gives language learning a real context and allows learners to practice skills they will need in their home and work lives (Moss & Van Cuzer, 1998; Gaer, 1998; Wrigley, 1998). For more information on Project-Based learning, please see Chapter Ten.

The Natural Approach

When learners enter the ESL literacy classroom with little or no English, the Natural Approach seeks to help them develop English in much the same way as they developed in their first language. This approach is meaning-based and allows learners to receive extended language input (listening and later reading) before requiring language output (speaking and later writing). Learners begin with single words and then move on to two and three word combinations. Finally, they are able to use whole sentences. The Natural Approach requires a safe and supportive classroom environment where learners are encouraged and their errors are not corrected (Illinois Resource Center, 2005).

Total Physical Response

Like the Natural Approach, Total Physical Response is a good choice for teaching beginning LIFE. TPR, as it is known, focuses on developing oral language through physical response to commands. This not only allows for extended exposure to English before the learners begin to speak but also helps learners to remember what they have learned through muscle memory. Children learn their first language through interaction with their family members. These interactions are both physical and verbal. When children begin to speak, they are rewarded by
the positive response of the family members (Asher, 1995). In the ESL classroom, this approach relies heavily on language in the imperative case: “Sit down. Stand up. Close the door.” While this method cannot fill an entire language program, it can provide variety to a lesson and it requires the full engagement of the learner. It also gets the learners moving around, often a welcome break to pen and paper work. TPR is a very common technique at lower levels, when learners are still developing concrete vocabulary. It is less effective at higher levels, as it is very difficult to use TPR to acquire abstract vocabulary.

For a complete list of the works cited in this document and in Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook, please refer to: www.esl-literacy.com/workscited1