


Chapter 57

Emergent Literacy Development in Adult L2 Learners: From Theory to Practice

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ABSTRACT

Globally, many adults lack access to education due to gender, poverty, ethnic discrimination, political conflict, and geographic proximity. Moreover, many of these same adults may migrate at some point in their lives, needing to adapt to new linguistic settings. Oftentimes, such adults need to learn both an entirely new language and first-time literacy - not necessarily in their first language, but in the new language (L2) which they may not yet speak. By providing a robust overview of scholarship on emergent literacy acquisition in children and adults, this chapter heightens understanding of the complexity of acquiring literacy for the first time as an L2 adult migrant. The chapter provides practical guidelines on how teachers of L2 adults with emergent literacy can apply this knowledge in the classroom, focusing on three pedagogical areas - vocabulary acquisition, metalinguistic awareness, and academic socialization.

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, many adults are denied access to education for political, economic, or social reasons. Consequently, today over 750,000,000 adults worldwide are considered illiterate – nearly 10% of the world population (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Moreover, many of these same adults may migrate at some point in their lives, needing to adapt to new linguistic settings. Often, such adults need to learn both an entirely new language *and* first-time literacy – not necessarily in their first language (L1) (which is arguably more difficult to acquire as an adult than as a child), but likely in the new, additional language (L2), which they may not yet speak. The simultaneous development of first-time literacy combined with the acquisition of an entirely new language underscores the difficulty in the developmental processes such

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learners must face. To illustrate, imagine attempting to copy simple text from the classroom board while struggling to a) distinguish and recognize novel shapes (letters), b) recreate the novel shapes in tandem with the instructor's own orthography, c) understand how to orient the paper you are writing upon, all while d) not having any idea what the teacher is saying or the meaning of what you are writing, and e) lacking a systematic understanding of all the parts and components of written language, how they relate to one another, and how to engage with such text. For these students new to literacy, understanding the world of print, particularly in a new language, can be an arduous undertaking.

While there exists a wealth of scholarship dedicated to second language learning and literacy, much of this literature is conducted on students who are literate in their L1 and therefore does not directly apply to L2 learners with emergent literacy (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Tarone, 2010). Moreover, research on adult emergent literacy in the L2 context is still relatively unexplored (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Strube, 2009; van de Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2006). As a result, practitioners suffer from a lack of materials and resources to teach first-time literacy to adult migrants in an L2 context; furthermore, many L2 teaching certificate programs do not include courses on how to teach students who are not L1 literate (McCluskey, 2012; Vinogradov & Liden, 2009; Young-Scholten, Peyton, Sosinski, & Cabeza, 2015). While some may say a natural starting point would be to first teach literacy to these adults in their L1 (Gillespie, 1994; Malaga, 2008; Roberts, 1994), in a multilingual classroom of immigrant and refugee background students from different countries such a suggestion may not only be impossible, but may not match the immediate goals of a learner adapting to a new linguistic environment.

This chapter aims to contribute to our understanding of the great complexity of acquiring literacy for the first time as an adult migrant in an L2 classroom. The chapter begins with an overview of the scholarship on emergent literacy acquisition in children, L1 adults, and L2 adults. Following, practical teaching guidelines are presented in three chosen pedagogical areas: vocabulary acquisition, **metalinguistic awareness** (including a sample classroom lesson), and **academic socialization**. These three areas were chosen due to their critical role in first-time literacy development in an L2 learning context (as elaborated upon in the literature review). The chapter concludes with discussion questions and additional resources.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Scholarship on Children's Emergent Literacy

To understand the process of acquiring literacy for the first time in adulthood, one starting point is the scholarship conducted on L1 children's development of reading. Learning to read entails a multitude of skills, including sound-graph knowledge (Boyer & Ehri, 2011; Ehri, 2011; Megino-Elvira, Martín-Lobo, & Vergara-Moragues, 2016) and (in the case of alphabetic languages), phonological awareness (Furnes & Samuelsson, 2011; Goswami & Bryant, 2016; Sermier Dessemontet & de Chambrier, 2015); consequently children benefit when receiving explicit instruction in phonics (Boyer & Ehri, 2011; Sugate, 2016; Szabo, 2010), and/or syllabic associations (Díaz-Cárdenas, Díaz-Furlong, Díaz-Furlong, & Sankey-García, 2016; Doignon-Camus & Zagar, 2014). Several other skills contribute to success in reading, including word-level knowledge: lexical and semantic knowledge and strategies (Brinchmann, Hjetland, & Lyster, 2016; Kim, Otaiba, Puranik, Folsom, & Gruelich, 2014; Quinn, Wagner, Petscher, & Lopez, 2015), as well as morphological knowledge (Carlisle & Kearns, 2017; Desrochers, Manolitsis, & Georgiou, 2018; Guo, Roehrig, & Williams, 2011). Reading in alphabetic languages (such as

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