Chapter 67
Leveraging Learner Experience: Pedagogical Scaffolding With Refugee-Background Adults

Raichle Farrelly
University of Colorado Boulder, USA

Iuliia Fakhrutdinova
University of Massachusetts Boston, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter builds on the pedagogical knowledge base of educators who work with refugee-background adult language learners. The chapter introduces refugee-background adults who have experienced interruptions in their formal education. The authors present a framework for pedagogical scaffolding that emerges from a sociocultural perspective on learning. An overview of research underscores the benefits of recognizing and building upon learners' strengths, lived experiences, and oral traditions. Classroom-based approaches that integrate pedagogical scaffolding into meaningful learning opportunities to enhance the language and literacy practices of adult learners are highlighted. The chapter sustains innovation and conversation among educators working with refugee-background adults, ideally in collaboration with the learners themselves, to cultivate pedagogical practices that foster learner success in the classroom and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Current global migration trends are resulting in ever-increasing numbers of people in need of developing oral proficiency and literacy in the dominant language of a new country. In particular, schools in refugee-receiving countries are seeing high numbers of students with interrupted formal schooling experiences and limited prior opportunities to develop print literacy in their mother tongue or the official language of their home country (Browder, 2018; deCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009; Shapiro, Farrelly, & Curry, 2018). Reasons that people may have interrupted schooling experiences include but are not limited to,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8598-6.ch067

war, civil conflict, escape from life-threatening persecution, climate crises, inability to pay school fees, migration for economic opportunities, or nomadic lifestyles. In many cases, people migrating due to any of the above reasons are likely leaving countries where literacy rates may be low due to insufficient teacher education, under-resourced schools, political unrest, or absence of a writing system associated with Indigenous[1] languages (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

In the context of English-speaking resettlement countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia and the UK, this subgroup of school-age English language learners is often referred to with the acronym SLIFE–Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009). SLIFE generally include asylum seekers and immigrants from various countries in Latin America, as well as students with refugee experience from countries throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). While the SLIFE label may not be widely used in non-English speaking educational contexts, many of the shared characteristics of learners with experiences of **interrupted formal education** and limited first language (L1) literacy apply to these learners wherever they are (e.g., Turkey, Lebanon, Sweden, Germany, etc.). When referring to adults with gaps in their schooling and emerging literacy skills, much current educational research refers to this population with the acronym LESLLA–also the name of the international organization committed to better understanding and supporting these adult learners: Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (see www.leslla.org). It is worth acknowledging that labeling and categorizing of individuals is not straightforward, and in some cases, may also be problematic (Browder, 2018). However, in many instances, it may serve to identify the specific needs of particular groups, such as the adult learner populations discussed in this chapter.

According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017), while global literacy rates are steadily increasing, there are over 750 million adults worldwide who still lack basic reading and writing (print literacy) skills–many of whom are women. UNESCO calculates adult literacy rates based on the percentage of a population over 15 years of age who can use functional literacy skills to understand basic sentences about their daily lives. In light of this explanation, this chapter speaks to adult populations encompassing individuals 15 years of age and older, which includes students in upper secondary school (i.e., high school).

UNESCO (2005) defines literacy as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" such that an individual is able "to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in community and wider society" (p. 21). This chapter embraces the above definition and extends it to include plural and dynamic notions of literacy that underscore the diverse social practices and dimensions inherent to acquiring and applying literacy (see, for example, Gee, 2010; Freebody & Luke, 2003; Freire, 2000; Street, 1995). Literacy encompasses print, visual, and oral texts and the various ways that individuals combine and interpret multiple modalities to make sense of their world, communicate with a purpose, and participate in society to access new opportunities and be agents of change in their schools and communities.

This chapter explores sociocultural approaches to teaching adult language learners that stem from the early work of Vygotsky (1978). In particular, population-specific approaches to language teaching that promote **pedagogical scaffolding** are considered for use with **refugee-background** adult language learners settling in countries with Western-style approaches to education. It is important to note that while this particular subset of students shares the broad characterizations of having refugee experience, interrupted formal education, and limited prior opportunities to develop L1 literacy, they are obviously