

AMEP Research Centre Fact sheets are developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on issues of professional concern. They provide a summary of the issue and provide annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding.

The *AMEP Fact sheets* are funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) through the AMEP Special Projects Research Programme and are informed by the Australian-based research that is funded by this programme. The *AMEP Fact sheets* can be accessed through the *Professional Connections* website:
<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/factsheets.html>

Context

In recent years, teachers of adult ESL and literacy in Australia have noted an increase in the numbers of students with limited education in their classes. Such students have always been present in the adult ESL field; however, the increased numbers have meant that more teachers have needed to understand and respond to their special needs, and programme administrators have become more conscious of the impact of course programming on their language learning and achievement.

While a number of course trials and projects have explored optimum conditions of learning for preliterate students, few have specifically addressed the relationships between course hours and the learning needs of preliterate and low-literacy learners.

A recent research project (McPherson 2007) specifically addressed these issues by drawing on the opinions of teachers, programme managers and students in focus groups. Some of the findings of this project have been used to inform this Fact sheet.

Preliterate learners

The term 'preliterate learner' is widely used to describe English language learners who are not able to read and write in any language at all. Such learners may enter an English language learning course as beginner learners of English, or they may have already developed quite advanced skills in spoken English.

Some may have learned to speak several languages but have not had opportunities to learn to read and write in any of them. Their language learning experiences are varied, depending on the circumstances in which they have encountered other languages, the imperatives on them to learn to communicate in these languages, and the means of learning available to them. For some, the national language of their home country is a second language and they have learned others through necessities created by their migration and settlement experiences. However, for at least some learners, opportunities to learn the written forms of these languages were not available.

Categories of preliterate learners

Differences in the literacy experience and practice of preliterate learners were explored by Huntley (1992) who found four different categories of preliteracy influenced by socially-determined life and educational experience. Huntley concluded that these categories are indicators for specific literacy curriculum interventions and teaching practice. The four categories he defined were:

- **Preliterate learners:** Learners whose home or first language is the predominant language in their community and doesn't have a written form. Literacy has a low profile in the communication practices of such communities and learners from this background are likely to have had little exposure to the written word.
- **Non-literate learners:** Learners whose home or first language has a written form, and literacy is widely used in social interaction in their home community. However, due to poverty, war, oppression or social disadvantage these students have not had opportunities for education in their native country and as a consequence are not literate in their home language.
- **Semi-literate learners:** Learners who speak a home or first language that has a written form, but because of limited opportunities or interrupted education the learner has developed only very elementary literacy skills in their first language. Such learners are often well aware of the power of literacy in social practice.
- **Non-roman alphabetic literate:** Learners who are literate in a home or first language that doesn't use the roman alphabet (for example Arabic, Greek, Russian).

Later, Burton & Peyton (2003) identified two further categories for ESL students:

- **Non-alphabet literate:** Learners who are fully literate in a language written in a non-alphabetic script (for example Chinese).
- **Roman-alphabet literate:** Learners who are literate in a language written in a roman alphabet script (for example Spanish, French) but are not literate in English.

Issues

Learners' understanding of literacy

Huntley found that the different categories of preliterate learners have very different understandings of the role of literacy in society. Some may not yet realise that literacy is an essential requirement for everyday communication in western societies, or that educational practice is founded on literate skills. Such learners are even less likely to be aware of the kinds of reading and writing skills that underpin communication modes that are now standard in English-speaking communities like Australia, such as Internet messaging, email and SMS.

Anecdotally, teachers report that their students have quickly adopted technologies for spoken communications, such as mobile/cell phones. This response by new settlers to the availability of communications technologies demonstrates a capacity to understand their value in the community and a willingness to learn and use powerful modes of communication. However, there is also evidence that the technologies that demand reading and writing skills are less widely used by preliterate learners (Harris 2006). Harris reported that preliterate learners enrolled in her distance learning programme had not acquired technologies such as CD players and DVD players, and even when these devices were available on loan they were unable to use the learning systems associated with them. She found that her students didn't have the literacy skills needed to identify the correct software, operate the device, or select and operate the correct learning programmes, even when the instructions were based on graphics and symbols.

Effects on learning of different understandings of literacy

Different experiences and understandings of literacy are likely to influence learners' approach to language learning and learning to read and write. Students who come from a literate society but were denied access to education are often well aware of the powerful role of literacy in the community. This can provide strong motivation and appreciation of the opportunity to learn to read and write in their new homeland.

On the other hand, students who come from communities where literacy is not widely used in education or public communication do not always appreciate its significance in highly literate societies. Without guidance, these students may fail to give literacy learning due attention in their language learning programmes and may have a tendency to focus on development of their spoken English skills. Teachers can influence students' understandings of the pervasiveness of literacy by focusing on reading and writing demands in everyday literacy encounters, such as checking transport tickets and timetables, reading classroom signs, street names. Gunn (2003) suggests that initial courses for preliterate learners should focus specifically on preliminary reading skills and handwriting.

Implications for course planning

Educators like Huntley have found that differences among preliterate learners can be indicators of specific curriculum and learning needs. While some of these will be concerned with starting points for literacy learning, there are also implications for different approaches to curriculum, teaching approaches, and the design of teaching materials (Hood and Khoe 1990; Ramm 1992). For a detailed discussion on specific teaching strategies see Achren & Williams (2006).

Elements of successful language learning programmes

In a recent research project (McPherson, 2007) teachers, programme managers and students identified elements of language learning programmes that they found to be effective. Specific areas of interest were course hours or intensity, experiential learning, computer-based learning and independent learning. Students also specifically expressed views on homework practices.

Course intensity (time allocation)

Course intensity has a number of different meanings to educators. One of these is the allocation of instructional time and the ways it is configured in programmes of learning. It can refer to the length of courses in years, months, weeks or days, and to the number of hours per instructional session.

There has been past interest in the role of course intensity in education, however most research has focused on the learning of foreign languages in school education programmes. There is little from this research that is generalisable to adult language learners in immigrant, language-learning programmes. However, Stern's (1985) widely accepted recommendation for modularised courses with clearly defined objectives and outcomes has been widely taken up in adult TESOL programmes.

Recommendations arising from reports on courses for preliterate learners generally recommend part-time classes of three–five days per week and two–four hours per day. However, for most of these reports, course intensity was not the primary focus of the research and few offered data that could support the recommendations.

It is widely believed that preliterate and low-literacy level students are unable to 'cope' with extended periods of learning; however this has been shown to be not strictly true. Discussions with highly experienced teachers of preliterate and low-literacy learners have affirmed that many of these learners are well able to manage learning for up to four hours per day over five days per week, under the right learning conditions.

Students in the earliest phase of settlement may have greater demands on their time in order to attend to medical appointments, negotiate accommodation and

household needs, enrol children in schools and explore employment options. However, some of these students in the McPherson focus group argued that they could undertake those kinds of tasks outside class time, even with four hour per day classes, and that there was no reason to limit classes to less than five days. On the other hand, when asked if increasing their class time would lead to greater language gain, many students did not think so, and attributed their slow progress in learning literacy to their lack of education and their perception that they had learning deficiencies.

Expert teachers consulted in this study maintain that preliterate and low literacy level students need the maximum amount of classroom learning time to make effective learning progress. They have argued that in the initial learning phase these learners need high levels of individualised teacher attention and intervention in order to develop a foundation of learning skills to support formal language learning strategies and to develop foundational literacy skills. Such learning can appear to be slow and painstaking in the early stages of English-only immersion classes, and for teachers to provide each student with adequate time and attention requires a minimum of three–four hours of class time per session. Learners who are not literate in any language have fewer resources to support independent learning. For example, they can't use bilingual dictionaries and without these, it is more difficult for them to recall and use learned language. These teachers argued that more frequent teaching sessions throughout the week allow them to (a) re-introduce learned language in different literacy contexts which helps students to recognise, memorise, and re-use this language in their reading and

writing, and (b) build on current language and literacy skills through the gradual introduction of new language and literacy concepts.

Table 1 presents the judgments of this group of experienced teachers about adequate learning hours for preliterate and low-literacy learners.

Course intensity (amount of learning planned)

Another meaning of the term 'course intensity' concerns the amount of learning planned for a course. It can mean the amount of course content to be covered within a defined period of time, or a narrowed focus on a specific area or skill, for example job seeking skills, or academic writing.

Courses for preliterate and low-literacy learners are often described as 'low intensity'. However this does not mean that such courses have limited course content. As well as language and literacy, the syllabus for these students includes the development of formal learning skills and strategies to equip them for future learning. Teachers participating in the McPherson study consider the cognitive load of syllabi for preliterate learners to be as intensive as those designed for literate students.

For adult preliterate learners the cognitive demands of literacy learning are considerable. Students who are not literate are not able to draw on the support provided by print resources such as dictionaries, worksheets or texts to support memory and recall. The demands on concentration and short and long term memory can be greater for preliterate learners than for literate students

Table 1: Adequacy of course intensity for preliterate and low-literacy learners

Session hours	Focus group view
2 hours per day	Doesn't allow enough time to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cover cultural background information • introduce new language items • recycle and repeat previously learned material (essential for these learners) Students tend not to retain knowledge, progress is limited and slow, students lose motivation
3 hours per day	A good model, less tiring for students and teachers More effective if offered several times throughout the week.
4 hours per day (with mid-session break)	Highly recommended Allows adequate time for out-of-class, concrete, hands-on, kinaesthetic activities Allows teachers more time to review and recycle previously learned language, vary the pace Allows for more time-consuming elements (for example computer-based learning)
Weekly schedule	
2 days per week	Not adequate for beginners and those in early stage of 510 hours
3 days per week	Adequate but not preferred
4–5 days per week	Students learn more, cover more material Teachers can include more learning element such as out-of-class learning, computer skills

who can use print-based resources for support and so are not totally reliant on their memory and recall.

Teachers can manage the cognitive load by interspersing short, intense periods of literacy instruction with activities that use movement spoken interaction and other modes of learning familiar to students. New language and literacy concepts can be introduced through familiar learning activities then reintroduced in alternative contexts and different learning modes of learning, for example, chanting, song, movement or creative arts. The ‘recycling’ of freshly-learned material in different modes helps learners to commit new language to working memory. When teachers regularly revise learned concepts, students are helped to transfer this knowledge from working memory to long term memory. Managing the processes of learning in this way enables students to maintain their concentration and continue learning through long class periods.

Conditions that promote learning

A number of reports on courses for preliterate learners have made recommendations on the conditions that promote learning. In summary, these conditions are:

- experiential learning in which concepts and language are closely linked to students’ own experiences
- literacy tasks that are related to students’ concrete experiences
- the use of visual, concrete and tactile materials
- frequent repetition and recycling of learned material
- frequent breaks and changes of pace
- group and collaborative learning
- bilingual resources, such as teaching assistants
- course hours aligned with students’ availability and learning needs
- the grouping of learners with similar needs together, rather than mixing levels and abilities in one class.

(McPherson, 2007; Achren & Williams, 2006; Barber 2003; Gunn, 2003; Sangster, 2002; Hood, 1990; Hood & Khoe, 1990)

Students with limited literacy have reported that they find some homework tasks difficult and alienating. They reported difficulty and frustration with:

- Tasks with written instructions beyond their reading level
- tasks that require the use of learning technologies not available to them. For example not all have audiocassette recorders; cd players; computers in their homes, if they have only recently arrived in Australia.
- tasks based on the use of learning technologies that require literacy skills
- teachers’ expectation that it is appropriate for them to seek homework assistance from their school-aged children.

However, many teachers believe that homework complements classroom learning, and promotes the development of independent learning skills. Learners can benefit from homework when tasks are designed to recycle previously-learned material rather than introduce new concepts, and tasks and instructions do not make literacy demands beyond students’ current skills.

Teacher support

Teaching preliterate and low-literacy learners is a highly demanding and intensive area of English language teaching. Such learners require an individualised approach that makes great demands on teacher time and effort inside the classroom, and in preparation for classes. McPherson (2007) reports that expert teachers in her project recommend that classroom groups of preliterate students should not exceed 15, and that numbers above ten should be supported with a second teacher or assistance from trained volunteers. Table 2 shows their recommendations.

Table 2: Teacher recommendations for class sizes

Class size	Focus group views
Fewer than 10 students	<p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer opportunities for interaction among students • Teacher less able to use a variety of group work strategies • Classroom dynamics can become very intense • Lower ability learners feel more exposed <p>Advantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works well for disparate level classes • Works well for special focus, individualised instruction for preliterate learners who need intensive work on learning strategies
10–15 students	OK if support teacher or volunteer assistance is available. For computer-based learning, the class should be split.
20+	Too many for preliterate learners or preliminary level class, even with volunteer assistance.

Resources for additional support

The kinds of resources that support them in teaching preliterate and low-literate students were identified by the teachers in this project as:

- In-class volunteers and home tutors
- Adequate time and support for computer-based learning
- Use of a flexible learning/individual learning centre and its resources
- Bilingual support
- Educational counsellors
- Video and DVDs at appropriate levels
- Use of Group & Collaborative Learning.

Conclusion

It may be timely to reconsider the role of course hours in language learning. While factors such as health, job-seeking and other settlement concerns make demands on learners' time, there seems to be little reason for offering preliterate learners fewer course hours than other students. Preliterate learners face a number of barriers to formal language learning and the consequence of this is a greater learning task for them and slower rates of language learning achievement, at least in their early courses.

It seems logical to offer preliterate learners the best possible conditions for learning, which according to expert teachers means more course hours per week combined with a teaching approach that maximises their learning potential.

Annotated bibliography

Achren, L., & Williams, A. (2006). Fact Sheet: Learners with low literacy in the AMEP. *Teaching issues 8*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre. Available: <http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/factsheets/08Teachingissues.pdf>.

This Fact sheet provides a comprehensive overview of the literacy needs of learners from oral cultures who settle in highly literate western societies. It outlines the learning styles and strategies developed by learners from oral cultures, and describes how teachers can utilise these in their language and literacy programmes. There is an extensive description of a teaching approach for beginning literacy with suggestions for syllabus content that can support learners' initial settlement in the community.

Barber, K. (2003). Special focus writing class for Horn of Africa and other AMEP students with similar writing needs. In G. Wigglesworth (Ed.), *The kaleidoscope of adult second language learning: learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre.

This chapter describes a classroom-based study which explored the writing characteristics of students with literacy needs, and developed a classroom teaching strategy to improve their literacy development, using a genre-based approach.

Burton, M., & Peyton, J. (2003). Developing the reading abilities of adults learning English. *ESL Magazine*, 6(2), 10–12.

This article discusses the learning characteristics of learners with varying backgrounds and experiences of literacy in their first language. It provides detailed descriptions of these characteristics, their impact on learning to read in English and recommendations for planning reading instruction.

Croydon, A. (2005). *Making it real: teaching preliterate adult refugee students*. Tacoma: Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

A teaching resource with examples of lesson plans, learning activities, individual, group and pair exercises for preliterate learners, and guidelines for teachers on how to use them.

Gunn, M. (2003). Opportunity for literacy? Preliterate learners in the AMEP. *Prospect*, 18(2), 37–53.

This article describes the outcomes of a classroom-based action research project aimed at optimising the learning opportunities for a group of students from the Horn of Africa and southern Sudan.

Harris, H. (2006) *Delivering to new learner groups* Paper at: AMEP National Conference 2006 Cultures of Learning. 5-7 October, Perth WA.

Hood, S. (1990). Second language literacy: working with non-literate learners. *Prospect*, 5(3), 52–61.

This article discusses the disadvantages to non-literate learners of formal language learning approaches that rely on decontextualised and abstract forms of instruction. Hood employs a systemic-functional model to explain the links between proficiency and context of language, and shows how Halliday's notion of register can be used to explore the dimensions of cognitive demand. She proposes that the systemic-functional model can be used to plan appropriate starting points for beginner learners of English and to show how instruction can move from spoken to written language development, with one mode supporting the other.

Hood, S., & Khoe, S. (1990). Beginner learners, illiterate in L1: where to begin. *Interchange*, 16, 5-7.

This article reviews three well-known approaches to teaching literacy and offers suggestions on how a meaning-centred view of literacy can be applied to early literacy development.

Huntley, H. (1992). The new illiteracy: a study of the pedagogic principles of teaching English as a Second Language to non-literate adults. ERIC

In this article, the author analyses the literacy experience of learners categorised as 'illiterate' and describes four types of literacy in the first language that affect literacy development and should be taken into account in adult ESL literacy instruction.

McPherson, P. (in press). *Modes of delivery for preliterate learners*. Sydney: NCELTR.

This publication reports on a research project that explored course hours and other aspects of course provision that promote learning for preliterate and low-literacy learners in the Adult Migrant English Programme. The report reviews previous research and reports on interviews with students, teachers and programme administrators.

Ramm, J. (1992). *Learners with minimal formal education*. Melbourne: AMES.

This report describes the influences of educational experiences on literacy development and language learning in formal instruction. It makes recommendations for course provision that includes teaching approaches, course hours and issues in materials development.

Sangster, S. (2002). *Teaching to learn: Exploring alternative teaching strategies for oral/aural learners*. Perth: West Coast AMES. Accessed June 2006 at http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/ty/litnet/docs/ANTA_Teaching_to_Learn.pdf

This report describes an action research-based investigation into alternative teaching strategies and learning methods to effectively address the disparate literacy skills and learning needs of students from countries in the Horn of Africa. The report provides recommendations for teaching strategies and methodologies that complement the learners' styles.

Stern, H. (1985). The Time Factor and compact course development. *TESL Canada*, 3(1), 12-27.

This article discusses the effects of instructional time on the development of proficiency in other languages. The author concludes that compact courses, that is, longer sessions over shorter periods of time are more effective for some learner groups. However, the article stresses that the time frame for learning another language is also influenced by the aptitude and previous language learning experiences of the learner.

Compiled by Pamela McPherson
Senior researcher,
AMEP Research Centre,
Macquarie University

Course planning for preliterate and low-literacy learners