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Modes of delivery for preliterate learners

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Glossary

AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
AMEP RC	AMEP Research Centre
ARMS	AMEP Reporting and Management System
CSWE	Certificates in Spoken and Written English
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
DL	Distance Learning
ESOL	English to Speakers of Other Languages
FLC	Flexible Learning Centre
HTS	Home Tutor Scheme
ILC	Independent Learning Centre
L1	First or Home Language
RRIT	Rural and Regional Intensive Training
SPP	Special Preparatory Program
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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Introduction

In the years 2002 – 2006, the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) catered for an increased number of students who had little or no experience of literacy in their first language (Gunn, 2003).

As a result, the AMEP Research Centre's 2005 – 06 Special Projects Research Program for the Adult Migrant English Program focused on meeting the needs of the large numbers of refugees and humanitarian entrants arriving from Africa and the Middle East. The overarching theme for the program was '*accommodating learners with low/pre-literacy and/or interrupted education*' (DIMA, 2007).

The changing profile of AMEP learners and the recognition of specific learning needs (Achren & Williams, 2006; Gunn, 2003; Lunt, 2001; Williams, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) prompted managers of teaching programs to request a re-examination of traditional ideas about the modes of delivery of language programs. This research report *Modes of delivery for preliterate learners* responds to this interest. 'Modes of delivery' should be seen here as relating particularly to issues of course intensity which includes course hours, course design and other resources that support learning.

Terminology

Preliterate

The term 'preliterate' is usually used to describe the literacy experience of learners whose home language does not have a written form, while 'non-literate' describes learners who are from literate cultures but have not had opportunities to develop literacy because of war, poverty or social disadvantage (Huntley, 1992).

In this report the term 'preliterate' refers to students who did not have basic literacy skills in English or other languages when they presented for enrolment in the AMEP. In the majority of cases, these students have experienced barriers to education, or are speakers of languages that do not have a written script. While the term 'non literate' implies a continuous if not permanent state, 'preliterate' more accurately defines learners as being at the starting point of developing literacy skills.

Students assessed as preliterate at enrolment in the AMEP can have spoken English proficiency levels of up to ISLPR 1+, or CSWE 3. However, those who are preliterate and at beginner level in spoken English (ISLPR 0 and Preliminary CSWE) face great challenges in learning, and have higher support needs.

By its strictest definition, learners in this study were no longer 'preliterate' when interviewed, as they were enrolled in AMEP classes and already at early stages of literacy development. However, the majority were still at beginner levels in spoken English (Preliminary or CSWE 1) and at very early stages of literacy development. One exception is learners in a mixed class in a regional centre. Among this group of learners were some who had been in Australia more than two years and whose spoken language proficiency had developed to CSWE 3 or ISLPR 1+ levels. (see **Table 3** Course provision at participating sites, page 6)

Course intensity

'Course intensity' is the term used to describe the amount of time allocated for classroom instruction. It refers to the length of a teaching session and the period of time over which the instruction is offered.

The determination of low and high intensity instruction varies according to the educational context in which it occurs. For example, in the AMEP, a course of six hours per week for the 510-hour entitlement period would be considered low intensity while instructional sessions

of this length may be average or even high intensity for foreign language learning in a school setting. In the AMEP, high intensity courses may be 20 – 30 hours per week. However, there are a number of factors other than time allocation that contribute to course intensity, and these are discussed in the *findings* of the report.

AMEP Provision

Provision of instruction through the AMEP includes a variety of different programs:

Formal classes: Most AMEP learners attend classes instructed by trained English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers in urban settings. Classes meet in the day, evening and weekends. Some classes meet several times a week and others only once a week. Migrants who do not have functional English and meet other government criteria are entitled to 510 hours of instruction in the AMEP.

Independent Learning Centre (ILC): Learners can also engage in independent learning in an ILC.

Rural and Regional Intensive Training (RRIT): In this program, students have a weekly or fortnightly lesson in a one-to-one teaching session with a trained ESOL teacher or in groups of up to three students.

Formal regional classes: AMEP classes are offered in regional areas. These are usually part-time, day or evening according to local demand.

Distance Learning program (DL): In the DL program learners have a prescribed curriculum and materials and meet with their DL teacher via the telephone. Five hours per week are allocated to self-study, drawn from the 510-hour entitlement.

Home Tutor Scheme (HTS): The HTS was designed for learners who cannot attend formal classes because of location or timing or for personal, cultural or work-related reasons. They are instructed by trained volunteers in their homes.

Special Preparatory Program (SPP): The SPP provides up to 100 hours of additional tuition for eligible AMEP clients who had difficult pre-migration experiences such as torture and trauma. An additional 400 hours of English language instruction within the AMEP is available for eligible young people with less than seven years of schooling.

Aims

The overall goal of the study was to investigate the range of delivery modes offered to preliterate and low literacy learners, along with the characteristics of those that provide the best opportunities to achieve both literacy and spoken language learning outcomes. Based on this overarching goal, the specific aims were to:

- document the range of options provided by AMEP service providers/teachers to low literacy and preliterate learners;
- identify the characteristics of best practice models and their effectiveness in providing for the needs of low literacy and preliterate learners;
- identify, where possible, urban, rural and regional parameters of difference;
- make recommendations on effective modes of delivery for low literacy and preliterate learners.

Methodology

A review of the literature on course provision for preliterate learners was undertaken, and participating AMEP service provider organisations were identified.

Five service provider organisations participated in the study. The sites were teaching centres in urban and regional locations across four states, and included distance learning programs. Students, teachers and program managers were interviewed over two years, with the assistance of interpreters and community group representatives for student interviews.

A Teacher Reference Group was convened at the start of the project. This group consisted of five teachers nominated by their organisations as having advanced skills and experience in teaching preliterate learners, and an understanding of research processes. Two of these had previously participated in research projects and have published articles on teaching preliterate learners.

The role of the Teacher Reference Group was to review and comment on the data collected throughout the project, discuss issues arising out of the data and contribute insights based on their professional experience and understandings.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of interviews by centre. Qualitative methodology was chosen as the primary method of data collection because of its value in identifying themes and issues, the main focus of this study.

Table 1 Number of interviews conducted by centre and type of instruction

Urban Centres	Teachers	Students	Program Managers
Site 1	2	11	1
Site 2	4	16	2
Site 3	2	6	1
Site 4	1	3	1
	9	36	5
Regional Centres	Teachers	Students	Program Managers
Site 1	1	7	1
Site 2	1	11	1 + 1 Home Tutor Coordinator
Site 3	1	-*	1
	3	18	3
Distance Learning	Teachers	Students	DL Coordinators
Centre 1	1	0	1
Centre 2	4	0	1
Centre 3	2	0	1
	7	0	3
TOTAL	19	54	11

*Researcher fell ill and student interviews were cancelled. Later attempts to reschedule the interviews were not successful.

Teacher interviews and focus groups

Interviews (see *Appendix 1* for the Teacher Interview Questions) were carried out, either individually or in focus groups, with 19 teachers comprising nine classroom teachers from urban teaching centres, three teachers in regional programs and seven distance learning teachers.

These numbers are a small sample of the total AMEP teacher population. However, the study aims were to draw on the experiences of teachers with greatest expertise in teaching preliterate learners rather than the general population of AMEP teachers, some of whom may have had limited background and experience in teaching this target group. All of the teachers interviewed had from two to six years' experience teaching preliterate learners.

The selected teachers were drawn from AMEP service provider organisations that indicated interest in participating in this study and had substantial proportions of preliterate learners in their programs. The teachers were nominated by their program administrators and selected by the AMEP Research Centre for their potential to contribute insights into the needs of these learners.

In keeping with the qualitative design of the study, teacher responses to interview questions are aggregated and reported in themes identified in the study rather than reported statistically. As may be expected of a group of professionals, there was a high degree of consensus in teacher responses to interview questions. Where views and perceptions vary, they are differentiated and reported. Teacher responses are aggregated and reported under theme headings in the *Findings* section of this report, together with views from program managers and students.

As noted previously, in addition five highly experienced classroom teachers from large and small urban centres formed a reference group and these teachers provided deeper insights in workshops and focus group meetings.

Student interviews

Fifty-four students were interviewed (see *Appendix 2* for Student interview questions) individually with the help of interpreters in four urban teaching centres and in two regional centres. At one urban centre and one regional centre, students requested group rather than individual interviews. Students were selected to represent different age groups, nationalities and genders proportional to the population of preliterate learners in their teaching centre.

Students from distance learning programs were invited to interviews. However, they did not return consent forms and so interviews were not conducted.

Students were asked for their views on current course hours, perceptions of progress in learning English and aspects of their teaching program that were most helpful to them. Not all students responded to all questions. Some expressed concern about the reasons for questions about their learning program, and what consequences there might be for their teachers.

Given the qualitative nature of student responses and the relatedness of these responses to students' context of learning, a statistical tabulation of responses would be reductive and of limited information value. Therefore, learner responses are aggregated and summarised under theme headings in the *Findings* section, and a fuller report is provided in *Appendix 3*.

Although not specified by the study design, learners interviewed were, for the most part, at elementary levels of spoken English as well as preliterate levels for reading and writing in English, and were in beginner classes. The decision to focus on this group of learners was informed by discussions with program managers and teachers who agreed that students who had been in the program for a longer period were likely to have developed English literacy skills and therefore no longer fitted the descriptor 'preliterate'.

Program manager interviews

As shown in *Table 1*, program managers were interviewed in four urban centres, three regional centres and three distance learning programs (see *Appendix 4*). In one urban centre, two senior managers chose to be interviewed jointly. A Home Tutor Coordinator connected to a regional centre also asked to be interviewed. As with teacher and student interviews, program manager responses are reported in the *Findings* section under the headings of themes identified in this study.

Findings

The *Findings* are drawn from the collated views of program managers, teachers and students to report on issues to be taken into account when planning programs for preliterate learners. The section begins with a discussion of preliterate learner enrolments at participating centres and is followed by discussion of factors to be taken into account in program planning for preliterate learners. Finally, three important aspects of course intensity, namely course hours, course design and resourcing, are explored in detail.

Findings: Preliterate student enrolments

Program managers at four urban centres estimated the proportion of preliterate students in their programs as approximately 60%, 50%, 40%, and 20% respectively. In regional centres, preliterate students were approximately 10% of the student population.

In DL programs, preliterate students constituted 25%, 5% and 1% of the student body in the three participating centres. However, the program with the largest proportion of preliterate learners assigned these learners to Home Tutor or RRIT instruction. *Table 2* compares the proportion of preliterate learners across programs in this study.

Table 2 Proportion of preliterate students in types of programs

Program	Preliterate students (%) as approximate proportion of student population			
	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
Urban Centres	40%	20%	50%	60%
Regional Centres	10%	10%	10%	
Distance Learning	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	–
	1%	5%	25% (Referred to HT/RRIT)	
Home Tutor	50% (25% beginners)		33%	

These figures are estimates only. At the time of the study, it was not possible to get ARMS data on actual numbers of preliterate students in these programs.

In 2007-08, 8.4 per cent of students in the Adult Migrant English Program enrolled in distance learning and 5.2% engaged in rural and regional tuition (DIAC, 2008).

The following table outlines course provision for preliterate learners at urban and regional centres participating in this study.

Table 3 Course provision at participating sites

Urban	Hours p/week	Timetable	Focus/level	
Site 1				
Class 1	15	3 x 8.30am – 2.30pm 1x 9am – 2.00pm	Beginner Preliminary	
Class 2	15	3 x 8.30am – 12.30pm 1x 9.00am – 12.00pm	Emergent readers Preliminary	
Site 2				
• Class 1	12-16 hrs	3 x 9.30am – 1.45pm	Preliminary Beginner	optional 4th day
• Class 2	12-16 hrs	3 x 9.30am – 1.45pm	Preliminary Beginner+	
• Class 3	12-16 hrs	3 x 9.30am – 1.45pm	Preliminary	
• Class 4	16 hrs	4 x 9.30am – 1.45pm	Beginner literacy (disparate oracy profiles)	
Site 3	14 hrs	9am-12pm; 12.30pm-2.30pm 9am-12pm; 12.30pm-3.00pm 9am-1.00pm	Preliminary/CSWE I	
Site 4	14 hrs	4 x 9am – 12.30pm	Beginner Preliminary	1 x day vocational elective
Regional				
Site 1	12 hrs	3 x 9am – 1.00pm	Preliminary; disparate level	
Site 2				
• Class 1	6 hrs	2 x 3 hrs	Mixed level, males, evening class	
• Class 2	15 hrs	2 x 6 hrs 1 x 3 hrs	Beginner, females only, daytime class	no childcare
• Class 3	3 hrs	1 x 3 hrs	Mixed level AMEP/ post AMEP/ Literacy/ ESL Evening class	1 AMEP student; no childcare
Site 3		3 x 2.5hrs	Beginner class	
• Class 1				
• Class 2		2 x 2.5 hrs	Post Beginner	

Findings: Program planning

The following discussion summarises factors identified by program managers and teachers as having a major impact on the successful development and delivery of programs for preliterate learners. These factors include learner characteristics, program characteristics and the resourcing required to support preliterate programs.

Learner characteristics

Differing literacy experiences: Learners who are preliterate can vary widely in their experience of literacy prior to arrival in Australia, and these different experiences may influence their approach to language and literacy learning. Those who are from literate cultures but who have not had opportunities for education themselves are often more aware of the powerful role of literacy in the community than those from cultures whose language does not have a written form. In the early settlement period this often translates into different beliefs about the importance of literacy skills, and their role in facilitating participation in Australian community life.

Slower progress than literate learners: Initially, preliterate learners are highly teacher-dependent in class as they are unable to draw on print resources such as bilingual dictionaries to support comprehension, revision and independent learning.

The greater part of their learning program will be on basic literacy skills like orthography, alphabetic and phonemic skills and their use in formal language learning, with the result that less class time is available for content-based language instruction. More literate students are able to draw on print materials and independent learning skills to further their spoken and written English with the result that they make faster progress in all areas. In a mixed class, preliterate students will lag behind literate class-mates, and the teachers will find it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of both groups equitably.

Community support: While some groups have well-established communities in Australia, others do not have such communities to draw on for information and resources. The latter group finds it more difficult to understand the literacy prerequisites for higher education and often have unrealistic expectations of being able to further their education before achieving required levels of academic literacy.

Program characteristics

Regional programs: Regional programs have smaller student populations overall and smaller numbers of preliterate learners which makes it difficult to plan separate classes and meet students' requests for preferred times. Itinerant workers are widely dispersed and they tend to 'drop in and out', making it difficult to form and maintain viable classes.

Distance learning: Distance Learning Coordinators do not recommend the DL program for preliterate learners. Preliterate learners need face-to-face-teaching until they develop the basic literacy and learning skills required for abstracted learning modes such as distance learning.

Cohesive grouping: Forming cohesive learner groups is a challenge to programmers because the continuous enrolment policy requires programs to offer a class within a defined period of time. The outcome of this policy is that learner groups are in a state of constant change, which makes coherent programming and student placement difficult.

Resourcing

Home Tutors: Attracting and training Home Tutors is an ongoing challenge in both urban and regional areas. In urban centres, Home Tutors put limits on the distance they will travel to student homes and the areas they are willing to visit. Coordinators find it difficult to visit regional- or rural-based Home Tutors to provide ongoing training and support for their voluntary work.

Professional development: Increasing numbers of preliterate learners translate to a need for more teachers skilled in the specialised teaching approaches deemed most suitable for preliterate learners. In turn this calls for professional development to enable more teachers to develop these skills.

Childcare: Availability of childcare in urban and regional areas was the most frequently-cited challenge to program planning for preliterate learners.

Findings: Course intensity

The most recent research on course intensity has focused primarily on the impact of time factors on learning achievement in courses of language instruction (Collins et al, 1999). However, seminal studies (Stern 1976, 1985) showed that when pedagogical planning was incorporated into timetabling decisions, better language learning outcomes were achieved. AMEP teachers agree that their pedagogic decisions take cognisance of available instructional hours and course timetables. They share Stern's broader view of course intensity, agreeing that course planning decisions are as critical to effective course intensity as course hours.

Course hours

AMEP administrators, teachers and students contributed views on the issue of course hours and timetables, and its role in language instruction.

AMEP administrators draw on several sources of information when planning course timetables for different learner groups. They monitor learner achievement reports, consult with learners on availability and needs, and consult teachers on the pedagogic implications for timetable decisions. They factor into their decisions the availability of resources such as teacher hours, classrooms, childcare services, and commuter transport timetables.

Specialist teachers of preliterate learners were consulted and they were in consensus in their recommendation that a course structure of four hours per day, four to five days per week, in a block (10 – 20 weeks) provides optimal conditions for teaching and learning in preliterate classes (see *Table 4* and *Table 5*). The professional judgment of these teachers is that learners acquire and consolidate new language concepts faster in longer learning sessions scheduled frequently throughout the week. These teachers say that the learning outcomes defined by the CSWE curriculum require frequent, consistent exposure to spoken and written English and in initial courses especially, learners make better progress with frequent, regular sessions of instruction. For consistent progress in learning, they recommend 3 – 4 hours per session, five days per week. However, teachers conceded that many learners in an early settlement phase may find it difficult to attend courses five days per week. This particularly applies to those with ongoing health problems, work commitments, or extensive family commitments.

Teachers in Distance Learning programs defined course intensity in terms of the frequency of contact between teacher and learner, and affirm classroom teachers' view that there should not be a long gap between teaching sessions.

Table 4 Teacher Reference Group recommendations: sessions per week

Timetabled instruction	Teacher views
2 days per week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient exposure to formal classroom learning practices • Insufficient time to achieve CSWE learning outcome modules • Insufficient time to cover settlement content and related language in one course • Insufficient time for high level of repetition, recycling, repetition required by preliterate learners to commit learned language to working and long-term memory, using aural/oral modes of learning.
3 days per week	<p>Adequate time for learners to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have regular and systematic exposure to English language and language learning, which assists retention of knowledge and skills • Have regular and systematic experience of a formal classroom learning environment • Have adequate practice in speaking, listening, reading and writing in English, with teacher feedback • Apply learned language and literacy skills to different settlement contexts, with teacher feedback. <p>Adequate time for teachers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce new language concepts regularly and systematically • Make explicit the links between new content and recently learned concepts while they are still in students' working memory • Repeat, revise and recycle recently learned language concepts in order to commit them to longer term memory.
4 – 5 days per week	<p>Preferred instructional timetable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners have regular and systematic exposure to English language and language learning • Learners quickly become familiar with classroom and institutional routines and procedures • Course objectives can be more comprehensive, and course planning more systematic • Content areas can be explored in more depth • Faster completion rates for learning outcomes and modules • Adequate time for learners to consolidate newly-learned concepts under teacher supervision, with feedback • Teaching program teacher can accommodate a wider variety of learning modes and elements such as out-of-class learning, computer skills, practice in authentic contexts, etc.

Table 5 Teacher Reference Group recommendations: hours per session.

Session hours	Teacher views
2 hours per day	<p>Insufficient session time for teachers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review learners’ cultural and linguistic knowledge and make connections to new concepts being introduced • Conduct an integrated teaching sequence that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – cultural and contextual aspects of spoken and written discourse – grammatical and phonological features of spoken discourse – grammatical, orthographic and phonemic features of written discourse – explicit connections to language concepts learned in other contexts. • Provide individualised assistance reading instruction and practice • Conduct revision, repetition and recycling activities in differing leaning modes to embed new concepts in working memory <p>Insufficient session time for learners to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practise and consolidate new spoken language items • Practise and apply basic literacy skills related to new language, eg orthographic and alphanumeric • Learn and apply phonemic knowledge to reading comprehension • Revise previously learned content to embed learning in long term memory. (essential for preliterate learners).
3 hours per day	Adequate if offered at least 3 days per week.
4 hours per day	<p>Highly recommended:</p> <p>Adequate session time for teachers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vary instructional pace throughout the session according to the skills and content to be learned • Teach formal learning skills, eg categorising and organising learning materials and resources • Provide a variety of language/literacy learning activities, eg aural, concrete, kinaesthetic, interactive • Provide instruction through a variety of learning modes, eg aural, oral, kinaesthetic, visual as well as print literacy • Include valuable but time-consuming program elements (eg computer-based learning, independent learning, reading aloud, joint class interaction) • Provide individualised assistance to learners. <p>Adequate session time for learners to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practise speaking skills and discourse strategies with co-learners • Practise reading with teacher feedback • Practise orthographic skills • Get teacher feedback on individual learning issues.

Students mostly believe that teachers and administrators should make the decisions about course timetabling, and trust that they are sound, professional judgments made on pedagogical grounds.

Most of these students also perceived a relationship between available course hours and progress in language learning. The few that did not agree believed their (low) achievement rates were a consequence of limited learning skills, and that increased course hours would not make a difference to their current rates of achievement for CSWE language learning outcomes.

Course design

In the AMEP, course intensity is often defined according to the course hours offered, for example low intensity courses may be four – eight hours per week, while courses of 20 – 30 hours may be designated high intensity.

Many teachers recommend ‘low intensity’ courses for preliterate learners on the assumption that early language and literacy development imposes a greater cognitive load, and demands intense concentration that cannot be maintained for longer periods of time (Trevino, & Davids, 2001).

However, specialist teachers defined course intensity not only by the number of allocated course hours, but also by the breadth of course objectives, extent of content to be learned and learning outcomes to be achieved within a defined time frame.

They view the management of cognitive load as a professional teaching skill which is applied in all courses of learning, but is strongly foregrounded in the teaching of language and learning skills to adult, preliterate learners. For these teachers, although course hours are an important variable in decisions about course design, it is a contributor to course intensity rather than its sole defining feature.

The course design variables that teachers use to manage course intensity are *course objectives*, *course content*, *instructional and learning activities*.

Course objectives: Define the learning outcomes that are achievable within the period of time available for instruction. They are developed after an assessment of students’ current knowledge and skills, and with reference to learning outcomes for the Preliminary CSWE curriculum. The achievement rate for learning outcomes is defined by the course hours available for teaching and learning.

Course content: Classes for preliterate learners emphasise the development of foundation learning strategies and foundation language and literacy skills. Teachers select the foundation skills that are most relevant to learners’ current needs, and outcomes that are achievable within the given instructional period. Course content and outcomes can be constrained by inadequate allocation of teaching hours.

Teacher instruction: Teachers design a sequence of instruction and identify the resources required to support learners’ engagement with the course (see Support structures and resources on page 12). They model and demonstrate, using a variety of audio/visual resources, authentic materials and authentic contexts to scaffold learning. They monitor learners’ comprehension, participation and skill development.

Teachers manage the cognitive load by rotating short, high cognitive demand content and activities with familiar, low cognitive demand content and activities throughout the teaching session, and the teaching week. As learners’ language, literacy and learning skills develop, the cognitive load decreases and learners can draw on visual or print materials to support memory and concentration. Frequent repetition and revision alleviates the load on working memory and helps learners to transfer recent learning to long term memory.

Learning activities: Are used to scaffold the development of language, learning and literacy

skills, and to provide learners with opportunities to produce and practice spoken and written language skills. Teachers balance the cognitive load in learning activities by embedding new language concepts in familiar learning activities, and teach new learning activities with familiar language concepts.

Support structures and resources

A number of support structures provide additional support for the teaching of preliterate learners. They include:

- specialised teaching resources
- flexible staffing
- flexible course options for learners
- professional development for teachers
- trials and evaluations of new materials
- two teachers per class
- in-class, trained volunteers
- resources and training for Home Tutors
- teacher exchange and collaboration
- peer and collegiate support
- moderation and training for RRIT teachers
- content emphasis and special modules
- community-based classes.

Distance learning

- Telephone Interpreter Service
- preliminary-level teaching materials
- internal moderation
- teacher exchange and collaboration.

The availability and use of course resources varies among AMEP providers. Among those evaluated by learners, bilingual teaching resources and in-class volunteer tutors rated most highly, and homework and computer-based learning rated lowest.

Bilingual classes were not available at the teacher centres surveyed but informal, on-demand bilingual assistance was available from teaching and administrative staff, and from students from higher level classes.

Volunteer teachers were used in most urban centres, and some regional centres. Teachers train volunteers in the language teaching approaches used for preliterate learners and found them flexible, willing to learn and an invaluable teaching resource. Students appreciated the additional attention, guidance and support volunteers provided.

Computer-based learning was not available to all learners, and not valued by all learners to whom it was offered. Although most agreed that computer skills are a valuable resource, those in beginner classes believed it was not an effective use of their class time to use computers for learning before they had developed basic reading skills.

Homework assignments were a source of frustration and difficulty for many students because:

- Homework activities required reading skills beyond their level, for example task instructions in commercial learning materials.
- Homework activities often require the use of technologies which students have not learned to use, do not possess, and cannot obtain.
- Household and family commitments do not allow time for daily homework assignments.

Discussion

At the time of the study, preliterate learners constituted a large proportion of students in some AMEP programs, bringing their teaching and learning issues to the fore and highlighting the need for an integrated approach to program planning.

In the past, professional wisdom has deemed that the needs of preliterate adult learners are best met by low intensity courses characterised by:

- fewer hours of instruction per day;
- fewer instructional sessions per week; and
- limited content and slower paced instruction.

However, this view is now under challenge. In addressing the aims of this study, a new view of the features of best practice in course provision for preliterate learners has emerged. These features are discussed under the headings of:

- course hours;
- course design; and
- support structures and resources.

and are described in the following response to the project aims:

- to document the range of options provided by AMEP service providers/teachers to low literacy and preliterate learners;
- to identify the characteristics of best practice models and their effectiveness in providing for the needs of low literacy and preliterate learners;
- to identify, where possible, urban, rural and regional parameters of difference; and
- to make recommendations on effective modes of delivery for low literacy and preliterate learners.

Aim: To document the range of options provided

Course hours

The courses for preliterate learners at participating sites during the second stage of the study (2006) are presented in *Table 3: Course provision at participating sites* (p.6). These course offerings were based on student enrolments, profiles and assessed need at the time of the study. Program managers advised that the timetables are flexible and can be adjusted each term in response to enrolment patterns and identified student needs.

Urban centres had more students so had more classes and the capacity to offer more choice in terms of level and instructional focus. Regional centres were constrained by lower student numbers, a limited number of available trained TESOL teachers, and limited childcare places so had fewer options for instructional hours. In some places only one course option was available to learners.

Course design

The challenges of teaching preliterate learners are centred on students' lack of familiarity with the literacy-based teaching approaches usually adopted for teaching English to speakers of other languages. Classroom learning calls for a set of literacy-based skills that most adults in Australia acquire throughout their schooling. Not only do preliterate learners need to learn to read, write and speak English, they need to develop formal learning skills used in classroom settings, and understanding of how these enable language learning. This is not to say that preliterate learners are not skilled in language learning, and do not have advanced learning skills. However, by mastering formal learning skills, AMEP students are equipped to further their English language learning outside of class

and after completion of their 510-hour entitlement. The formal learning skills they acquire will stand them in good stead for further education of a vocational nature.

The transition from oral/aural learning skills while developing elementary literacy skills calls for a specialised teaching approach. When preliterate learners are only a small proportion of new arrivals in the AMEP, there is lesser demand for these teaching skills. When several AMEP service providers experienced an increase in the numbers of preliterate learners, there was an accompanying need for more teachers with knowledge of oral/aural teaching approaches, skills in teaching elementary literacy and formal learning, and the ability to help learners build on familiar learning approaches in order to acquire new ones. Program administrators identified a need for professional development to enable more teachers to acquire the required teaching skills, and the AMEP Research Centre prioritised this need in its professional development program. (See AMEP Research Centre Annual Reports 2002 to 2006).

With mixed level classes, teachers tend to choose methods and materials suited to the greatest number of students and make adaptations to suit others in the class. The teaching strategies used to challenge and motivate higher level learners are less effective for preliterate learners, and vice versa. To be effective, teaching materials for preliterate learners have to be tightly prescribed and highly individualised, and commercially-made materials are rarely suitable. Learning activities are likewise specialised and individualised, so course planning for mixed level classes becomes a large and time-consuming task.

Support structures and resources

Trained, volunteer tutors were used in several urban centres, but were less consistently available in regional centres where the need is greater for mixed level classes.

Other resources were:

Bilingual assistance: This is not available to all students, and is not always provided at a professional standard. For example, it may be provided by a staff member without training in educational practice or interpreting and translating. Regional centres are less likely to offer bilingual classes, and learners appear to value this means of learning support more than teachers do.

Excursions: These are of great value when focused on settlement needs and communication skills, for example orientation to local transport and essential services, and language of transactions in these contexts.

Independent learning: Regular sessions in a Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) and/or Independent Learning Centre (ILC) help students develop autonomous learning skills, use a range of learning technologies, and individualise their learning program. The most effective example observed in the study integrated the teaching of independent learning skills in the classroom with the use of FLC resources, and this learning consolidated the language content learned in the classroom. In this location, computer programs were appropriate to the level and skills of preliterate learners and they gained experience in the use of learning technologies that support independent learning. Without appropriate software and programs, students find computers and other technologies alienating and irrelevant to their learning goals.

Aim: Identify the characteristics of best practice models and their effectiveness in providing for the needs of low literacy and preliterate learners

Course hours

The professional judgment of experienced AMEP teachers is that learners acquire and consolidate new language concepts faster with longer learning sessions held frequently during the week. Teachers say that the learning outcomes defined by the CSWE curriculum require frequent, consistent exposure to spoken and written English. For effective learning

they recommend three – four hours per session, five days per week.

However, program managers, teachers and learners agreed that the demands of early settlement make it difficult for students to attend class on a full-time basis. Learners noted that over time, their settlement demands abate and they are able to refocus on language learning, and commit more time to its processes. Some argued for fewer hours in their first course as they adapt to living in the Australian community, and the opportunity to adjust their course hours as their learning needs change.

Course design

The reference group recommend a teaching approach that features:

- the use of concrete, experiential teaching approaches, while scaffolding the development of formal learning skills;
- explicitly teaching the context and purpose of literacy practices as well as literacy skills; and
- frequent recycling of content and language skills, that is, presenting already learned language features in different, though familiar, settlement contexts.

These teachers take issue with the notion that learning literacy is ‘low intensity’ and describe the tenacity, persistence and concentration that students demonstrate in their efforts to acquire these notions and skills as indicative of intensive learning. With regular and frequent instruction, a structured curriculum, and clearly defined learning outcomes, preliterate learners can make steady progress towards achievement of learning outcomes in spoken and written English at Preliminary level and Certificate I in Spoken and Written English.

Aim: Identify, where possible, urban, rural and regional parameters of difference

Course hours

Regional programs have the least flexibility to offer different course timetable options. Because of the low numbers, preliterate students are often placed in a class with more advanced students and teachers struggle to provide the course content, methodology and individualised assistance these learners need. While teachers in urban centres can draw on the assistance of volunteer Home Tutors, their in-class assistance seemed to be less available in regional centres.

When students are unable to attend classes in a teaching centre they can be enrolled in the Distance Learning program, however this mode of delivery is highly challenging for learners who have limited or no experience of formal learning, and limited or no literacy skills. Where available, these students can be offered the Remote and Rural Intensive Teaching (RRIT) program which provides 1 hour per week of individualised face-to-face instruction and, for eligible students, the Special Preparatory Program (SPP) with up to an additional 400 hours.

In locations where RRIT is not available DL Coordinators can enrol students in the DL program as a last resort for English language tuition. However, policy guidelines do not allow the DL program to offer SPP and its additional hours to eligible students. DL Coordinators expressed concern that SPP-eligible students enrolled in a highly challenging mode of delivery cannot be offered the support this program can provide.

Course design

Students surveyed in most regional centres had relocated to the regions in search of ongoing employment. Consequently they were less likely to be available for daytime classes; and after a full day’s work were less likely to be available for extended class hours. Teachers report that in these circumstances, learning needs to be carefully staged for learners to accommodate higher levels of fatigue, reduced capacity for deep concentration; and fewer

class hours. Some learners felt that more of the instructional focus should be on workplace spoken communications. However, teachers caution that workplace literacy has a key role in workplace safety.

Aim: Make recommendations on effective modes of delivery for low literacy and preliterate learners

To reiterate, the term ‘modes of delivery’ encompasses three major aspects of AMEP program delivery: the number and configuration of available course hours, course planning and teaching approaches and resources to support learning. This study has explored the views of program administrators and teachers from their professional standpoint, the views of preliterate learners enrolled in the AMEP, and academic and teacher research undertaken in a variety of language learning contexts. Recommendations on program delivery, drawn from these sources, are summarised in the following section.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Course hours

As Hood (1990) comments, numerous reports on courses for preliterate learners have iterated that early literacy development is characterised by painstaking, incremental learning gains achieved through a level of persistence and tenacity that is difficult to maintain over several class hours. These reports conclude that the high ratio of learner effort to learning gain is indicative of a need for lower intensity courses, that is, fewer overall course hours, and fewer hours per session. Hood & Kightley (1991) take issue with this conclusion, noting that limiting course hour provision for preliterate learners has not resulted in increased learning gains.

As discussed above, teachers in this study concur, and it appears there is no pedagogical argument for limiting course hours to less than 15 hours per week.

Course design

Hood (1990) and Hood & Kightley (1991) call for explicit, highly structured teaching of literacy and learning skills, and Barber (2003) successfully applied these principles in her class. Expert teachers in this study agree that ongoing literacy gain is achieved through carefully scaffolded instruction, and that instruction can be carefully managed by teachers at an appropriate intensity.

Instruction is characterised by:

- explicit information about literacy practices in the Australian community;
- systematic instruction in phonological, phonemic and orthographic features of English;
- guided use of learning technologies;
- ongoing monitoring of learner achievement;
- guided use of self-directed learning strategies; and
- varying the learning modes and pace throughout the learning session with recycled content and learning activities.

Course resources

The following resources are recommended by program administrators, teachers and learners and in some sites these are already in place:

Pedagogic resources:

- bilingual instruction, or bilingual resources to support language learning;
- teaching materials designed specifically for preliterate learners;
- concrete, visual teaching materials and resources; and
- scaffolded, multimode instruction that targets literacy development as well as spoken language skills.

Physical resources:

- access to Flexible or Independent Learning Centres that provide a wide range of learning resources and encourage independent learning skills;
- dedicated teaching rooms that house self-access resources; and
- computer hardware and software for the in-class, independent learning advocated for adult education.

Volunteer resources

Teaching assistants, whether trainees or volunteers, have a vital role in providing individualised assistance, rehearsal and practice for students in larger size classes. Some will need training to enable them to focus their assistance on course objectives and teaching strategies shown to be most effective for these learners.

Teacher development resources

Advanced skill teachers should be able to share their knowledge and experience in professional development roles at their local teaching centre, or in the national professional development program provided by the AMEP Research Centre.

While the national program is constructed formally, local professional development can take a number of forms, such as team teaching, shared resources, in-house workshops, peer mentoring and support. Informal professional development can be of great benefit for sharing the expertise within a local teaching centre, and particularly smaller and regional centres.

Professional development resources are an effective way to demonstrate and model good teaching practice, and resources of this nature, nationally distributed, would support local professional development initiatives.

Summary of recommendations

The overall goal of this study was to investigate the range of delivery modes offered to preliterate and low literacy learners, along with the characteristics of those that provide best opportunities to achieve literacy and learning outcomes. The study identified a consensus view of teachers and program managers that informs the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** That AMEP Service Providers consider making available a course intensity of 15+ hours per week for development of literacy and learning skills for preliterate learners where it is feasible for students.
- **Recommendation 2:** That where student numbers allow it, AMEP Service Providers provide choice of course hours for preliterate/low literacy learners.
- **Recommendation 3:** That AMEP language learning programs for beginner preliterate learners use concrete, experiential approaches to teaching, combined with explicit instruction on classroom learning cultures and practices.
- **Recommendation 4:** That consideration be given to documenting the teaching approaches of expert teachers of pre literate learners when developing professional development materials for AMEP teachers.
- **Recommendation 5:** That if further information about the relationship between course hours and rates of achievement by preliterate learners is required, consideration should be given to commissioning such a report.

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Appendix 1

Teacher interview questions

Experience and beliefs

- 1 How much experience do you have teaching preliterate learners?
- 2 What do you understand by the term 'course intensity'?
- 3 What effect do you think course intensity has on student learning and achievement?
- 4 What influences your beliefs about course intensity for preliterate learners?
- 5 What are some of the strengths and challenges these learners have in learning English in AMEP classes?

Program delivery

- 6 What were your teaching goals for this current course?
- 7 Were your course goals influenced by the intensity of the course? In what way?
- 8 What were the course hours of your class this term?
- 9 Are you satisfied that the course intensity of this class was the most appropriate for your preliterate students?

If Yes – Why?

If No – What course intensity would you recommend for your current preliterate students?

Program support

- 10 Do you know of any factors that constrain your program from providing courses of appropriate course intensity?
- 11 What other features of your teaching program support your preliterate/minimal literacy students' language learning?
- 12 What support structures does your program have in place to assist you with teaching preliterate and low literacy learners?

Appendix 2

Student interview questions

Course intensity

- 1 Is this your first English course in Australia?
If No – what other classes, how many?
- 2 What is your priority in learning English – improving your speaking/listening or reading and writing skills?
- 3 How many hours each week is your class?
- 4 Did you ask for these hours/class times?
If Yes – Why did you want these hours/times?
If No – Were you happy with these hours/times - why/why not?

Progress and achievement

- 5 Are you happy with your progress and achievement in learning English?
- 6 If your course hours were longer/shorter do you think you would have made more progress/achievement?

Course components

- 7 Which parts of your course are most helpful to you?
- 8 Do you do any homework activities outside of class?
What kinds of things do you do?
How often?
- 9 What class hours would you like next time? Same/different (Why, if relevant?)
- 10 What other course preferences do you have?

Appendix 3

Student interview responses

Students were interviewed at four urban sites and two regional sites with the assistance of interpreters from community representatives nominated or approved by the students, NAATI-qualified independent interpreters, and the Department of Immigration's Telephone Interpreter Service. Students were not interviewed at the third regional site because of a combination of unforeseen circumstances.

Students were asked for their views on current course hours, perceptions of progress in learning English, and aspects of their teaching program that were most helpful to them. Not all students responded to all questions.

The qualitative nature of student responses and the relatedness of their perceptions to their unique learning contexts meant that a statistical table alone would be reductive and would provide limited information. Consequently students' responses are grouped by class and are summarised below.

Urban centres

Site 1

Class 1: Beginner preliminary level class. 15 hours per week x 3 days

For five of the six students interviewed, this was their first English class in Australia. Two had requested a 3-day class, and three said they were not offered an alternative. Of those not offered an alternative, two were happy with the course hours and slow paced tuition, while the third would like to increase his hours. All students were happy with their progress in learning.

Three of the students interviewed believed that:

- their rate of progress was influenced by the intensity of the course;
- fewer hours per week would adversely affect their rate of progress; and
- more hours per week would lead to faster learning and greater achievement.

All students were happy with all aspects of their program, although they would prefer to have a book rather than worksheets, and one found the teaching method difficult to adjust to. Some commented that they were unable to complete homework because they could not read or write.

Class 2: Emergent readers. Preliminary level class. 15 hours per week x 3 days

The five students interviewed were in their first English class, and two commented it was their first experience of formal education.

All indicated they had not requested these course hours but had been assigned to the class by the institution. However, they were happy to have this decision made for them and comfortable with the course hours. One would prefer only two days of class per week to allow an extra day for job-seeking. Three others would not be able to attend more than three days because of home responsibilities.

Four of the five were happy with their progress in learning to speak English while two indicated concern about their slow progress with reading and writing.

All five students were happy with the teaching program but felt computer work was too difficult because of their limited reading skills. All rated excursions highly because of the opportunities they offered to speak English and become familiar with the city area. Four students identified volunteers as an especially valuable part of the program.

Site 2

Class 1: Beginner Preliminary level class. 12 hours per week x 3 days

Four students were interviewed, and all were in their first AMEP class, three being eligible for SPP. Two students were attending class two days per week. Three nominated learning to speak English as their greatest priority, one said reading, writing and speaking were the priority and another wanted to learn all four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Three students said they were not satisfied with their course hours. One student (SPP) attending three days per week, would like more hours but said she did not have adequate English skills to make the request (program manager advised interpreters are available to assist students in their communications with the institution). Three others would also prefer more hours but could not get childcare for additional days. One said she would request fewer hours for the next course because she found classroom learning very stressful. Another stated he would like one more day per week, but did not give a reason.

All students believed that they would learn English faster if they attended class for an additional day/s per week.

All students were happy with the teaching approach, and rated computer work, excursions and volunteer assistance highly as valuable elements of the teaching program.

Class 2: Beginner Preliminary level class. 12 – 16 hours per week x 3 – 4 days

Four AMEP students were interviewed, all stating they were in their first English class. Of this group two were attending class on an optional fourth day per week. Another indicated she would attend a fourth day if childcare was available.

All four students were pleased with their progress in learning English, and saw greatest progress in their listening and writing, although one felt she was learning very slowly.

Three believed that increased course hours would lead to a faster rate of learning, while one was not sure.

All found volunteer assistance in class very helpful. Three found computer work interesting and useful, three found excursions interesting and useful, while one preferred classroom learning.

Class 3: Preliminary Beginner. 12 hours per week x 3 – 4 days

Five students were interviewed and all stated they were in their first English class. All attend 12 hours per week and one student would have preferred five days a week. Two were happy with their progress, and two were very happy.

Only one of this group believed that more course hours would lead to better or faster achievements in learning. One believed it would not help at all; another stated she could not learn any faster than her current rate; the fourth student believed that the longer time away from her children would cause her to worry and that this would inhibit her learning.

Class 4: Literacy focus. 16 hours x 4 days

Five AMEP students were interviewed, for one student it was her first AMEP class. Three students requested this class; one was assigned to the class, not offered other options and would prefer five days per week. One followed the institution's advice to study four days and

keep one day free for other commitments, and she was satisfied with this arrangement.

All these students believe there is a correlation between class hours, rate of learning and progress in learning, however, four said that other commitments would prevent them attending additional days.

Views on the use of volunteer tutors, computers, excursions and independent learning centres were mixed. Four out of five found the use of volunteer tutors helpful; three thought excursions were not necessary and one commented that if she learned to read she could independently find her way to community agencies herself. All found that the time allocated for computer-based instruction (2 x 30-minute sessions) was inadequate to develop the skills required.

Site 3

Class 1: Preliminary level class. 12 hours per week

The three students in this class were interviewed as a group. One student at preliminary level found the hours adequate, and was unable to do more because of family responsibilities. This student found classroom learning very difficult.

The second student was also happy with the hours; however, childcare was at a distance from the teaching centre and class finishing times meant he was often late to collect his children.

The third student believed he needed more hours as he was still at CSWE I level after two courses.

Class 2: Flexible Learning Centre

Three students who attended class and had regular periods in the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) were interviewed.

One student studied four days per week, and had two sessions in the Flexible Learning Centre. This student understood that the FLC offered a wider range of learning methods and technologies and found classroom learning and FLC learning equally good.

The second student found FLC work easier than classroom work and although he believed himself to be a slow learner, found the computer work easy to understand. He said he had little experience of schooling and believed he should always follow the teacher's advice on learning methods.

The third student found FLC work more difficult, had more difficulty understanding the teacher and following her instructions, and found the computer more difficult than handwriting. However, she said she accepted her teacher's advice that it would be useful for her to study in the FLC.

Site 4

Class 1: Beginner 3.5 hours x 4 days per week (includes one hour per day in Flexible Learning Centre)

Three students were interviewed. It was the first class for two students and one student interspersed study with work.

All students were satisfied with the flexibility of course hours. One had taken up an optional fifth day for a content-based course; one occasionally took this option when child and family commitments allowed; one combined classes with work and family commitments.

All were happy with their progress in learning English; however, one stated he learned more English at work than in class, finding the experiential nature of workplace learning easier. He believed classroom and workplace learning should be more closely aligned.

One student believed bilingual teaching should be available to beginners, and that more

African workers should be employed at teaching centres to assist others of this background with acculturation to learning.

All students were happy with the teaching program. All rated excursions highly. Two rated Flexible Learning Centre time highly while one stated she did not understand its purpose.

Learners at regional centres

Regional centres

Site 1

Class 1: Mixed level. 12 hours x 3 days

Seven students were interviewed and all had been learning English for approximately 12–18 months. Four were satisfied with 12 hours per week because of large families and home responsibilities. One would prefer higher intensity (five days) to make faster progress.

Two commented that three days per week was too intensive at beginner stages. They said beginner classes should be less intensive in terms of session hours per day and number of sessions per week, and that course intensity should increase as English language skills development increases. One found it difficult to sit and concentrate for four hours per day because of his medical condition.

All believed they had made considerable progress in their class.

There was no consensus on the question of relationships between course hours and language improvement. Most students answered this question in terms of their capacity to increase their hours of learning.

Six found volunteer tutors a help in class, while one thought it more helpful for beginner students.

Three students would like computer skills to be included in the course. Three would prefer to focus on English only, while one learned computer skills in a different program.

Three students found it difficult to complete homework because of family commitments. One completed it occasionally. One completed it one – two times per week and one would like more homework.

Site 2

Class 1: Mixed level; males. 2 x 3 hours per week, evenings

Four male students were interviewed as a group. The students were all working so evening class was suitable for them. These students believed they would progress faster with more hours, but home commitments did not allow this. Only one student would prefer three nights.

Students were happy with the program, which included computer time, volunteer assistance and homework every week.

Class 2: Beginner 15 hours per week

Five female students were interviewed as a group. They are a mixed-level class, both new arrivals and longer term, some with high oracy but low literacy and some with low oracy and literacy. It is the first class for all students.

They are highly motivated to learn to speak English, stating they ‘have many problems caused by lack of English’. They would like to increase hours to 18 hours per week. There was no adequate childcare available, so they had to bring children to class.

They found it difficult to understand the teacher, and needed an interpreter.

Class 3: Mixed level, ESL + Literacy class. Three hours per week

Two students were interviewed: one preliterate female student at Preliminary level and one male student not literate in L1.

The Preliminary-level student understood that while hours are limited, this was the most that could be offered. She felt she was making better progress than in a previous urban-based class. She did not have access to childcare so attended evening class while her husband took care of the children.

The male student would have liked more hours per week but could only attend evening because of work commitments. He felt he would learn faster with more hours, and if he did extensive homework and sought assistance from other students.

Summary

Most students believed there to be a relationship between the number of course hours (course intensity) and rate of progress in learning English. Those who did not agree considered themselves slow learners and believed they would not make greater gains with increased hours of study. While a few students would prefer more hours, most of these believed they were unable to increase their course hours because of settlement and family commitments.

There was wide appreciation of the additional learning support provided by volunteers in the classroom and mixed views about using computers in second language learning, with beginner students and non-readers being more daunted by their inclusion in their program. Some referred to a limited ability to complete homework independently because of low literacy or the demands of family and home responsibilities.

Appendix 4

Program manager interview questions

- 1 What proportion of your intake is preliterate/low literacy students?
 - 2 Do preliterate students from different cultural backgrounds have similar characteristics as learners, or do some have special needs?
 - 3 Describe the challenges these learners present for:
 - program planning
 - teaching
 - 4 What strategies or mechanisms has your program developed to respond to these challenges?
 - 5 What do you understand by the term ‘course intensity’ in relation to program delivery?
 - 6 Is this a factor you take into account when planning programs for:
 - all learners
 - preliterate learners
 - 7 To what extent do the following influence your decisions about course intensity and delivery modes for preliterate learners?
 - research findings
 - student requests or apparent needs
 - teacher recommendations
 - available resources
- other
- 8 What course intensity and delivery modes do you recommend for these learners, and why?
 - 9 What strategies or mechanisms do you use to support the teaching of these learners (for example, teacher professional development, teaching resources etc)?
 - 10 What other factors (+ or -) influence your program’s ability to offer best practice delivery models for these learners?

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