7 Teaching and Tutoring Adult Learners with Limited Education and Literacy

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7.1 Introduction

In keeping with teachers' and tutors' interests and the professional development needs described in the introduction to this book, this chapter focuses on the skills for teaching and tutoring second language reading and writing to migrant adults with limited education and literacy and the attitudes necessary for working effectively with this learner population. We provide information so that teachers and tutors will be able to help learners develop literacy practices and be engaged in the communities in which they are living. The chapter starts with reference to the theory and research covered in the previous chapters and is then devoted to ideas for practice.

The chapter begins with an overview of the meaning and components of literacy and then discusses the following six topics:

(1) What it means to be a literacy learner.
(2) Preparing to teach an adult literacy class.
(3) Developing print awareness.
(4) Phonological awareness and sound-symbol correspondence.
(5) Instructional practices for MULTILEVEL CLASSES.
(6) Assessments.

7.2 Conceptualizing Literacy

Literacy is broadly understood to be reading and writing skills and what it means to use these skills in one's daily life. (See Chapter 3 for further discussion of literacy and society.) Discussions of what it means to be literate extend beyond a focus on basic skills and practices. For example, Brian Street and Shirley Brice Heath focus on the SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS OF LITERACY. According to Street (1984), literacy is a culturally and socially embedded practice that is infused with beliefs and ways of knowing within a particular context, rather than a set of isolated, transferable

skills. In Heath's (1983) ethnographic work in rural American communities in North Carolina, literacy engagement begins with a text. Heath finds that people in different communities engage with texts in many different ways, that go beyond what is narrowly defined in formal, school settings as 'reading'.

The sociocultural perspective includes the notion of *multiliteracies* (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), the many ways that people practice literacy in their everyday lives outside of formal school settings. This includes reading recipes, newspapers, signs and online media; helping children with homework; and reading for self-improvement. Janks (2010), drawing on the work of Freire (1970/1993), argues that texts position readers and writers in specific ways and reflect the writers' and readers' contexts and perspectives. Gee (2015: 9) argues that texts contain the 'social and political ideas of those groups with the most power'. Therefore, it is important for teachers and tutors to consider the messages that materials used in instruction might convey and how they position literacy learners in the communities in which they are now living and learning.

Literacy, and what it might mean to be literate (or illiterate), is studied by scholars from a broad range of perspectives. In-depth discussion of these perspectives is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we acknowledge that becoming literate in a second or additional language (L2) is a complex process for adults with limited education and literacy, especially those who come from an oral tradition. Watson (2010), drawing on the work of Goody (1968, 1977) and others, suggests that literacy 'brings about major changes in the ways that people think about themselves and the world, because literacy fundamentally alters the structure of intellectual processes and cultural relations' (Goody, 1977: 34). Huettig (2015) contends that literacy skills can influence cognitive processes, which range from making predictions about the meanings of a text to the amount of attention that an individual is able to give to a text, for what period of time (ATTENTION SPAN). Bassetti (2009) writes that seeing a language in its written form during oral language learning acts as an additional form of language input, which can facilitate learning. We can see that literacy and becoming literate is more than learning to read and write. It is a different way of engaging with the world and thinking about language.

With ideas about literacy in society and in the mind described in Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter focuses on teaching L2 reading and writing skills and the attitudes necessary for working with literacy learners who are learning to read and write for the first time in a second language. By maintaining a focus on instruction, the chapter provides teachers and tutors with specific instructional practices for working with literacy learners in different instructional contexts.

7.3 Five Topics to Consider When Working With This Learner Population

7.3.1 What it means to be a literacy learner

Adults who have limited or no reading and writing skills in their home or any other language and who are developing literacy skills for the first time in the majority language of the country in which they are living are referred to by various terms.

Bigelow and Vinogradov (2011) use a term also used for children, emergent reader. In North America, the term *SLIFE*, or STUDENTS WITH LIMITED OR INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION, is often used (DeCapua & Marshall, 2013). In this chapter, we use emergent reader, adult learner and literacy learner interchangeably to acknowledge the agency and circumstances of adult learners. We recognize that learners may speak several languages but not read or write in any of them, and that some may speak a language that does not have a written form. Indeed, adult learners are a heterogeneous group.

Understanding that literacy learners may have difficulty with or little knowledge of reading and writing skills can help practitioners develop a deeper understanding of the challenges that these learners face when learning to read and write for the first time in a second language, as described in Chapters 2 and 3. We begin this chapter by stressing that that illiteracy is not a 'permanent condition or characteristic' (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011: 120), and educators need to be aware of assumptions they may hold about emergent readers. Unlike children or literate adults learning to read in a new language, these learners face the double challenge of learning oral forms of the L2 while simultaneously learning to read and write in that language (Koda, 2005; Vinogradov, 2008; Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006). Tarone *et al*. (2009) note that children acquiring L1 literacy have four or more years to develop oral skills before beginning to read and write. Additionally, adult learners are beyond the age of compulsory and cost-free schooling, they often work and have families and they have far less time to devote to schooling. This puts them in a very different position from their younger counterparts who are required to attend school and have few, if any, work and family commitments.

Adkins *et al*. (1999) observe that teachers and tutors are often involved in helping migrant adults cope with challenges of everyday life in the destination country, in which the simplest literacy tasks can pose barriers to communication. Misunderstandings that can arise from these tasks can result in refugees and immigrants believing that their identity is threatened (Ullman, 1997). In fact, these adults bring a great deal of commitment, knowledge and skills to the learning endeavor. In *Bringing Literacy to Life,* Wrigley and Guth (1992) describe the wealth of experience, life knowledge and strengths that they possess. In their new country, they may have secured jobs, enrolled their children in local school systems and accessed social services. Likewise, Vinogradov and Bigelow (2010) emphasize that these adult migrants, like all adults, develop social networks and are adept at problem solving in daily life. In the face of considerable educational challenges, their sense of humor, commitment and openness to learning create the sort of positive atmosphere in which learning flourishes. However, the loss of support systems, such as family, friends and community, can compound their challenges. According to Adkins *et al*. (1999), the pressure to integrate is an additional stressor that makes it difficult for adults to be fully engaged in their learning and may result in a lack of attention or sleepiness. If they are refugees or asylum seekers, they may have experienced trauma and they may not yet have legal status to remain in the

country. Pynoos *et al*. (1993) discuss how the experience of trauma brings about psychological, social and physical changes that affect the speed and facility with which the L2 is learned. Observable behaviors include absences, withdrawal from participation and changes in progress.

Another important area of understanding for working with adult learners is their literacy background. Burt *et al*. (2008) offer the following six categories of literacy that range from:

(1) Pre-literate, because the L1 has no written form or is in the process of developing a written form.
(2) Nonliterate, having had no access to literacy instruction due to war, famine, economic issues and so forth.
(3) Semiliterate, having limited access to literacy instruction, such as a few years of formal schooling.
(4) Non-alphabet literate, being literate in a language written in a non-alphabetic script but not in an alphabetic script.
(5) Non-Roman alphabet literate, being literate in a language written in a non-Roman alphabet.
(6) Roman alphabet literate, being literate in a language written in a Roman alphabet script.

Additionally, there are adults who learn literacy through religion. Doing research in Iran, Street (1984) found that by attending *maktabs*, or Islamic religious schools, Farsi-speaking students learned to recite passages of the Koran, a book written in Arabic, a language they did not speak. Students could open the Koran to the correct page and follow along with their fingers as they listened to or recited the passage. They developed literacy with the Koran not by 'cracking the phonemic code' but through a habitual, cultural practice (Street, 1984: 133).

It is important to think about the different literacy backgrounds and practices that learners bring to the classroom in order to build an understanding of who they are, why they have limited reading and writing skills and why they may require more time to learn than their more literate classmates.

Limited literacy can hold adults back from engaging in the economic life of the new community. Any kind of writing – applying for jobs, filling out forms, writing notes to children's teachers – presents barriers to communication for those who do not read or write. Apter *et al*. (2008) note that adults may not admit to a lack of literacy skills or may be embarrassed to seek help. There may be cultural and religious differences that result in reluctance by learners to interact in certain ways with the teacher, tutor or classmates. Teachers and tutors who are sensitive to these feelings, barriers and challenges can provide encouragement and support to help emergent readers be successful. One way to accomplish this is to incorporate activities into instruction that are relevant to learners' needs and daily lives and to recognize the knowledge and strengths that they bring to the endeavor.

7.3.2 Preparing to teach an adult literacy class

7.3.2.1 Understanding learners and gathering materials

One way to prepare is to consider learners' needs, strengths and challenges, with the goal first of understanding who they are, what they need to learn, what countries they have come from, what languages they speak and at what levels. The previous five chapters will be helpful for this preparation. They also provide some ideas for instruction, but this chapter aims to provide many more options, particularly for the teacher or tutor new to working with this learner population. Preparation also involves gathering materials and designing instruction that will put learners at ease, build on their language proficiency in their home language, draw out their strengths and provide appropriate challenges, with guidance on how to address them. Instructional materials, particularly reading texts for adult emergent readers, can be difficult to locate. Appropriate texts are those that provide contextual clues, such as pictures, and use simple language. Wrigley (1993: 1) suggests 'starting with the images, concepts, words and expressions that are familiar to the learners, rather than with the alphabet [because] innovative programs provide opportunities for MEANING MAKING from the first day of literacy education'. As Vinogradov (2008) notes, making meaning from a visual text is the broader aim of reading, and engaging with pictures is an act of literacy. However, Strube *et al*. (2009) caution that pictures can be culturally biased and result in misunderstandings. Pictures, like other texts, represent the ideology of a culture. Photographs can be easier to decipher than illustrations. Therefore, careful selection of appropriate texts, including the images, is crucial to literacy instruction.

7.3.2.2 Connecting instruction to learners' lives

Another way to put learners at ease and draw on their strengths is to use authentic texts, or those that connect instruction with learners' lives outside of the classroom (see Auerbach, 1992; Purcell-Gates *et al*., 2002). These might include texts in their home languages, when these are available. Fish *et al*. (2007: 2) remind us that adult learners 'are beginning readers, but they are not beginning problem solvers; therefore, it's important to utilize materials and methods that can connect to students' immediate needs'.

One way to connect instruction to learners' lives is the language experience approach (LEA), described also in Chapter 3. LEA engages learners in writing about an authentic experience or activity with the teacher's or tutor's help. The LEA-generated stories can then be used for reading lessons. An experience or activity for generating an LEA text might be a museum visit. Museums are suitable for literacy learners, because they often use sensory input, such as touching and hearing, to make sense of new information. The teacher or tutor prepares learners for the visit with instruction that explains the content to be viewed. He or she then accompanies the learners on the museum visit and helps them make sense of what is being seen and heard. Amoruso (2016) uses drama as a way for learners to act out their ideas and experiences. Young-Scholten and Limon (2015) advocate building a habit of reading

for pleasure. These materials can be made available in class or the program premises, at learners' different reading levels.

7.3.2.3 Determining materials that are level appropriate

Wrigley and Guth (1992) recommend using a checklist or rubric to evaluate level-appropriate materials used for features such as authenticity, predictability, visual clues and relevance to learners' needs. Other factors to consider in selecting level-appropriate texts include appropriateness of pictures, photographs and art. Additionally, the teacher or tutor should think about clear labels, diagrams, graphs, maps, or other visuals in texts. Grabe (2009) recommends that teachers align use of reading texts with learners' oral language skills and continue to build those oral skills as reading and writing develop. At the same time, however, literacy learners' oral language skills are usually more advanced than their reading skills. Farrelly (2013) adds that teachers and tutors know their learners best and can use this knowledge to put learners at ease and draw on their strengths.

7.3.2.4 Using a variety of instructional materials

In addition to written texts, instructional materials such as lined paper and writing instruments, scissors, tape and sentence strips (large strips of heavy paper) are important for literacy instruction. Sentence strips give emergent writers a guide with lines and borders on which to practice forming letters and words. Wrigley and Guth (1992) suggest varying the materials and approaches to allow learners to experience learning and reading in diverse ways. For example, magnetic letters or Legos can be used for a TACTILE LEARNING experience. Common objects from everyday life, realia, can help learners make connections with text. Pictures and photographs are useful when trying to explain and understand different ideas and vocabulary. The teacher or tutor can ask learners to bring in objects and pictures of their own and incorporate them into instruction.

7.3.2.5 Creating a safe, engaging space for learning

Gathering texts and materials is one part of preparing to work with literacy learners, whether in a classroom or a one-on-one tutoring setting. Other considerations include creating a safe, comfortable space for learning (Santos & Shandor, 2012) and, if in a class, building a sense of community. Although learners are adults who bring many different and valuable life experiences to the classroom, if they have no formal schooling, they will lack the experience of a structured learning environment. They may not have school skills or know what to expect when learning to read and write. Wrigley (2009) refers to these skills as COGNITIVE ACADEMIC SKILLS, or skills necessary for success in school. If learners feel nervous about their ability to use these skills, this could raise their stress level, or affect. Krashen's (1982) AFFECTIVE FILTER HYPOTHESIS suggests that motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem and anxiety play a role in second language acquisition. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) describe one of these emotions as language anxiety,

or the inability to adequately express thoughts and ideas because of fear of negative social evaluation and the need to impress others. Rubin and Thompson (1994) add that language learning requires taking risks and a high self-esteem, which can contribute to learners' willingness to engage and has been positively correlated with success in language learning (Brodkey & Shore, 1976; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Heyde, 1979; Watkins *et al*., 1991).

The role of emotions in second language learning is complex. Teachers and tutors can address learners' comfort and safety, and promote engagement, by creating a supportive learning environment. One idea for creating a learning environment in the classroom is use of interactive activities that help learners get acquainted with each other. The teacher can do an ICE-BREAKER, or introductory activity, to promote learner interaction. For example, learners might walk around the room and talk with five other learners, and each one says to the other their name and the country they are from. In a later icebreaker, they might share one thing interesting about their country. The complexity of the sharing can increase over time. Tutors working with learners one-on-one can modify these activities and interact directly with the learner.

Keeping learners engaged can be another challenge. A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH, which emphasizes learner agency, includes conducting a needs assessment and involving learners in the choice of instructional topics. These strategies are in keeping with principles of adult learning theory (Merriam *et al*., 2007). A needs assessment can be used to better determine learners' goals and desires for learning. For example, pictures provide an easy, visual way to gather information about learners' needs. The teacher or tutor can use pictures from magazines or drawings that represent common curriculum themes such as community, housing or transportation. Classroom teachers can post the pictures around the room, and learners can vote for the topics of their choosing by placing a checkmark beside the picture(s) that best represent what they want to learn. They can also vote with their feet, or stand beside the picture of the subject area they want to study most. Picture dictionaries also allow learners to communicate their choices of what they want to study in class. The whole class can identify the themes that are selected most often to determine a content focus for class. Since interests and needs might change over time, these activities might be done several times during a semester or year.

One example of a learner-centered approach is found in the Reflect ESOL program (http://www.reflect-action.org/reflectesol). Reflect ESOL is a DIALOGIC APPROACH in which the teacher steps back, and the learners not only determine the topic(s) for instruction but also express the concerns of the class as a community. The goal is to shift the power dynamic between teacher and student in favor of the student. Further examples of learner-centered approaches are seen in the work of Amoruso *et al*. (2016) and Di Benedetto *et al*. (2017). Both worked with unaccompanied, refugee-background minors who had crossed the Mediterranean Sea and arrived in Sicily. With support as needed, these youth wrote autobiographies describing their journeys, including maps that traced the routes they had taken to get there.

Teachers and tutors can plan how to meet learners' concerns and needs by doing a needs assessment activity. Different from a language assessment, which evaluates learners' skills, a needs assessment helps determine what language students want and need to learn. For example, students may be interested in language around the topic of health, communication with their children's schools, or how to use local transportation. Classes become more engaging for literacy learners when instruction focuses on topics they want and need to study.

7.3.2.6 Considering learning factors when planning instruction

Other considerations for planning instruction include program features, such as length of the teaching session, number of meetings per week, and total number of hours of instruction. For example, if a teaching session is 12 weeks, with classes meeting two nights a week for two hours, one or two instructional topics should be adequate. Theme-based teaching may be new to some teachers and tutors, but this approach contextualizes language learning and addresses the need for learner engagement. Planning a unit and lessons using a thematic approach, rather than focusing solely on grammar (form-focused instruction), is an effective strategy with learners who do not yet read and write. For example, the theme for a 12-week class might be health, with topics including reading prescriptions, describing illnesses to the doctor and accessing emergency care.

7.3.2.7 Considering approaches to teaching reading

Finally, the teacher or tutor can consider different approaches to teaching reading. In some countries, there is a debate about whether to begin with a top-down or with a bottom-up approach. A top-down, or whole language approach, begins with words and simple phrases, and instruction includes use of all language skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing – in all lessons. A bottom-up, linguistic or phonics approach begins with the alphabet, sounds and syllables, with a focus on learning those, often in isolation from meaning, and gradually building to working with longer texts. For learners of English, Vinogradov (2008) advocates the balanced approach, also known as a whole-part-whole approach (see also Hempenstall, 2005; Trupke-Bastidas, 2007). A whole-part-whole approach begins with oral discussion of specific topics related to the unit or semester theme and moves to reading and writing about those topics, using words, sentences, paragraphs and longer texts (top-down). At relevant times, the teacher provides specific instruction on phonemes (sounds) in words, phoneme-grapheme correspondence (the ways that sounds are represented in print), syllables of words and vocabulary that is important for working with the theme. (Phoneme-grapheme correspondence is explained in Section 7.3.4 below.)

Another consideration for a teaching approach is the writing and spelling system of the target language. It is important for teachers and tutors to understand how the orthographies (spelling systems) of languages using the Roman alphabet, such

as Dutch, English, German, Finnish, Italian, Spanish or Turkish, present different degrees of regularity in the correspondence between oral language and written symbols. This is discussed in depth in Chapter 3. Written symbols, such as letters, are called graphemes. Individual sounds of oral language are called phonemes. The strength of the phoneme (sounds)-grapheme (letters) correspondence in a language is referred to as ORTHOGRAPHIC DEPTH. Orthographic depth is typically depicted using a continuum of shallow to deep or transparent to opaque. For example, English (depending on the dialect) has as many as 1120 letter combinations for (ways of writing) 40 phonemes (Hempenstall, 2005: 21). This relationship, 1120 to 40, is far from a one-to-one correspondence, making English a deep or opaque orthography (see Goswami & Bryant, 1992). On the other hand, Italian has 33 graphemes to its 25 phonemes (Paulesu *et al*., 2001), making it a shallow, more transparent orthography. The strength of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence is something to consider in developing an instructional approach. For languages with shallow orthographies, a bottom-up or phonics-based approach may be appropriate. For languages with deep orthographies, such as English or French, beginning with themes and words and sentences used to develop those themes, a top-down approach may be more appropriate.

7.3.2.8 Considering learning that takes place outside the classroom

Finally, it is important to remember that language learning takes place both inside and outside of the classroom. Learners are immersed to varying degrees in the L2-speaking environment; they are parents, workers and citizens in the community. At the same time, these factors may limit their access to the L2, if the language of the home and the immediate community is not the L2. An important goal of adult education is to create independent learners who can employ learning strategies wherever opportunities present themselves (Merriam *et al*., 2007). Developing independence with L2 learning begins during instruction. However, Dalderop *et al*. (2008) theorize that adult literacy learners may be more teacher dependent than their more literate peers. They are often learning how to learn and may rely on the teacher as a learning strategy.

7.3.2.9 Adjusting the teacher's or tutor's attitudes and beliefs

Teachers' and tutors' beliefs about what learners can do affects instruction, making it important to be self-aware and develop a reflective practice. Vinogradov (2008) provides a helpful way for teachers and tutors to raise their awareness of learners' potential, using the following six principles for working with these learners:

(1) Keep teaching in context by building on what learners already know and can do.
(2) Take a balanced approach between whole language and phonics (particularly for English) and use objects that represent words and ideas that are familiar to learners.
(3) Break down the sound-symbol correspondence for words that learners struggle with.

(4) Provide instruction that appeals to different learning styles, preferences, current strengths, such as including tactile learning.
(5) Build on learners' strengths, especially L2 oral skills, to connect oral and written language.
(6) Nurture learner confidence.

In summary, preparing to work with adult L2 learners with limited education and literacy will likely involve extra planning time and effort to gather instructional materials. As literacy learners, they may not have attended school and may have limited experience with academic environments. One way to prepare is to build on their strengths by carefully selecting instructional materials that are relevant and authentic to their needs. A needs assessment can also serve to foster communication and support the creation of a comfortable environment where language learning can take place. This is not a quick process, and teachers can expect learning to proceed slowly, with frequent repetition. Adult emergent readers, like their younger counterparts, are learning how to learn and are developing academic skills for the first time. Unlike children, though, they are accomplishing these difficult tasks in a new language.

7.3.3 Developing print awareness

Print awareness includes being able to recognize the functions and uses of print, being comfortable with using a writing instrument, being able to recognize letters of the alphabet and being able to recognize high-frequency words (see discussion in Chapter 3). Print awareness skills and oral language skills are connected. Therefore, in this section, we focus on activities that will build print awareness, using both oral and literate skills.

The goal of print awareness instruction is for learners to recognize the functions and uses of text on labels, schedules and forms. Learners need to understand that print can be found in many places other than books (e.g. warnings, descriptions, signs, newspapers, magazines, the internet). Wrigley and Guth (1992) suggest using real-world objects, or realia, as part of print-awareness instruction. Realia can be food packages, signs, a tube of toothpaste, money and other commercial items with print on them. For an activity, learners can predict the meaning and function of the text on these objects, using contextual clues. After the learners spend time thinking and talking about this, the teacher or tutor can reveal what the text says. Print awareness activities can be used with thematic instruction focused on family, work, school, health, transportation, the community and so forth. Wrigley and Guth (1992) suggest helping learners to develop a sense of what print looks like, such as how it is different from a picture or the wallpaper, which merely exists as decoration. Students who are not familiar with the Roman alphabet may also need to develop a global sense of the shape and look of English writing (and Roman alphabet writing in other languages) before focusing on individual words and letters.

Additionally, learners may need help understanding that written texts have a beginning, middle and end; or that text is read from left to right and from the top of a page down; and that written words can represent a story or a message (August & Shanahan, 2006). Spending instructional time teaching the structure of texts is also important.

Another aspect of print awareness is comfort with writing instruments. According to Schwarz (2008), literacy learners may need practice with copying words, writing on lines or in boxes and understanding that some letters need capitalization and that there are spaces between words. In teaching how to write letters of the alphabet, Burt *et al*. (2008) recommend first helping students practice with writing in a specific direction and with shapes and sizes; then practicing letters, consonants, vowels and – particularly for deep orthographies – sight words, and eventually longer utterances, such as sentences. Schwarz (2008) adds that learning to write requires fine motor skills that these learners may not have developed. Kinesthetic activities, such as following dots to complete a picture, tracing letters and numbers and coloring pictures to help distinguish figures and background, can help strengthen learners' fine motor skills as they learn to write. Adult literacy learners may experience cognitive overload, because they are tackling many new ideas at one time: school skills, oral language and literacy skills. They may tire easily and require breaks. Their eyes may be unaccustomed to the focused work that reading and writing require, making it important to vary the activities, with short periods of focused reading and writing that can be repeated and times to talk with each other about what they are doing or about other topics. Some suggested activities include:

- Coloring in adult coloring books.
- Drawing a red line down the left margin of a paper and across a paper from left to right, to help focus on directionality when writing.
- Taking occasional breaks from reading and writing to prevent eyestrain and use oral language in interactions or in specific exercises.
- Getting up out of their seats to write or draw on the blackboard or a poster.
- Cutting out photos from magazines.
- Organizing photos into an album.
- Playing games such as BINGO and using flashcards for practice.
- Making a picture dictionary.
- Singing or chanting the alphabet.

Teachers and tutors might:

- Cover up additional text (for example, text attached to the board in a classroom from another teacher who uses the room) with large poster board paper, to avoid extra visual distraction when students read from the board.
- Design documents so they are easy to read, with a larger font, double spacing and lots of white space.

In summary, print awareness addresses the functions and uses of print, being comfortable with using a writing instrument and being able to automatically recognize letters of the alphabet and high-frequency words and process written text. Using realia and activities that involve movement (kinesthetic activities) such as coloring, copying and drawing are some ways to help learners develop these skills. Dance and drama are also effective ways to develop not only oral language skills but also print awareness (Pecoraro, 2017).

7.3.4 Grapheme-phoneme correspondence

Grapheme-phoneme correspondence is the connection between written symbols and sounds. An example of a grapheme, or written symbol, is the letter <m> in the Roman alphabet. An example of a phoneme is /m/, or the sound that this letter represents in a word like *mother* or *may*. Awareness of abstract units of sound, known as phonological awareness, develops in part before children start school and expands as they begin learning to read and write. Adult literacy learners who have not had the opportunity to attend school, or who come from an oral tradition, will not have the same phonological awareness as their educated L2 counterparts and will need time to develop this as part of literacy instruction. (See Chapter 2, Reading, for discussion of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness.)

Adults with limited literacy skills in any language may not be able to distinguish phonemes – individual sounds in words and the concepts of beginning, middle and end sounds – and understand that changing a single sound changes the meaning of a word. For pre- and non-literate adult learners, language is likely to be perceived as a string of continuous sounds.

For learners without formal schooling and for those whose home language does not have a written form, Schwarz (2008) notes that they have no words for discussing language, such as *syllable, sentence, grammar* or *tense*. These are concepts that evolve with knowledge of written language. Learners whose first language has a written form can learn the words in their language to start to understand the concepts in the second language.

Like teaching reading overall, instruction for building grapheme-phoneme correspondence can take either a balanced, bottom-up (grapheme-phoneme), or top-down (whole word) approach. For example, teachers and tutors can use pictures, photos and posters representing different sounds that help learners build awareness of these in the L2 through the repetition of seeing the grapheme-phoneme connections. With learners with some literacy, a CLOZE ACTIVITY can be used, where learners insert a missing letter, in word-initial or word-final position, for example, into a written word. For example, a learner could insert an <m> into the word <_other>. The activity can be supported by pictures or realia. The teacher or tutor can also dictate the word, and the learner(s) write in the missing letter. This can be repeated with any number of familiar words and letters. Another activity requires

learners to fill in a missing word from a dictated sentence. For example, the teacher or tutor dictates the sentence 'The cat sleeps' but omits a word on the worksheet; e.g. 'The cat _____' or 'The _____ sleeps', using words that the learners know and are learning to spell. Other ways to practice grapheme-phoneme correspondence is minimal pairs, an activity in which learners are prompted to choose the right answer from one of two options. For example, learners can be prompted to indicate which sound they hear by choosing from one of two sounds (e.g. /b/ or /v/). When prompted, they indicate the correct answer in a number of ways, such as holding up letters or words written on different pieces of paper. Learners can also indicate the answer by raising or not raising their hand.

Introducing rhyming words builds phonemic awareness by helping learners distinguish one sound in a word. For an activity, the teacher or tutor provides many examples of rhyming and non-rhyming words. It is best to focus on short, high-frequency words, such as 'cat', 'bat', 'fat', 'car'. When learners seem to grasp the concept that something is different about the sound in one of the words, the teacher or tutor checks for comprehension by asking learners to indicate which word is different, or does not RHYME. For example, the teacher or tutor slowly reads the list of words and learners raise their hands when they hear the word that does not rhyme (e.g. car). For a variation, ask learners to indicate precisely where words differ when they do not rhyme, such as beginning, middle or end sounds, to develop phonemic awareness. Using a simple set of rhymes, such as 'cat', 'bat', 'fat', teachers and tutors can show how changing the initial sound changes the meaning of a word. For this activity, Vinogradov (2008) suggests using manipulatives, things the learner can handle such as Scrabble-type letter tiles or letters used for children's early literacy, to change the beginning sound so that learners experience tacitly what they are doing. These activities can help build phonological awareness in the L2 and, in particular, the phonemic awareness that underpins alphabetic reading. Puco (2007) finds that the use of tactile objects such as those described here makes learning more enjoyable for learners, which promotes engagement.

Once learners have a bank of words and are moving beyond single word decoding to higher-level comprehension, sentence strips can help them create their own sentences without the added challenge of writing. Individual words are cut out from a sentence written on a strip of paper, mixed up in a different order, and then learners reassemble the sentence by placing the words in the right order. This activity can be done in small groups, pairs, or individually. Sentence strip activities give learners hands-on practice with word order and when read aloud, practice with pronunciation. They also help learners become aware of individual word boundaries. Additionally, use of sentence strips is helpful for learners who prefer kinesthetic activities. Sentence strip words can also be used to create simple cloze activities in which learners add the missing word, or a word is written with a missing letter that is filled in (We went to the ____. We saw a lot of _ood.). These activities help to build confidence by putting into writing the useful social phrases from learners' oral language discussed in Chapter 5.

7.3.5 Text comprehension

As discussed above, a language experience approach (LEA) activity can also help build awareness of the relationship of words and text to print and can contribute to development of reading comprehension. One LEA activity involves learners relating something from their lives to another person, who writes down what was said. (Care is taken to ensure that learners are not put in a situation where they are talking about traumatic aspects of their past or events that they prefer not to talk about; see Santos & Shandor, 2012, on safe spaces in the classroom.) The text can then be used for reading, vocabulary development, pronunciation and building morphosyntactic competence. LEA texts are sometimes used with one common theme, with each learner sharing information related to the theme. For example, learners describe their families or other aspects of their current lives. In one-on-one tutoring sessions, LEA provides rich instructional material with maximal student interest due to its immediate relevance to their lives.

Another LEA option is an activity such as a field trip, and, with the teacher's or tutor's facilitation, writing an account of the activity after it is completed. Field trips can be a visit to the local library or government office, a museum, a shopping center, a park, among other locations. Pictures can be taken while on the field trip and then used to create a journalistic-type story about the experience. Individually, in pairs, or in groups, learners generate sentences to describe the pictures, which are then used for practice activities, such as reading, cloze activities, grammar activities, phonics-related activities, SEQUENCING ACTIVITIES and dialogue practice.

LEA writing can be used at all language proficiency levels, and this is a great way to spark learners' motivation and create lessons that match their abilities and draw on their experiences. LEA texts may be created based solely on visuals; for example, a learner writes about a picture or a short series of pictures. Wrigley and Guth (1992) describe a variation on the traditional LEA approach in which learners put together something cohesive solely using photographs and no text. For example, an urban literacy class takes a trip on the city's bus and metro system, and learners take photographs of the ticket machines, purchasing instructions and the bus and metro maps. When they return to the classroom, they study their photographs, discuss strategies they used to get their tickets and find their way around the city and then organize the photographs logically. In this way, picture-based accounts of activities from daily life build vocabulary and sequencing skills. Learners can also use the Internet to find photographs about a common theme. One example from the United States is *Picture Stories for Adult ESL Health Literacy* (Singleton, n.d.) with pictures that show examples of activities in daily life, and learners add comments based on their own experiences. Many activities can be developed that use the words and phrases produced by the learners. Likewise, pictures and photographs can help to relate needed information as well as provide crucial survival information. In Australia, Williams and Chapman (2007) used staged photographs to convey safety in the home where dangerous situations could develop. These photographs became part of the

readers for the learners along with other materials, including picture cards and word flash cards.

7.3.6 Instructional practices for multilevel classes

Adult literacy classes are usually multilevel along one or more dimensions of learning, because adult learners' literacy, linguistic and education backgrounds, experiences, skills and even views of themselves as learners vary (see DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). Some learners may have stronger L2 oral skills, some may have L1 literacy but weak L2 oral skills, while others need to build basic oral L2 skills and have no L1 literacy skills. Addressing the learning needs of a multilevel class presents challenges for the teacher and a need for careful planning. While this section focuses on instruction in the multilevel classroom, the suggestions are also relevant for work with learners in smaller, homogenous groups or in one-on-one scenarios.

7.3.6.1 Separating learners into different groups

For classroom teachers, Schwarz (2005, 2008) advocates separating learners with little or no literacy into different classes from more literate peers in order to address their print awareness and grapheme-phoneme correspondence needs. Unfortunately, many adult education programs do not have the resources to offer separate classes for these learners and instead offer multilevel classes, which include learners from varied education and literacy backgrounds. Then the teacher will need to create groups within a given class.

7.3.6.2 Providing one-on-one tutoring

One way to address multilevel needs in a class is to pull out literacy learners for one-to-one tutoring, for example, on skills related to literacy components (sounds, letters, syllables, basic words). A tutor or teaching assistant can serve well in this model. The classroom teacher identifies which learners need tutoring support and what skills the tutoring will focus on. A typical PULL-OUT MODEL for phonics instruction in English-speaking countries might use a basal reader such as the US series, *Sam and Pat* (Hartel *et al*., 2006). Assistants are given a lesson plan, so they know what to cover in any given session, and they keep the classroom teacher advised on the learner's progress. Teachers and assistants should be careful not to make the pull-out tutoring seem punitive. To reduce this perception, feedback should be provided to learners at every session, so they can see how the tutoring is helping them progress.

7.3.6.3 Time management and differentiated instruction

Another method for organizing multilevel classes is through time management and DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION. Time management includes scheduling activities where all of the learners focus on a particular need or skill, which differs by group. For example, if class time is devoted to writing, some groups might copy letters or write

their names while other groups write paragraphs. Differentiated instruction involves activities that have simpler and more complex versions to meet the needs of learners at different proficiency levels.

Organizing learners in groups within the classroom has the added social benefit of fostering cooperation and building community, as discussed above. Moreover, groups can be formed with like-ability or mixed-ability learners. Wrigley and Guth (1992) suggest mixing up existing groups from time to time, so that less proficient learners do not feel stigmatized as the slow learners. With like-ability groups, or groups composed of learners with approximately the same proficiency level, instructional materials can be tailored to meet the specific needs of the group. In mixed-ability groups, or groups in which the learners are of various proficiency levels, more knowledgeable peers can support the learning of lower-level learners. Learning between different-level individuals can take place in the Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), discussed in Chapter 2. These are activities that learners can do with help, when they are not yet able to do them without help. As Chapter 2 discusses, learning occurs when a more knowledgeable other (teacher, classmates, friends and so forth) acts as a scaffold/help/support to help the less knowledgeable learner reach a higher level of understanding and skill. While learners work together, the teacher can circulate among the groups to ensure that they are on track, more knowledgeable learners are providing support, and less knowledgeable learners are progressing.

7.3.6.4 Classroom centers and learning stations

Another means of differentiating instruction advocated by Schwarz (2008) and Wrigley and Guth (1992) is classroom centers, or LEARNING STATIONS, where learners can choose what they want to do and work toward mastery of specific skills. Based on Montessori (1964) principles, classroom centers provide learners the opportunity to develop at their own pace (Lillard, 2011). Centers can be designed around any language or literacy skill and include different proficiency-level tasks that learners complete and then self-assess. This way, learners manage their own progress and move to the next proficiency level only after they have mastered the task at the current level. Reading centers might include some of the authentic texts that students encounter in daily life, including magazines, newspapers, coupons, posters, pictures and notes from their children's school. However, reading authentic text can be challenging for literacy learners, because it often contains difficult vocabulary, slang, idioms, or humor. The font may be very small or decorative, making it more difficult for learners to decode. Teachers can mitigate some of these challenges by breaking texts into small chunks and providing scaffolds such as pictures, graphic organizers, realia, strategies, and making the print larger. Centers can also include digital tools that help students negotiate meaning from texts, such as talking dictionaries, translators, or screen readers. Whatever the design and content of a reading center, students can work at their own pace. With centers, teachers are free to monitor the larger class and better track everyone's progress.

7.3.6.5 Project-based learning

Use of PROJECT-BASED LEARNING is another strategy that is effective in a multilevel classroom. Learners work in small groups or pairs, with each person assigned a specific role and task to complete which fits their interests (Peterson & Nassaji, 2016). This can incorporate the ZPD mentioned above. Strube (2007) observes that peer-to-peer work on projects is one of many scaffolding strategies used by teachers to support learners who would not be able to complete these on their own. Working in groups with more proficient peers allows learners to find other ways to excel, such as with oral storytelling, taking photographs or drawing. Some drawbacks to differentiated instruction and grouping are the time and effort needed for planning and convincing learners of the benefits of group work with those from other language backgrounds and cultures and at different proficiency levels. However, once the groups are operating independently, the teacher has the opportunity to continually observe their progress and provide feedback.

One example of a classroom project is a class newsletter in which learners report on a topic, such as what they did over the weekend, what they studied in class, activities that they enjoy with their family or current events. For weaker learners, use of pictures will reduce literacy demands. A newsletter project provides learners at all proficiency levels with doable tasks such as finding pictures, writing, editing, managing resources and organizing texts and pictures. It automatically scaffolds learning through the shared goal of creating a newsletter, and it raises learners' awareness of an important written genre. The newsletter becomes a text that can be shared with outsiders as well as used for further reading practice. Those working in one-on-one tutoring contexts can consider collaborating with other tutors to involve learners in contributing to community newsletters.

Similarly, students can create picture books about classmates and teachers, families and friends, revolving around their interests. Like newsletters, these books generate relevant vocabulary and provide real documents in an additional genre where learners can share what's important to them. A book project works well in a multilevel class, because it allows each author the opportunity to work independently at their level. For learners with greater literacy challenges, a technique borrowed from LEA (the learner dictates what they want to share to another person, who writes it) enables learners to express themselves without having to worry about their insufficient writing skills. Learners might then copy what is written. As with newsletters, these are ideal for sharing with outsiders.

7.3.6.6 Engaging in dramatic productions

Drama is a less used but highly engaging means of promoting collaboration and exploring a range of issues, while also expanding oral proficiency and literacy skills. At the Italian Language School for Foreigners at the University of Palermo (Amoruso, 2016), a group of learners with very low literacy met for twelve Saturdays to organize a theatrical production reflecting their shared experiences with and feelings about leaving their homes (Pecoraro, 2017). Teachers in Finland have been working with these learners on a documentary project known as *Toinen koti,* Other Home, which

involves refugee musicians, actors, singers, poets and rap artists (see Pöyhönen & Simpson, 2017). In such projects, there are multiple opportunities for scaffolding. The teacher can support learners in the development of these projects by breaking the project down into smaller sequential tasks, by assigning specific tasks to learners with special skills, by providing multiple examples or templates to be filled in by learners and by working with the learners to correct language inaccuracies.

7.3.6.7 Engaging with the community and people outside the class

Other projects suggested by Wrigley and Guth (1992) include: (1) a field trip planned by learners to a place in addition to those listed above, which they would not normally have the chance to see; (2) inviting a guest speaker of the learners' choosing to come to class to discuss a specific community issue; or (3) writing a letter to a famous person or someone involved with local government or in the community. Although multilevel instruction requires careful planning and classroom management to address adult learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences, the teacher (or tutor) can make use of learners' strengths in creative and rewarding ways.

7.3.7 Assessment of learners

The use of commercially developed, standardized tests for formally assessing learners' language skills for both class placement and documenting progress is required by most publicly funded adult education programs. (See also Chapter 5.) The challenges of using standardized testing with language learners are well documented in the literature. Notably, these tests may not capture fine-grained linguistic changes, such as those seen in pragmatics or oral fluency (Pettitt & Tarone, 2015; Strube, 2014). Test scoring does not accommodate the many ways that students might interpret the language and instead, requires one right answer. Simpson (2006) adds that test administrators vary in their skills and expectations in putting test data into practice. Vermeersch *et al.* (2008) warn that formal assessments often position learners with static labels, such as *low-beginning learner* or *basic user*, in alignment with systems such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001), the National Reporting System in the United States (https://www.nrsweb.org) and the Canadian Language Benchmarks (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012). As discussed above, Bigelow and Vinogradov (2011) caution that labels are not a permanent characteristic of the learners, and we need to be ready to look beyond labels and recognize learners' full potential and their steps toward realizing it. Nevertheless, formal testing is a reality in adult education, and test data are typically used to both place students and mark learning progress.

For informal, or FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT, Croydon (2005) suggests creating an assessment grid to better inform instruction and track learner progress over the course of a teaching session. An example is shown in Figure 7.1. When using this grid, students 'read' the pictures and indicate whether they enjoy the particular food by writing either a check mark or an 'x'. Teachers and tutors can adapt grids to accommodate learners' interests, needs and skill levels by using different pictures or

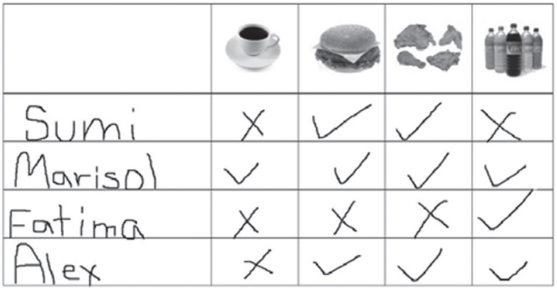

Figure 7.1 Formative assessment grid (adapted from Croydon, 2005)

words. Learners might use words, such as 'yes' or 'no' instead of checks or 'x's' to indicate their answers.

Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) promote the use of a reading progress checklist to informally document fine-grained skills such as reading with a left-to-right orientation, word and number discrimination, upper- and lower-case letter discrimination and knowledge of specific grapheme-phoneme correspondences. For writing, teachers and tutors use the checklist to indicate whether learners can copy text, such as a sentence written on the board; compose a short text, such as writing the date; and write personal words, such as name and address. Examples would be adjusted according to the focus of the class and levels of the learners in the class. As informal assessments, the reading and writing checklists can be used as a basis for designing level-appropriate instruction as well as a means for tracking learner progress over time. The checklists could also serve a means for providing feedback to learners on their progress. The reading and writing checklists are shown in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Reading and writing progress checklist

Reading The learner is able to …
Read from left to right
Read numbers as different from words
Recognize upper case and lower-case versions of letters
Recognize a sound (phoneme) and its associated letters(s) (graphemes, for the following letters: -- -- -- --
Writing The learner is able to …
Write his/her name
Write his/her address
Copy a text
Compose a short text

Dalderop *et al*. (2008) and Stockmann (2006) advocate use of portfolios assessment to document learners' work. Portfolios are dossiers of a learner's work, including authentic documents such as postcards and notes to teachers. As a form of assessment, portfolios reflect and encourage learner autonomy and responsibility. Stockmann (2006) and Nuwenhoud (2015) show that portfolios serve multiple functions, including a space to keep learner's work, the opportunity to use their work as reference materials during examinations and providing evidence for reporting and accountability purposes. When the portfolio is aligned with a checklist of skills and abilities, it can provide a broader and more detailed picture of the learner's progress.

Dalderop *et al*. (2008) propose creating the portfolio with the learner so that the process itself contributes to learning and goal setting. Both Stockmann (2006) and Nuwenhoud (2015) note that using a literacy portfolio alongside a literacy framework, such as the one shown in Table 7.2, has proven to be very successful for both assessing learners' progress and allowing learners to set up and track their own development on life- and work-based tasks. Feldmeier (2015) observes that learners, even at the lowest literacy levels, use supports to create their own portfolios and make learning contracts to assess their progress.

The use of standardized tests as an accountability measure in adult education is a reality for publicly funded programs, which are often required to use specific assessments and report results regularly in order to receive funding. As noted above,

Table 7.2 Global characterization of the three literacy levels: Literacy framework (Stockmann, 2006)

	Alfa A	**Alfa B**	**Alfa C**
Autonomy	Can carry out reading and writing tasks with help and/or with the help of examples.	Can carry out known and trained tasks without any help.	Can carry out new tasks without help, is able to transfer things learnt in another context.
Fluency	Can read and write character by character.	Can spell and write no longer character by character, but by (consonant) clusters.	Can analyze and synthesize in silence; only long, unknown words cause problems. Can recognize words as a unit and can write them as a unit.
Word complexity	Can read and write global words trained, CVC words, words in which two graphemes represent one phoneme.	Can read and write the global words trained, all short words, long words if known, all grapheme combinations; words may contain consonant clusters and morphemes.	Can read and write all words except for long and semantically unknown words.
Text properties	Texts are very short and concern familiar subjects. Texts have a clear typeface and line spacing. Capitals and punctuation marks occur in the text but are not relevant for understanding.	Texts are selected with purpose, are short and concern familiar subjects. Texts contain concrete and well-known words. Typeface may vary. Characters written by hand are recognized.	Texts are short and simple and concern familiar subjects. Texts contain high-frequency words and short and simple sentences with visual support. Typeface is clear. Capitals and punctuation marks are used as a source of information.

test scores do not capture all that a learner has achieved. Teachers usually have some freedom to develop more appropriate and additional ways of assessing learning and helping learners make sense of their own progress, which might include exit cards (on which students write something they have learned that day and give it to the teacher before leaving class) and circulating while students are working in pairs or small groups to determine how they are doing and where they need help and specific instruction, as described above.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter provides ideas for those who are just getting started in working with adult migrants with little or no formal schooling. The strategies and resources described provide guidance for teachers and tutors working with this learner population, who can adopt, adapt and build on them. Teachers and tutors know best the needs and interests of the learners in their classes and can start by considering the feasibility and the usefulness of the ideas presented here as they suit their contexts.