



LITERATURE REVIEW ON ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACY IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Prepared for National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

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1. Introduction

As a result of recommendations in its recent policy paper **Informing NALA's future direction in ESOL**¹, NALA has made the decision to focus on ESOL literacy, specifically literacy for ESOL Learners who do not read and write fluently in any language.

One of the key recommendations from the paper is that, "*More information is required to develop ... understanding and promote awareness of what ESOL literacy is and how it is connected to language acquisition.*" (p 10)

As a result, LLU+ at London South Bank University were commissioned to conduct a review of literature on the acquisition and development of literacy when it is a second language, and when the learner does not have fluent literacy in any language.

¹ Available on www.nala.ie

2. Summary of findings

1. Research into second language literacy acquisition for adults with low levels of literacy in their first language is still in its early days. Often researchers make use of research carried out on children or on adult literacy learners. It is important to be mindful of the significant differences between these learners when drawing conclusions from this research.

2. ESOL literacy learners have different and specific needs which are different from literacy learners and ESOL learners with fluent literacy in their first language. These needs relate to their specific language and educational profile.

3. There is a strong relationship between oral proficiency and development of reading. Some proficiency in oral skills is necessary to develop reading.

4. Use of authentic tasks and connecting teaching to the real world support reading and writing development.

5. Use of first language for instructions and clarification supports the development of reading.

6. Having literacy in the first language has a positive impact on development of second language literacy.

7. Older ESOL literacy learners have more difficulty acquiring reading and writing skills in a second language.

8. Regular attendance supports learners in developing literacy skills.

9. Learners benefit from explicit and specific teaching in relation to reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary development, fluency and alphabets.

10. A process approach to writing which integrates work on spelling and handwriting with work on whole texts is beneficial for ESOL literacy learners.

3. Methodology

Our aim was to conduct a search of literature and research studies that concentrated on adult literacy acquisition, in a second language where the learner does not read and write well or at all in any language. Our focus was on literacy acquisition rather than general second language acquisition (for which there is a large body of research).

It is important to note that research into second language literacy acquisition for adults with low levels of literacy in their first language is still in its early days. In fact, the dearth of work in this area was one of the reasons for the setting up of the Lower Education Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA). For this reason, we felt it was important not to be too restrictive our initial search.

The search involved three main initial sources:

A call for information to key research networks:

- The Lower Education Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) list
- ESOL research list

One reference was received as a result of the call and, though it was a literature review of phonics teaching and **young** second language learners (Purewal 2008) it has been included as no equivalent work has been done to relation to adult ESOL literacy learners.

A survey of publications related to ESOL, reading and writing. In particular:

- LESLLA publications
- National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) publications
- National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) publications
- Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) publications

This survey highlighted a number of particularly useful studies. Of most value were a number of literature reviews which enabled us to develop a more focussed search using the ERIC database and relevant websites.

The literature reviews² that supported the final stage of the search are:

- **Adams, R & Burt M (2002)** *Research on reading development of adult English learners: An annotated bibliography.*
www.cal.org/nclereadingbib

² For an annotated list of our sources, see section 7

- **Barton, D. and Pitt, K. (2003)** *Adult ESOL pedagogy: a review of research, an annotated bibliography and recommendations for research*. London: NRDC
- **Benseman, J., Sutton, A., Lander. J (2005)** *Working in the light of evidence as well as aspiration: A literature review of the best available evidence about effective adult literacy, numeracy and language teaching*. Auckland UniServices Limited
- **Burt, M., Peyton, J.K., Adams, R. (2003)** *Reading and Adult English Language Learners: A review of the research*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics

A follow-up search from the ERIC (Education Research and Information Center) database was conducted in relation to the topic of literacy acquisition for adults. We narrowed our search to publications from 2000. These were screened for relevance in relation to literacy acquisition in a second language, particularly for learners with little literacy in any language.

We found that very little research has been done on ESOL literacy learners, though this is an area that is beginning to receive more attention.

Many of the studies examined (Barton and Pitt 2003; Burt and Peyton 2003, Condelli and Wrigley 2004, Benseman et al 2005) highlight the difficulties of drawing conclusions from a small number of research studies. For example, the Reading Research Working Group in the US (Kruidenier 2002) found only 70 studies on adult reading instruction whereas the National Reading Panel (who conducted a similar review of reading for children in the US) found more than 400 studies to review.

Thus, the body of research into literacy acquisition for adults is much smaller than that for children. Further, the number of research studies which examine the particular needs of ESOL literacy learners is smaller still. For example, Adams and Burt 2002 conducted a review of research on reading development among adult English language learners in the US between 1980-2000. Their search identified **only** 23 studies on learners attending adult ESL classes (adult, community and work based classes) i.e. not specifically ESOL literacy learners. Of these 23 studies only 5 examined 'pre-literate' learners.

We have included studies, in this review, which relate to adult literacy learners where findings were applicable to ESOL literacy or where it was clear that the programmes or learners researched were ESOL literacy learners. We feel that this helps to give a truer picture of the

work that has been done and more importantly, highlights the research needs that exist in the field of adult ESOL literacy.

Throughout this review we indicate the contexts in which studies were conducted and, in addition, have annotated the reference section to make this explicit.

A note regarding terminology:

We have used the term ESOL literacy learner to describe the learners who are the focus of this review i.e.

ESOL learners who

- are adults
- can have a range of ability in relation to speaking and understanding, i.e. from beginners to fluent
- are learning English literacy at a basic/beginner level
- may have no or limited literacy in their first language or any language
- may be literate in their first language, but the language is significantly different from English, for example a logographic language such as Chinese or one which is alphabetic but has a different script, such as Arabic.

There are a number of different terms used in the various studies to differentiate learners, e.g. adult literacy native speaker, non native speaker, non literate ESL. We have tried to use terms consistently in this review regardless of the terms used in the studies consulted. Section 6 contains a glossary of terminology.

4. Discussion of findings

4.1. The nature of ESOL literacy learners

Studies which have examined characteristics of ESOL learners, literacy learners or ESOL literacy learners (Besser et al 2004, Barton and Pitt 2003, Kruidenier 2002, Strucker and Davidson 2003) highlight the fact that these learners have diverse needs which relate to their specific profiles of strengths and weaknesses, i.e. that adults have spiky profiles as opposed to the relatively more homogeneous literacy profiles of children (Besser et al 2004).

When drawing conclusions from research conducted with adult literacy learners or literate ESOL learners, it is important to keep in mind the significant differences that exist between the language and education profiles of these learners and ESOL literacy learners. For example, ESOL literacy learners may need to develop spoken English vocabulary and patterns of syntax explicitly, which is not often an issue for adult literacy learners (Benseman 2005). Further, ESOL literacy learners often have different experiences and learning from adult literacy learners and so may lack cultural or schematic knowledge which impacts on their needs in relation to literacy development (Rance-Roney 1997). Many adult literacy learners have been unsuccessful at school and have negative experiences which can impact on their confidence and self esteem in relation to literacy learning (Benseman 2005). This may also be true for some ESOL literacy learners, but for the majority the issue is more a lack of access to literacy instruction.

ESOL literacy learners also have different learning needs from ESOL learners with fluent literacy in their first language. The latter may well have positive experiences of schooling and professional qualifications. They have skills in literacy and in studying generally which can be transferred to the learning of English literacy (Burt, Peyton and Adams 2003). Burt and Peyton (2003) describe different levels of learner literacy in the first language. First, are learners from cultures where literacy is uncommon in everyday life because the language is not written or has only recently been written (e.g. the language of the Bantu people of Somalia - Af Maay). These learners will have had little exposure to written text and may be unaware of the purposes of literacy. For these learners, literacy teaching:

“needs to build on oral language knowledge and be supported by oral language activities” (Carroll 1999). Learners tend to make slow progress and need re-teaching. (Robson 1982, Strucker 2002)” (Burt and Peyton 2003 p3).

Then there are those who have either had no access or limited access to literacy teaching because of war, poverty, socio economic status, illness etc. These learners have had some exposure to written language, have some awareness of the uses of literacy and may have developed some literacy skills. Some of these learners may be reluctant to disclose their limited literacy, and those with very little literacy in their first language often make slow progress (Burt and Peyton 2003)

Some studies have identified specific differences in relation to the literacy strengths and needs of ESOL literacy learners as opposed to adult literacy learners. Chall 1994 (quoted in Kruidenier 2002) conducted a non-experimental study on 100 adult basic education learners; the learners in this study were literacy learners i.e. those with English as their first language as well as ESOL literacy learners i.e. those with English as a second or additional language. Two patterns emerged. The ESOL literacy group had relatively high scores on alphabetic (phonics and decoding) and fluency scores while scores for vocabulary and comprehension were low. This means they were stronger on the mechanics of reading print but experienced difficulty with comprehending texts and understanding the meaning of the words they were reading. The opposite was true for the literacy learners – the meaning based aspects of reading had relatively high scores while print based aspects were low.

Findings from the Davidson and Strucker study (2002) are consistent with conclusions from the Chall study above; that literacy learners and ESOL literacy learners have different strengths and needs in relation to literacy development. They analysed data from 212 learners (a mix of both literacy learners and ESOL literacy learners). They found that literacy learners and ESOL literacy learners had different error patterns even when the word attack means and distributions were identical. The literacy learners were significantly stronger in silent reading comprehension than the ESOL literacy group but their print skills (decoding) were significantly lower than the print skills of the ESOL literacy learners. Adult literacy learners showed greater meaning strength than print strength while the ESOL literacy learners had equivalent scores in print and meaning aspects of reading. They found that “Overall, the NNSE [non native speakers of English] more resemble normally developing younger readers, whereas NSE [native speakers of English] more resemble children with reading disabilities whose print skills lag behind their meaning skills.” (Davidson and Strucker 2002). They concluded that one of the implications for teaching is that ESOL literacy learners need to develop their vocabulary while adult literacy learners tend to need to develop decoding skills.

4.2 Relationship between oral skills and literacy

Condelli and Wrigley (2002) found a strong relationship between oral proficiency and reading. Learners with higher oral skills showed more improvement in reading than learners with lower oral ability. It would seem that some proficiency in oral skills is necessary for mastering basic reading skills. Thus, teachers working with beginners would need to emphasise the development of oral skills before, or at least alongside, development of basic literacy skills

Condelli and Wrigley also examined factors that supported growth in oral English language development and found that learners with higher initial basic reading skills had faster growth in their oral skills. Thus, oral skills support the development of reading and reading also supports the development of oral skills.

4.3 Connecting literacy teaching to real tasks

There is evidence that ESOL literacy learners benefit from contextualised learning environments. This was highlighted by Wrigley and Guth (1992) in one of the first guidance texts for ESOL literacy teachers. Condelli and Wrigley (2002) observed classes and coded activities according to instructional strategies. One of the areas they examined was the use of strategies to connect teaching to 'outside' or real world e.g. using trips, speakers, real life materials. They found that learners in classes where teachers made connections to real world tasks showed a greater increase in basic reading skills than those in other classes.

Purcell-Gates et al (2002) (quoted in Benseman et al 2005) examined two aspects of teaching methodology, based on actual reading and writing practices of literacy learners, in order to determine whether these methodologies encouraged changes in literacy behaviours. The two aspects were authenticity of activities and texts and the degree of collaboration between teachers and learners. **173 literacy learners** were involved in the study. The study found a positive relationship between learners engaging in real life, authentic activities in the classroom and changed literacy behaviours:

“The results document that it is indeed beneficial to incorporate materials and literacy activities in the instructional program that reflect real-life texts and purposes for reading and writing them to the greatest degree possible.”

(quoted in Benseman et al 2005 p 41).

Further, the researchers concluded that the strategy is appropriate for literacy learners at all levels of reading ability, i.e. even those beginning to read.

Simpson (2007) stresses the importance of the contextualised approach for ESOL literacy learners. However, though this approach has been considered best practice in ESOL teaching for some time its benefits have only recently begun to be documented.

4.4 Using the first language to support literacy work

There is a substantial body of research related mainly to children, which shows the effectiveness of bilingual programmes and dual immersion on second language acquisition.

There are few studies that focus on adult ESOL literacy learners but the few that have been conducted in the last few years tend to suggest that use of learners' first language supports the development of second language literacy. Lucero and Thompson (1994) conducted an evaluative study with adult ESOL literacy learners. They set up 3 ESOL literacy classes with 3 bilingual teachers (Arabic, Spanish and Bengali speakers). The authors comment on the speed of progress made by 3 groups of learners in their literacy development. However, it is not easy to draw conclusions that relate specifically to the use of the first language as the three tutors used very different teaching approaches e.g. language experience, traditional ESOL methodology, and formal approaches beginning with recognition of the alphabet.

More recent studies have been better able to link outcomes to specific aspects of the programmes studied. One of the aspects examined in a New Zealand study 'Through Language to Literacy: A Report on the Literacy Gains of Low Level and pre Literate Adult ESOL Learners in Literacy Classes (Shameem et al 2002) was the use of bilingual tutors. Eight ESOL literacy classes were set up for 118 learners (62 of these learners participated in the research). Some classes were 12 hours per week and some were 2 hours per week; they all ran for 20 weeks. Four classes had bilingual tutors and four classes were taught by native English speakers. The study used learner self assessment and formal tests to measure gains in literacy.

The findings in relation to the use of bilingual teachers are mixed. The study found that:

- learners, both those taught by bilingual and those taught by English-speaking tutors, made significant gains in literacy.

- the learner self assessment results showed no significant difference between learners taught by bilingual teachers and those with English speaking teachers i.e. the type of teacher did not make a difference to the learners' perception of their improvements in literacy.
- in formal tests, there was a difference between learners taught by bilingual teachers and those taught by English speaking teachers:

"..significant differences were found in the variances between the two groups on the final reading assessments, where those being taught by bilingual tutors appeared to have made considerable gains." (Shameem et al 2002 p 4).

The study was not able to draw out reasons for this difference but recommends that classes have access to bilingual as well as English speaking tutors. They found that "Two thirds of the students indicated they would like bilingual teaching at the start of the programme, and this is clearly a preferred option at the beginning stages when student language needs require special scaffolding, and especially when they face insecurities with language learning, given their traumatic backgrounds.." (Shameem et al 2002 p10)

Condelli and Wrigley 2002 examined teachers' use of learners' first language as one of the instructional strategies coded during observation of ESOL literacy classes. They developed a measure for the use of first language to explain concepts, give instructions, for learners to ask questions and to do written assignments. The result was that use of first language had:

"a positive effect on the linear growth in reading comprehension. the more teachers used students' native language to do such things as give directions about class activities or to clarify concepts, the faster students' reading comprehension grew."
(Condelli and Wrigley 2002 p123)

4.5 First language literacy

Studies suggest that having some literacy in the first language has a positive impact on development of second language literacy.

Condelli and Wrigley (2002) found that learners with more education started with a higher level of basic reading skills (e.g. knowledge of phonics and word recognition skills) and learned faster than less educated learners. As years of education may reflect level of literacy in the first language, the result supports the theory that L1 literacy assists the development of L2 literacy. Interestingly, the study found that the

positive effect faded over time i.e. that “*prior education initially helps ESL literacy students acquire basic reading skills, this initial advantage does not help later.*” (Condelli and Wrigley 2002 p122).

Burt and Peyton (2003) examined how literacy in the first language can affect the acquisition of reading in English. They identified six types of literacy in the first language. The first three types describe learners with limited literacy. They are:

- ‘preliterate’ which describes learners whose first language has no written form or has only recently been written e.g. Af-Maay;
- ‘nonliterate’ learners are those who have not had access to literacy instruction because of their socioeconomic status or disruption due to war or poverty;
- ‘semi-literate’ learners describes learners who have had access to literacy teaching but have not achieved a high level of literacy because of their socioeconomic status.

The category of literate learners are subdivided into

- nonalphabet literate e.g. Chinese;
- non-Roman alphabet e.g. Arabic;
- Roman alphabet e.g. French.

The review highlights research into the particular skills that these different categories of learners can transfer to the development of reading in English e.g. ‘nonliterate’ learners have had some exposure to written language and so have an awareness of the value and uses of literacy which may not be the case with ‘preliterate’ learners. It also identified needs that learners with different experiences of literacy may have e.g. “For preliterate and nonliterate learners, written materials used as teaching aids may have limited value” (Burt et al 2003). Burt and Peyton summarised this information in a table (Burt and Peyton 2003 p5).

The conclusion that learners with literacy skills in their first language can transfer skills to learning second language literacy is supported by Strucker and Davidson (2003). They carried out a study of learners attending Adult Basic Education classes in the US to describe features and needs in relation to reading. Included in the study were 279 ESOL learners, 218 of whom were Spanish speakers. These learners were given both English and Spanish reading assessments. The majority had some literacy skills in Spanish (the study describes this as ‘adequate or better native language literacy skills’ p3). The study clustered learners according to, for example, educational history, time in US, reading problems in Spanish etc. They found that learners were able to transfer their skills to reading in English “*the learners who are already literate in Spanish seem able to chunk English words correctly into syllables immediately. This is because they transfer this chunking skill from Spanish.*” (Strucker and Davidson 2003 p 4).

In addition, Burt and Peyton (2003) identified two studies which suggest that previous or simultaneous acquisition of L1 literacy can have a positive impact on the development of English literacy: Robson 1982 found that Hmong learners with some literacy skills in their L1 developed reading skills in English faster than those learners without L1 literacy; Burtoff 1985 studied adult Haitians in New York and found those who received instruction in first language literacy while they were learning English developed stronger literacy skills than those only studying English.

4.6 Other Factors associated with learners making progress

- **Age:** Condelli and Wrigley (2003) found that older learners acquired basic reading skills more slowly. Younger learners often started at a lower level but learned more quickly. The study does not specify the age range for the two categories but, in a discussion about rates at which learners acquire speaking and learning skills, an example of a younger learner is a 20 year old and an example of an older learner is a 40 year old. The NRDC review of ESOL pedagogy in the UK refers to a study³ conducted in 1989 on 133 ESOL learners (Barton and Pitt 2003 p 9) which found that the age the learners entered the UK and started learning English was an important factor in determining their success:

“Age correlates negatively with the grades given by the teachers, suggesting that the higher the age of the learners the lower the level of their proficiency.” (Khanna et al 1998 p 64)

- **Teacher education and methodology:** A number of studies highlight features in relation to teaching that support learners in making progress. Brooks et al (2001) investigated progress of literacy learners in the UK. This was an investigation into the literacy progress made by learners in adult basic education classes, however, 334 of the learners surveyed gave their first language as other than English. The study found that learners made small but significant improvements in reading and writing and concluded that 2 of the factors responsible for this progress related to teachers - having qualified teacher status and having additional help, e.g. volunteers or teaching assistants. Barton and Pitt (2003) have a subsection within their UK review of ESOL research on ESOL literacy. They identify the lack of training on literacy pedagogy as one of the main issues in relation to this

³ Khanna, A et al (1998) Adult ESOL Learners In Britain: A Cross-Cultural Study Multilingual Matters

area of work. The review refers to two studies which both call for the training of ESOL teachers in literacy pedagogy: one is an account of doctoral research on the learning of second language literacy in Canada⁴ and the second is the first report of the US 'What Works' study⁵. The US report found that:

"There was virtually no instruction on higher order reading and writing skills, such as comprehension, meaning making or guided or free writing. Most instruction was limited to copying and phonics." (Barton and Pitt 2003 p19)

Condelli and Wrigley (2004) found that

"..even though the classes were supposed to be literacy-focused, most of the instructional time was being spent on language acquisition activities, rather than literacy development..... In addition, we found that the teachers in our study were not trained in teaching literacy. They were mostly using the materials and methods that they would normally use in regular ESL classes aimed at more literate students." (Condelli and Wrigley 2004 p4).

The NRDC ESOL effective practice study (Baynham et al 2007) highlighted the importance of talk and group work. Group teaching is more appropriate for ESOL learners than one-to-one teaching because the social practice of English is an essential part of language learning. For this reason, the emphasis on individualised teaching and learning emphasised in some adult literacy classes may not support the needs of ESOL learners (Roberts 2004). It is interesting to note, however, that the NRDC study into reading in the UK (Burton 2007) also identified working with others as a factor that supports reading development for literacy learners.

- **Amount of tuition** Condelli and Wrigley (2002) examined two main factors in relation to attendance: the total number of weeks that learners attended (persistence measure); the number of hours attended in a week (intensity measure). They found that learners who attended *"more regularly improved their reading comprehension skills, no matter how many hours they attended."* (Condelli and Wrigley 2002 p 123); those who attended intensively also developed reading comprehension more than those with few hours.

⁴ Bell, J. S. (1997) Literacy, Culture and Identity New York

⁵ AIR (American Institutes for Research) (2001) What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students: Research Challenges and Descriptive Findings – Draft Report, Pelavin Research Center, Washington

- **Retention and persistence** Persistence of ESOL literacy learners has not received specific attention in the research. However, there are studies that have examined persistence and retention of learners on ESOL courses and adult basic education courses. These give us some insights that are equally valid for ESOL literacy learners:

 - Basic Skills Agency (BSA) in the UK examined progression and drop out in ESOL programmes and found that learners dropped out for a wide variety of reasons e.g. change in accommodation, childcare, dissatisfaction with the progress they were making.
 - Comings (2007) provides an examination of four literature reviews that analyse research into persistence. Many of the research studies are based on adults who speak English as their first language and/or have high levels of literacy and, therefore, may not be directly applicable to ESOL literacy learners. However, there are some findings that can be translated to the ESOL literacy context:
 - The need for courses to take account of learner motivations and life contexts;
 - Ensuring that learners are correctly placed and have sufficient information about the course so that they can make informed choices;
 - The importance of the initial weeks of the course in providing induction and in establishing relationships between teachers and learners;
 - The importance of identifying learners at risk of dropping out and providing support.
 - McGoldrick et al (2007) carried out a small scale study to explore the reasons why ESOL learners (not specifically ESOL literacy learners) stay on course despite often difficult circumstances. Seven teachers at a London FE college, who had all achieved consistently high retention rates, and a sample of each of their learners were involved in the study. The focus was to identify factors about teachers and the learning environment that engaged the learners and kept them motivated. A high proportion of learners identified specific goals and aspirations that related to their motivation. The next most motivating factor identified by learners, was the teacher. ESOL learners expressed strong opinions about methods and teacher characteristics that motivated them to attend regularly. Items that were key are: clear explanations, patience from the teacher, being treated as equals rather than as children, enjoyment and relevance to their lives. Teachers too identified a number of factors than they considered supported learners'

persistence; one factor that is particularly relevant to ESOL literacy learners is the importance of achievement “..learners must feel they are learning and getting somewhere ..”

4.7 Findings specific to reading

Though the quantity of research on how adults acquire reading is small in comparison to research on children, it is this area that has seen more research than any other aspect of basic skills education.

A major study was conducted in the US (Kruidenier 2002) that analysed research into the development of reading for ‘low literate’ adults. Though its focus was not ESOL literacy, several of the 70 research studies examined included ESOL literacy learners.

The study examines research in relation to 4 components of reading: alphabeticity (this includes use of phonics and word analysis), fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Though these components are discussed separately, the study emphasises that reading is a complex process and that the ultimate goal is comprehension. For comprehension to occur the separate components of reading must function together and “*..must be taught together to maximize instructional effectiveness.... a balanced approach in which no one aspect of the reading process is over or under emphasised.*” (Curtis and Kruidenier 2005 p 32)

This review will examine these aspects of reading in turn.

Comprehension

- For comprehension to occur, readers need to interact with the text, constructing meaning based on what they already know. Comprehension will suffer if they are not familiar with basic vocabulary and lack prior knowledge/experience to make sense of the key concepts. This is an important issue for ESOL literacy learners and highlights the importance of ensuring learners have sufficient oral skills to support reading development (Condelli and Wrigley 2002), that comprehension is taught alongside other reading components e.g. vocabulary (Curtis and Kruidenier 2005) and that care is taken “*in choosing the texts .. with respect to both the language and the content .. and we must also....provide these students with .. the knowledge of the content they will need ..*” (Eskey 1997 p2). The more that material for reading is relevant to learners and relates to real life the greater the gains in reading. (Condelli and Wrigley 2002; Kruidenier 2002).

- Kruidenier (2002) found that “..less proficient readers often lack awareness of comprehension strategies and cannot develop them on their own.” (Curtis and Kruidenier 2005 p 80). A number of studies have found that literacy learners benefit from explicit instruction on comprehension strategies. Kruidenier identifies a number of experimental and non-experimental studies that show positive effects for reading comprehension instruction (Kruidenier 2002 pp 86 and 87).
- An experimental study Rich and Shepherd (1993)⁶, quoted in both Kruidenier (2002) and Benseman (2005), investigated the effects of explicitly teaching two reading comprehension strategies. One group were taught self-questioning as they read (who, what, when, where, how and why). Another group were taught to summarise information as they read and a third group were taught to use both strategies. The group taught both strategies outperformed control groups that did not receive instruction in these strategies. However, the combined summarising and self-questioning was not more effective than using one strategy by itself. Self-questioning appeared to lead to more improvement in comprehension. Though the study was not based on ESOL literacy learners it does suggest that explicit teaching improves comprehension.
- Condelli and Wrigley (2002)’s research involved a number of assessments in relation to reading. They used tests to assess basic reading skills (e.g. knowledge of sound-letter relationship, letter and whole word recognition) as well as tests to assess comprehension of passages (starting with short phrases e.g ‘red table’ to simple sentences and then to short texts). In their analysis of the factors that were linked to growth in reading comprehension, they found that the presence of basic reading skills (phonics and word recognition) was linked to learners’ improvements in reading comprehension tests. They found that “..students who entered class with some basic reading skills showed significant growth in reading comprehension compared to students who had little or no basic reading skills...” (Condelli and Wrigley 2002 p 122). Thus, lower-level reading skills such as word recognition seem critical for successful reading comprehension.

⁶ Rich, R. and Shepherd, M. J. (1993) Teaching text comprehension strategies to adult poor readers. Reading & Writing, 5(4), 387-402

Vocabulary

- Readers will struggle to comprehend texts without sufficient knowledge of the key vocabulary. For ESOL literacy learners vocabulary knowledge is one of the most significant factors in reading success. Davidson and Strucker (2002) in their analysis of word recognition errors of English speaking learners and ESOL literacy learners found that knowledge of word meanings was an area of great need for ESOL literacy learners. In their study of the characteristics of learners enrolled in US adult basic education programmes, Strucker and Davidson (2003) again found that learners need different approaches, and for ESOL learners development of vocabulary is a priority. Besser et al (2004) also stress the importance of high quality vocabulary development and exposure to a range of texts in the development of reading skills.
- Arriving at conclusions about effective vocabulary instruction has been difficult and results from research are inconclusive. (Kruideneir 2002). *“A handful of studies found vocabulary increases as result of instruction (Gold and Johnson 1982, McDonald 1997) but do not identify specific approaches..”* (Curtis 2006)

Use of context clues i.e., advising learners to guess the meaning of unfamiliar terms or phrases from the context, is a common strategy for developing vocabulary in literate post beginner ESOL learners. However, this strategy is unlikely to be effective with ESOL literacy learners because of low levels of vocabulary knowledge and difficulties with word recognition. Some researchers *“argue that in order to learn new words from a text, readers need to understand at least 95%-98% of the other words, and that readers cannot use contextual cues to guess a word’s meaning unless they know the meanings of the cues (Coady, 1997; Coady et al, 1993; Laufer, 1997).”* (Burt, Peyton and Adams 2003 p 18).

Providing learners with opportunities to engage in varied reading at an appropriate level with follow up activities that extend their understanding of new vocabulary may be more effective (Curtis 2006).

Fluency

- Fluency relates to the speed and ease with which we read. It *“promotes comprehension by freeing cognitive resources for interpretation”* (Curtis and Kruidenier 2005 p51).

- Guided oral reading and repeated reading are common techniques for supporting learners in developing fluency (Kruidenier 2002).
- Kruidenier identified one non experimental study (Tan, Moore, Dixon and Nicholson, 1994) on ESOL literacy learners. Three learners were taught to rapidly identify isolated words using a repeated reading approach. The learners' word and passage fluency increased but not their comprehension (Kruidenier 2002 p 65).
- Some studies of the repeated reading approach have been carried out with more literate ESOL learners e.g. Taguchi (1997) examined the effects of repeated reading on Japanese university students learning English (quoted in Taguchi et al 2006). The studies found that the repeated reading approach helped develop learners' fluency. However, as with the study described in Kruidenier above, they were unable to identify improvements in reading comprehension. Taguchi et al (2006) highlight the need for further studies on the effects of word recognition fluency training on comprehension development; "*Thus, it remains to be consistently demonstrated in L2/Foreign language reading research that automated word recognition skills are a sufficient condition for successful reading comprehension.*" (Taguchi et al 2006 p7).
- A small study was conducted in the UK to examine the effectiveness of oral reading fluency strategies (Burton 2007a). Six adult literacy teachers took part in the study and received support to try a range of strategies, e.g. paired reading, repeated reading, performance reading. This was an evaluative study; teachers and learners reported that the strategies supported fluency and confidence.

Alphabetics

- Kruidenier (2002) defines this as phonemic awareness and word analysis. He examined research which assessed phonemic awareness of adult non readers and beginning readers. Adult non-readers were found to have virtually no awareness of phonemes and adult beginner readers had difficulty manipulating phonemes and applying letter-sound knowledge to figure out unfamiliar words (Curtis and Kruidenier 2005 p 39). They did not find experimental research on ESOL literacy learners though Davidson and Strucker (2002 noted above) found that ESOL literacy learners had relatively high scores in phonics. This may

be due to the high number of Spanish speakers in the study with some basic literacy in their first language.

- Research shows that learners' first language and level of first language literacy have a role to play in relation to learners' phonemic awareness. For example, in the Wade-Woolley 1999 study, a group of Japanese ESL learners at a Canadian university and a group of Russian ESL learners at an Israeli university were given a number of word level reading and decoding tests to complete. The 2 groups were similar in respect of ages, gender distribution, reading ability in their first language (they were all successful readers in either Russian or Japanese) and exposure to English. The main difference between the groups was the first language. Both languages are significantly different from English and each uses a different writing system from each other; "Russian uses a phonologically based alphabet and Japanese uses a syllabary (kana) and a logographic system (kanji)." (Wade-Woolley 1999 p 1). The study found that the Japanese group were faster and more accurate on tasks involving orthographic patterns while the Russian group were faster and more accurate in deleting phonemes from words. This suggests that different learners would make use of the strategies, when reading English, that are most important in their first languages.
- Research suggests that learners can develop skills related to alphabets (e.g. phonemic awareness, use of phonics) through explicit instruction. Two studies suggest that when reading instruction includes alphabets this leads to increases in reading comprehension (Curtis and Kruidenier 2005 p 43). The research has been based on learners attending adult basic education classes rather than ESOL literacy learners. It is important to note that phonic based instruction designed for native speakers of English tends to assume a high level of oral language and vocabulary (Burt et al 2005 p4 quoted in Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos 2007).
- Little research on the effectiveness of phonic instruction has been done with ESOL literacy learners. Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos (2007) carried out a small action research study in the US to examine whether the use of whole-part-whole instruction (this involves integrating phonics work with whole language methods) improved learners' phonemic awareness and decoding skills. It was conducted with one class of 9 learners, some with no literacy in the first language and some with L1 literacy. The researcher identified what phonemic awareness and letter-sound combinations the learners needed to work on from pre tests and

incorporated work on these areas into direct, context based, reading instruction sessions. They found that the instruction was useful, particularly for the learners not literate in their first language. These learners showed most improvement in decoding. The learners with L1 literacy did not gain as much, and the authors suggest that this may be due to the fact that their decoding was strong in most areas at the start of the study.

- Purewal (2008) identified 4 studies (Denton et al 2000; Foorman et al 1998; Stuart 1999; Torgesen et al 1999) which examined phonics instruction for children with English as a second language. It is important to keep in mind the significant difference between adults and children and to be careful about drawing conclusions. However, it is interesting to note that all studies reported improvements in decoding but none showed any significant increase in comprehension.
- The use of phonics is an area that is receiving considerable interest at present, both in respect of children's reading acquisition and that of adults. In the US, Condelli (2008) is planning research to evaluate the effectiveness of an explicit, direct, systematic approach for teaching phonics and high frequency sight words to ESOL literacy learners.

Other factors:

- Motivation, interest, literacy practices and needs are often cited by practitioners as factors which play a significant role in reading success. This area has received a little attention in the research. However, one study (Cuban 2001) describes case studies of four women, two of which are ESOL literacy learners. The study aimed to encourage learners to read for pleasure. The case studies discuss the impact and response from the learners and found that offering pleasurable reading that makes women feel good can 'hook' women into reading so that it becomes an enjoyable practice and can connect to women's emotional lives in a non threatening way.

4.8 Findings specific to writing

Research studies have found that learners make less progress in writing than in reading. Condelli and Wrigley (2002) found no significant improvement in writing and could not draw out conclusions in relation to factors that might support writing development. The authors consider that this may be because the assessment tools were not able to detect the slight gains made by low level learners. Shameem et al (2002) also

found that learners who took part in their research study started with higher levels of reading than writing. At the end of the study they had made significant progress with reading but made less progress in writing. This feature of literacy development seems also to be true for literacy learners; Brooks (2001) found that many learners had significantly lower skills in writing than reading.

Much of the literature around writing concerns teaching approaches and is related to adults in literacy provision rather than focussing specifically on ESOL literacy learners.

Gillespie (2001) provides a comprehensive discussion of research on writing related to adults. The discussion examines how our knowledge of what writers do led to the development of the process model of writing and how in the last decade research has further developed our understanding of the socio-cultural and contextual nature of writing. The implications that Gillespie draws out and which are relevant to ESOL literacy learners are that “writing is not best taught as a linear, sequential set of skills but as a process of gradual approximation of what skilled writers do: a cycling and recycling of learning processes” (Gillespie 1999 p5) and further that “Composition is not something that should wait until all the basic, prerequisite skills are learned, but can be introduced even to relative beginners.” (Gillespie 1999 p5).

In addition to the composing aspect of writing, many ESOL literacy learners need to develop their skills in relation to the mechanics i.e. handwriting and spelling. In the writing process model these are considered lower-level processes. For beginning writers, “*the goal is to automatise the low level processes so that working memory resources are freed for the higher level constructive aspects of composing*” (Berninger and Swanson 1998 p652 quoted in Gillespie 2001 p11).

Berninger and Swanson 1997 (quoted in Gillespie 2001) examined the effects of different approaches to teaching handwriting with children. They found that brief but frequent handwriting instruction while children were engaged in writing tasks was the most effective. Sawyer and Joyce (2006) review research on spelling, making use of research on children as well as the research that exists on low-literate adults. The review includes a small subsection examining research relevant to ESOL learners. Very few studies have been undertaken. One of the studies quoted in Sawyer and Joyce (2006) is Cook (1997)⁷. This study compared spelling of 375 adult ESOL learners with 1,492 native speakers (adults and children), in order to determine whether second language learners applied both visual and phonological strategies for

⁷ Cook, V.J. (1997) L2 users and English spelling. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18(6), 474-488

spelling or if they would show a preference for the strategy that was prominent in their first language. Cook found that the phonological strategy was dominant regardless of the learners' first language. In the case of ESOL learners Sawyer and Joyce advise that "*instruction should begin at whatever stage the student is currently in.and providing instruction that is structured, sequential and repetitive.*" (Sawyer and Joyce 2006 p 104)

Kelly et al (2004) in their review of research and practice on writing state that it is not yet possible to determine to what extent findings from research with children can be applied to adults. They review theories of how learners develop as writers, factors that support development of writing and current learning in the UK. The review identifies a number of success factors associated with the learning environment: teaching process-based writing, authentic practices and tasks, encouragement of collaboration, use of contexts and materials relevant to learners' lives. Purcell-Gates et al (2002) found that use of authentic tasks, e.g.

"..writing letters that get sent to real people in the lives of student .. accounts for a newsletter that gets printed and read by real people.. all of these types of activities can, according to the findings of this study lead to substantive changes in the ways that students create literate lives outside the classroom"
(Purcell-Gates et al 2002 p 91).

A small study was conducted in the UK to examine the effectiveness of collaborative writing (Grief 2007), following the finding from Kelly et al (2004) above, that this was a strategy that could support learners to develop as writers. Seven teachers took part in the study and two of them worked with groups where the majority of learners were ESOL literacy learners. Teachers used a range of collaborative writing activities e.g. creating a survey, retelling a story. The study was not able to measure change in writing competence but produced evaluative findings based on observation of behaviour and examination of learners' writing. All the teachers were positive about the experience and most learners found the experience of writing with others helpful. The study found that collaborative writing "encouraged the learners to value each others' knowledge and learn from one another" (Grief 2007 p 9). Two teachers noted that collaborative working helped learners to focus for longer periods of time and the teacher working with the ESOL literacy learners found that learners working together produced more accurate writing, "a learner whose first language was not English shared her understanding of grammar. She was able to correct a subject-verb agreement. She and her partners also had a discussion about the need for consistency in using the narrative voice...." (Grief 2007 p 10).

5. Conclusion and recommendations for policy

The review highlights the lack of research for this particular group of learners. However, it is clear that this is an area which is continuing to receive more attention.

Despite the small amount of research on this group of learners and the need for further research into both acquisition of reading and writing and teaching approaches, it is possible to draw tentative conclusions from the knowledge we have at present. These conclusions can inform decisions we make regarding how provision, teaching methodology and materials are organised.

Provision:

Given the very specific and particular needs of different ESOL literacy learners highlighted by this review (section 4.1, 4.2 and 4.5), it is important to provide **focussed assessment** so that learners are placed in most appropriate provision.

The **initial assessment process** needs to obtain information about ESOL literacy learners which can inform the decision on placement . In particular: learners' educational background and level of first language literacy; level of oral English skills and level of literacy in English are key (section 4.2, 4.5).

Care is needed when making judgements about whether to place ESOL literacy learners in classes for literacy learners or in classes for ESOL learners with fluent literacy. Ideally, classes specifically aimed at this group of learners (if possible targeted at different levels of oral English) will be better able to address the needs of these learners (section 4.2, 5.5).

ESOL literacy learners with beginner oral skills may need to **focus on developing their speaking before starting work on literacy**. This needs to take priority when deciding on appropriate provision (section 4.2).

The feasibility of using **bilingual teachers or bilingual support workers or bilingual volunteers** needs to be considered, particularly when planning provision for beginner speakers (section 4.4),.

Teaching Methodology

Teacher training and professional development is essential so that teachers can make use of the best available knowledge we have about

how literacy is acquired for this group of learners and about the most appropriate and specific methodologies (section 4.6).

Teachers need to develop assessment processes which will help them **identify their learners' literacy strengths and areas for development**. This will be strengthened if teachers are able to identify literacy skills that learners can transfer from their first languages (section 4.5).

Providing a **contextualised model of teaching** that includes literacy tasks reflective of real life use promotes literacy development (section 4.3, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8).

ESOL literacy learners need a balanced approach in order to develop learners' **reading** skills i.e. teachers need to ensure they address the different components of reading (phonics and word recognition, vocabulary development, fluency and comprehension) without over or underemphasising any one aspect (section 4.7).

ESOL literacy learners will benefit from **explicit teaching** of comprehension strategies; specific focus on vocabulary development; use of strategies, for example guided oral reading and repeated reading to develop fluency and a systematic and explicit approach to phonic work which is linked to phonic skills that learners may already have (section 4.7).

ESOL literacy learners need a balanced approach in order to develop their **writing** skills i.e. a focus on both mechanics and composition. They will need to improve their skills in relation to the mechanics of writing e.g. handwriting and spelling. Teaching of these skills has been found to be most effective when it brief, frequent and, in the case of spelling, structured and repetitive (section 4.8).

Factors that have been found to be linked to success in supporting learners to develop as writers have been the use of a process-based approach to writing, encouragement of collaboration, use of authentic practices and tasks that relate to learners' lives (section 4.8).

Materials

Activities and materials that enable learners to make **links to real life** have been shown to promote progress. Teachers may need to be supported in finding ways to identify contexts that are of particular relevance and interest to their learners as well as strategies to incorporate authentic materials and tasks that reflect real life literacy practices (section 4.3, 4.7, 4.8).

When **choosing texts**, teachers need to take account of both the language and the content. It is important to consider what cultural knowledge learners need in order to make sense of particular texts.

6. Glossary

L1	First language; the language a speaker speaks best
L2	Second language; in this report, the language a person is developing
ESL	English as a second language
Comprehension	Understanding of a text
Decode	Translate the visual representation of letters into component sounds that make up a word
Fluency	Unhesitating reading. Focus is on speed and ease of reading
Language experience	An approach to learning that uses the learner's own words as the basis for reading and writing work
Lexis	all the words and expressions in a language
Phonics	the relationship between the letters of the alphabet and the sounds of the language they represent
Phonological awareness	Awareness of sounds within words, demonstrated, for example, by the ability to segment and blend component sounds.

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This is the first large-scale study of ESL literacy learners of its kind. 495 learners were involved in the study; 72% female, with a mean age of 40, the mean number of years education was 3.1. 30 languages were represented though two thirds were Spanish speaking. The learners had very little English language or literacy skills. Learners were followed from time of entry for 9 months and were assessed on entry and at 2 and 9 months after enrolment. Classes were observed and activities were coded. The aim was to identify progress made and the factors that impact on progress.

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The chapter provides a comprehensive review of theory and practice related to vocabulary learning in adult literacy learners. Not specifically ESOL literacy

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A comprehensive review of the research and developments in teaching writing. Not specifically ESOL literacy.

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