

# **How do uneducated adult immigrants become readers?**

**A British Academy-funded exploratory case study.**

**Principal investigator Martha Young-Scholten, research assistant Louise Younger**

**February - October 2008**

Results from studies published in the 2006 and the 2007 *Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition* symposium proceedings indicate there is not a critical period during which reading must be learnt (unlike what is claimed for linguistic competence, e.g. Johnson & Newport 1989). At the three *LESLLA* symposia held thus far, participants shared their observations regarding variation in progress in the population of adults with no education or literacy in their native language who attempt to learn to read for the first time in a second language. When learners are successful, this is typically attributed to motivation, and when they fail, what is mentioned is lack of motivation, time on task as well as learning disabilities.

This new project aims to identify factors connected with success for first-time L2 English readers. The current project is a short-term (six-month) longitudinal study involving 12 uneducated adult immigrants who are speakers of languages with differing scripts: Kurdish and Arabic (Perso-Arabic script and Somali (Roman alphabet) and who are currently receiving English-as-a-second-language instruction.

Reading will be measured in terms of (a) decoding words and (b) fluent reading of a paragraph; linguistic competence (Young-Scholten & Ijiun 2006) phonological awareness (Goswami & Bryant (1990) and working memory (Gathercole 1999) will be measured using established procedures (see table below). These research questions will be addressed:

- 1) Does reading development parallel oral proficiency development in a) morpho-syntax; b) phonology; c) vocabulary?
- 2) Does rate of reading development correlate with a) age of arrival; b) age of start of instruction; c) working memory capacity; d) phonological awareness?
- 3) Does reading development correlate with a) oral language practices (active and passive, e.g. television) in English; b) extra-classroom native language and English literacy practices?
- 4) Do adults whose native language is written in the Roman alphabet (Somali) show faster development than those whose native language is written in a script different from English?

The research assistant is Louise Younger (CELTA: PG Cert in Responses to Dyslexia and Basic Education (Literacy) for Adults; MA Applied Linguistic. Louise teaches immigrant adults at two local colleges and will monitor the instruction the 12 adults participating receive during the study as well as administer/assist in administration of the tasks listed below.

Apart from the boldfaced cells in the table below, procedures will be carried out on a monthly basis. Response changes are expected due to development in these areas (repeated testing has shown little test-wiseness).

Reading and writing	phonological awareness	Linguistic competence	Extra-linguistic factors
<b>Once:</b> in native language, <u>read</u> a paragraph, <u>write</u> personal details	onset, rime, and phoneme awareness	vocabulary	<b>Once:</b> interview to obtain age of arrival in the UK and age of programme enrolment
		morpho-syntax	
<b>English</b> <u>read:</u> alphabet; signs; paragraph; read single words; <u>write</u> personal details		syllable perception and production; segment production	<b>Month 1:</b> and Month 6: working memory, in English and in the native language  oral interview: extra-classroom oral and literacy practices in native language and in English

The current investigation constitutes a pilot study whose results will form the basis of a major study which will track the development of oral competence and reading by a larger group of uneducated adults from initial programme enrolment for several years. Feedback from others during the pilot study particularly on identification of appropriate tests to measure all of the above, particularly vocabulary, phonemic awareness and working memory is not only very welcome but will be actively solicited (e.g. in the form of workshops at Newcastle University)!