

2. Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition by Adults (LESLLA).

LESLLA was established in 2004 as an international forum on the acquisition of proficiency in spoken and written English by adults who are not literate in their first language. As such LESLLA is an acronym for “Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition by Adults”. Many traditional programmes for teaching English to speakers of other languages assume that the students will have literacy skills in their first language, so that they will be familiar with the basics of spelling, grammar and syntax. When this is not the case -as is increasingly common in the UK, particularly amongst refugees from east African countries and Afghanistan – then literacy must be taught from scratch at the same time as teaching a new language: a tall order for both students and their teachers. Considerable innovation in teaching and learning strategies is called for, and LESLLA exists to share ideas and effective practices in this rapidly-evolving area of literacy and language learning.

LESLLA was founded by a consortium of European and North American researchers, amongst them Dr Martha Young-Scholten, who is based in Newcastle University's School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics. LESLLA holds an annual conference (2005 in Tilburg; 2006 in Richmond, Virginia and 2007 in Newcastle) for the purpose of sharing research findings and discussing the implications of these findings for teaching practice and immigrant educational policy in countries to which low-educated adults immigrate. Peer-reviewed proceedings of each of these conferences have been and are being compiled (in the case of the 2007 Newcastle Conference, by Dr. Young-Scholten). At these conferences, Dr. Young-Scholten, who originally hails from the USA, has shared her research findings from a 2002-2003 project in Seattle, which showed that low-educated adult refugees from Vietnam and Somalia demonstrate the same prerequisites as young children do when confronting the task of learning to read. Other studies suggest that concentrated and relevant instruction in reading can lead to success.

As it is not clear what factors result in a completely unschooled adult learning to read in a second language, Dr Young-Scholten is currently directing a British Academy-funded research project in the Newcastle area, tracking the reading development over six months of adults from Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Sudan. An additional project currently under development seeks to create a substantial collection of engaging and sophisticated fiction at these adults' low level of spoken English and literacy to start them reading for pleasure outside the classroom. A small-scale pilot study has on the one hand confirmed the complete lack of such books and on the other hand the potential of accessible story books to motivate adult immigrants.

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