

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Al-Dhaif, Amina, Hall, Graham and Naeb, Rola (2022) Literacy, Legitimacy, and Investment in Language Learning. The Experiences of a Female Syrian Refugee in the UK. In: Literacies in the Age of Mobility Literacy: Practices of Adult and Adolescent Migrants. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 77-101. ISBN 9783030833169, 9783030833176

Published by: Palgrave Macmillan

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83317-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83317-6_4) <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83317-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83317-6_4)>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/50445/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

## Chapter 4

### Literacy, legitimacy, and investment in language learning: the experiences of a female Syrian refugee in the UK

#### Introduction

Literacy development has become a significant focus in understanding the processes of migration and post-migration settlement. Yet research on literacy development in the language(s) of host countries often assumes that migrant language learners are literate in their first language (L1) - the amount of research about language learners who are non-literate or have low levels of literacy in their L1 is relatively and surprisingly sparse (e.g. Bigelow & King, 2015; Young-Scholten, 2015; Young-Scholten & Naeb, 2010). Only a small fraction of current research explores the most vulnerable and severely disadvantaged second language (L2) learners: those who have received limited education and/or have limited abilities to read and write in their L1 . These learners are often referred to as LESLLA learners<sup>1</sup> (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults). They are among the roughly 750 million non-literate adults around the world (UIS and GEM Report Team, 2019), many of whom migrate from politically fragile and/or impoverished contexts to highly literate post-industrialised, democratic communities.

Migration flows, refugee resettlement schemes, the asylum-seeking process and the political and economic instability in some relatively low-literate, impoverished regions of the world have thus led to increasing numbers of low-educated language learners in countries such as the USA, UK (Young-Scholten, 2015), Germany, Turkey, Italy (Bagna et al., 2017), and Finland (Suni & Tammelin-Laine, 2018). Their experience of learning the language of their host communities is a unique undertaking as often they are learning, in a new language, to read and write for the first time. They take considerably longer to reach the same levels of proficiency in the target language than their more educated/literate peers in terms of both metalinguistic and linguistic development (Kurvers et al., 2006; Naeb & Young-Scholten, 2019; Tarone et al., 2009; Schellekens, 2011), and face substantial challenges in acquiring the linguistic competence and literacy skills that are essential for their integration.

This chapter will therefore explore the experiences of Nadeema, a 42-year-old Syrian female refugee in the UK who had limited literacy in her L1. The chapter traces the ways in which Nadeema's migration and post-migration settlement experiences in the UK have impacted upon her literacy development, her changing attitudes/identities, and her social mobility. We begin by presenting the theoretical framework on which this paper is based: (1) investment and identity(es) in learning English, (2) the communities of practice (CoP) framework, and (3) literacy as a social practice.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Investment and identity(es) in learning English

The relationship between language learning and identity has attracted increasing attention (e.g., Block, 2007; Giroir, 2014; Norton, 2000). This body of work offers new perspectives on language learning, illustrating how learners' identity positions can affect, positively and/or negatively, their language learning processes as well as, in the case of migrants, their access to host community resources. It highlights both how access to linguistic and interactional opportunities is mediated by language learners' social class, gender, race, (non-/low-)literacy, religious and age identities, and the extent to which the conditions under which language learners speak, learn and use the target language are shaped by inequitable power relations. For some migrants, participation in their new host community and in/through its language(s) may provide positive opportunities for self-expression, identity development and social mobility. Identifying and being identified as legitimate speakers within their L2 discourse encourages them to cross boundaries and learn the language of the host community (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002). Yet, sometimes, immigrants might be assigned identities which are negative, and, for them, unacceptable or incompatible with the identities they occupied prior to their migration journey. They might find that their previous symbolic and material resources are not valued, and they might be positioned as lacking in intelligence, incompetent, ignorant, or even a burden on society. In such cases, "their desire to acquire the symbolic capital offered by the new language might be in conflict with their resistance to the range of identities offered to them by that language" (Pavlenko, 2002, p.285), and this will consequently impact their investment in learning the host language and their social mobility.

Hence, identity and identities are dynamic, multiple, contradictory and potentially contested, fluid, and continually changing over historical time and social space (Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1997). This has important implications for L2 education and teachers; language teaching

becomes an intervention in identity formation and negotiation. As Pavlenko (2001, pp. 319-320) argues, “the process of second language socialization and participation in new discursive communities may entail significant changes in ways some L2 users perceive themselves and are perceived by others”. In other words, language learning and socialisation may “transform who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215).

Language plays a central role in identity construction. It is in and through language (linguistic interaction) that identity is constituted; language and identity are mutually constitutive and inseparable (Weedon, 1997). If language is a central element of identity, and if identity and language learning are intertwined, how might the relationship of learners to the language being learned, and towards learning and practising it, be conceptualised? In her early research, Norton (2000; Norton Peirce, 1995) found that “high levels of motivation did not necessarily translate into good language learning, and that unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers was a common theme in the data” (Norton, 2013, p. 6). In other words, learners who fail to learn an L2 are not necessarily ‘unmotivated’. Norton thus suggests the concept of ‘investment’ as a way of linking learners’ desire to learn a second language, their social context, and their changing and contradictory identity/ies. Learners ‘invest’ in learning a language in the hope that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic (language, education, friendship or recognition) and material resources (real estate, money or employment), which will consequently increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. As Norton (2016, p. 2) puts it, “this in turn provides for a wider range of identity positions from which the learner can speak or listen, read or write”. Hence, an investment in the L2 is also an investment in a learner's own identity and social mobility and, because identity is multiple, contradictory and frequently a site of struggle, investment itself “is also complex, contradictory, and often in a state of flux” (Darvin & Norton, 2016, p. 20).

Investment thus serves as a “significant explanatory construct” (Cummins, 2006, p. 59). A language learner might be highly motivated, but not necessarily invested in the language practices of a given context if, for instance, the practices are racist, sexist, homophobic, elitist, marginalising, anti-immigrant, or anti-refugee, or if there are inconsistencies between practices within the language classroom and language learners' imagined identities and communities. Thus, language learners might gradually be excluded and positioned as unmotivated by teachers, peers or institutional structures and systems. This positioning is likely to affect the learners’ social mobility, that is, the movement of individuals or groups through social classes

and hierarchies, with opportunities for and barriers to mobility resulting from the inter-relationships and interactions between a complex range of factors (Gurieva et al., 2020; Blommaert et al., 2017). Social mobility can be further understood through Lave and Wenger's (1991) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework, to which we shall now turn.

#### Communities of practice (CoP) framework

Lave and Wenger's (1991) useful CoP framework emphasises the quintessentially social character of learning, and views learning as located in the evolving membership of individuals in their new social communities and as occurring through participation and engagement within those communities. According to Wenger (1998), learning is a process of participation and cannot be separated from the context in which it occurs. Ultimately, learning can be conceived of as shifts in identity as learners participate in new (to them) communities of practice and form identities in relation to those communities: "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable. They are two aspects of the same phenomenon" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 115). Learning is a process of becoming, or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of habits, skills and knowledge.

The CoP framework is often cited by researchers interested in how language learning and literacy are socially mediated and shaped in practice, and in how language learners construct identities as they move from peripheral to full participation in social worlds. CoP is particularly useful here as it allows us to conceptualise language learners as members of social and historical communities rather than as isolated individuals, and opens up the possibility of exploring the relationship between language learners' sociocultural experiences and their language and literacy learning. It also allows us to reinterpret such learning as a process of participation in new linguistic and cultural communities of practice, in which learners may attempt to gain membership. The concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (LPP) is a primary component of the CoP perspective; it proposes that participation in a new community of practice is initially and legitimately peripheral, but then increases gradually in its engagement and complexity. LPP is perceived as a positive and necessary point in which newcomers are situated peripherally as a vital part of their apprenticeship experiences. Through LPP, newcomers interact with longer-term participants in a given community and learn its necessary knowledge and skills, become increasingly more adept at community practices, and gradually move towards fuller participation in that community, thereby becoming legitimate and active participants. LPP assumes that all newcomers enter communities with equal access

to community resources and experts of the practice and they all end up being fully fledged participants and experts in their communities.

Interestingly, however, language learning projects that have applied the concept of LPP (e.g., Giroir, 2014; Kanno, 1998; Norton, 2000) have found that LPP, as Kanno (1998) argued, “is not how it is” (p. 128) and that learners “are often blocked from the very resource that is vital to their acquisition of the L2: opportunities to interact with native speakers” (p. 129). That is, language learners are not always offered LPP and their paths toward full participation are not always sanctioned. Language learners can be denied access to community resources due to unequal power distributions based on language ideologies, community biases, and discriminatory practices around social dimensions such as religion, social class, race, gender, literacy level, and linguistic proficiency. How language learners negotiate those structures of marginalisation and peripherality and assume more powerful identity positions remains an important area of investigation.

#### Literacy as a social practice

Central to this chapter’s approach is the notion of literacy as a social practice. Literacy is a key aspect in migrants’ lives as it is central to the development of the skills and knowledge necessary to interact and integrate effectively in their new communities of practice. From this perspective, literacy is a social practice as it occurs in individuals’ everyday lives and activities within their communities of practice (Street, 1997), and takes account of literacy’s different meanings for different cultural groups (Barton, 2007). A ‘social perspective’ on literacy does not focus on people’s acquisition or use of technical skills in formal education, but rather on the ways people use written language in their everyday life (as both a producer and/or consumer of written texts). Within this perspective, literacy is conceived primarily as a social activity with specific social purposes, meanings, and outcomes. Thus:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.

- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

(Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 8)

This indicates that literacy is socially and culturally embedded and mediated (Carter, 2006). It is shaped and mediated by language learners' learning history, identity(ies), past experiences, the dominant views in their families and wider communities, and the imagined benefits, if any, literacy carries for them. For example, for LESLLA learners, literacy could be something they were able to manage reasonably well without, and thus it might be of little status. On the other hand, it could have a high value as it is something that they were deprived of; in this case, literacy might be seen as a tool of empowerment. Thus, "the cultural embeddedness of literacy along with the individual differences that apply to all human beings means that it is difficult to predict for a given learner what added value they think literacy skills will bring" (Suni & Tammelin-Laine, 2018, p.29). Not only does literacy vary within social contexts and cultural ideologies, but its meaning and purposes are grounded also in inequitable relations of power (Street, 1997).

## Method

An ethnographic research methodology

The data in this chapter are drawn from a wider 14-month-long ethnographic project which aimed at understanding the language learning and related identity experiences of a group of fourteen adult Muslim Syrian refugees recently arrived in the north-east of England. The project focused in particular on the intersection of their investment in learning English with their social, class, gender and religious identities, both within and beyond the ESOL classroom, and sought to draw out the participants' emic perspectives on their experiences, that is, their own meanings for social actions and their own understandings of their social world (Davies, 1995). The larger dataset included semi-structured interviews with the fourteen refugees and their ESOL teachers and the manager of the institution; classroom observations and field notes alongside audio-recordings and subsequent transcriptions of classroom events; learner diaries in their L1, either written or audio-recorded according to the participants' preferences; learner shadowing, both in-class and beyond; researcher diaries; and a collection of relevant documents which ranged from classroom handouts to UK job-search forms and related paperwork. The learners were interviewed twice in their L1 at the start and end of the project and the interviews were audio-recorded. Data was collected both in Arabic (with subsequent translation into

English) and in English, the multiple sources enabling the clarification and corroboration of data across the project through a process of triangulation. The use of different research methods in tandem compensated for their individual shortcomings and exploited their respective benefits (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

### Participants

Of the fourteen Syrian participants in the project, eight were female and six male, with ages ranging from 19 to 49. Thirteen participants had come to the UK via Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq under the UK's Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPR), while one participant had travelled directly from Syria to Britain. The participants came from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in Syria, and had differing levels of linguistic proficiency and of literacy. While ten had received six years of schooling or less, two had university degrees. Ten participants did not know any English before arriving in Britain, while four knew very little. None of them had previously experienced living in a non-Arabic-speaking country. The focus of this chapter is on Nadeema as she was the least literate in the participants' L1, Arabic.

### Nadeema: the focal participant

Born in Damascus, Syria in 1975, Nadeema reported herself, and was reported by others, to be, 'illiterate' in her L1, Arabic, as she needed to look after her mother who had been severely burnt with boiling oil. Her literacy test results confirmed that she had limited literacy as she was able to recognise few letters, a limited number of words, and a few common phrases.

Literacy was not regarded a necessity for females in Nadeema's home village. As an adult, she had married and had five children. In interviews, Nadeema reported that she had been constantly ridiculed by her family-in-law because of her reported 'illiteracy', which appeared to contribute to low self-esteem. During the research, Nadeema often described herself as 'illiterate' and 'ignorant', this self-reported 'illiteracy' emerging within the data as a crucial identification for her. Accompanied by her family, Nadeema left Syria for Jordan in 2012 and moved to England in 2015. Nadeema noted that she was deeply saddened about coming to England which was entirely her husband's decision. Nadeema described immigrating from Jordan to the UK as moving from 'heaven to a prison'. After being in the UK for three years, Nadeema did not appear to change her attitudes:



Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	ما حبيتها لهبلاد...و يشهد ربي علي اذا بقولولي رجعي عالاردن برجع.	I don't like it here...Still, if I have the choice, I swear by God I'd go back to Jordan.

(Nadeema, phone diary, 13/12/18)

Since arriving in the UK, Nadeema's family members (her husband, four children, and sister-in-law) had made rapid progress with learning English. Although she was not a shy person, Nadeema was quiet in the ESOL classroom and reported being bullied by her ESOL classmates (we shall examine later how her low L1 literacy and social positioning as 'illiterate' interacted with her investment in learning English). Although Nadeema often complained about living in the UK, she seemed to be dedicated and stable in her investment in English, not missing any English classes, attending voluntary English-learning courses at the weekends, and reporting that she asked her children for help studying English at home:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	أنا عم حاول أتعلم انكليزي اي...أنا عم حاول ورح ضل حاول وبدي حاول وبدي حاول.	I'm trying to learn English. Yeah, I'm trying and I'll keep trying. I do want to learn I do want to learn.

(Nadeema, phone diary, 08/07/17)

#### Approach to Analysis

The project followed a broadly ethnographic and interpretive approach. Taking account of the participants' diverse backgrounds and experiences, the aim was to see the world through the Syrians' eyes from an emic perspective, understanding "the participants' meanings for social actions" (Davis, 1995, p.433). Thus, the consequent interpretive stance in this project aimed not to discover meaning and truth deposited *a priori* (Walsham, 1993), but to explore how the social world was made meaningful and interpreted from Nadeema's own perspective, as this would shape her behaviour and stances. The approach to the formal analysis was based on the 'constant comparative method' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which involved the discursive procedure of constant going back and forth through the data and coding it for themes that emerged; it required moving repeatedly between the concrete and raw data and abstract

theoretical knowledge, “between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.202). It also involved constant re/checking with the participants of our interpretations. The analysis and report of the participants’ experiences and stories in the remainder of the chapter therefore involves the authors as co-constructors of knowledge in order to understand and present Nadeema and other participants’ “multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple interpretations” of their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 12).

## Results

This section answers the question of how ‘literacy’ as a social construct was implicated in the experiences of learning English and identity construction and development of Nadeema. It starts by exploring the negative bearing that Nadeema’s reported ‘illiteracy’ had on her learning of English and her gendered identities as a mother and a wife. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of her literacy in her ESOL classroom and how she was positioned by her ESOL classmates and finally the impact on Nadeema herself.

### Nadeema’s ‘illiteracy’ as gendered and a constraint on learning English

In what is clearly a gendered issue, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the world’s 750 million low-literacy adults are women, according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics report published in 2017. As that same report argues, denying women the right of literacy can have implications on the entirety of their life. Low-literacy is “analogous to the oppression of women in general, and amplified when the two factors together create an intersectional double bind” (Parker, 2012, p. 4). For Nadeema, her low-literacy was not merely a background variable; rather, it was a central lived experience in the mosaic of her life experiences and identity. The word ‘illiterate’ and its synonyms were mentioned 53 times by Nadeema in her self-report data<sup>2</sup>. At the very beginning of her first interview, Nadeema spent quite some time expressing her frustration at ‘being illiterate’ and the restrictive implications of this ‘illiteracy’ for her sense of self and her journey of learning English:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	بحسسوني أنو انا فيني شي ناقص لأن ما بعرف أقرأ و أكتب عم قلك بيتصلو فيني أحياناً بقولولي شو تعلمتي هاتي حكينا شي كم كلمة انكليزية	They {her in-laws} made me feel that I’m less of a person because I can’t read and write. Sometimes they call me and

	مع أنون هنن ما بيعرفو بس مشان يتمسخرو ويضحكو علي .	say ‘what did you learn? Come on tell us some English words’ although they know no English at all. They just want to ridicule and humiliate me.
--	--	---

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17<sup>3</sup>)

Because women were seen as primary carers and literacy was not perceived as important for females in the Syrian village of her childhood, Nadeema’s parents decided to stop sending her to school so she could look after her sick mother and newborn sibling. Hence, the roots of Nadeema’s low-literacy could be traced to gendered and cultural ideologies, and this seemed to shape her life and experiences, also limiting her social mobility. Due to her lack of literacy skills, Nadeema reported that she was perceived by her in-laws as inadequate for her husband who had only experienced 6 years of schooling himself, and she reported consequently being often characterised within the family as a woman devoid of intelligence and character:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	ابني ببسألني سؤال أحياناً قتلنو والله ما بعرف قام قلي مرة أمي انتي شو بتعرفي؟! بسوريا كانوا ولادي يحترموني و يموتو رعية مني بس هون كتبير تغيرو.	Sometimes my son asks me something and I say sorry I really don’t know. He once said “Is there anything you know?!” Back in Syria my children used to respect me very much and even fear me, but they’ve changed here massively...
Researcher	بتحسي السبب أنك معتمدة عليهمون مشان اللغة الانكليزية و الترجمة؟	Do you think it’s because you often depend on them with the English language?
Nadeema	قصدك أنو ما عدلي مونة عليهمون أنو هنن بيعرفو أكثر مني؟ اي حكيك صح.	You mean that I no longer have authority over them? The fact that they know more than I do? Yeah that’s correct.

(Interview, 15/08/17)

Nadeema's low-literacy in Arabic seemed to shape not only how she was positioned in the home as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law but also her prospects of learning English in the UK; she was positioned as an inadequate language learner. Nadeema remarked that her two daughters and two sons, aged respectively 16, 12, 24 and 10, and her husband had made quick and significant progress learning English, while she had not. She explained the gap between her and her family's English as the result of her reported 'illiteracy' making her progress far slower, with the result that she became reliant on her children which, in turn, tilted the balance of in-family power in their favour. This was supported by our observational data from Nadeema's house which showed that her children sometimes commented and laughed at her progress in learning English and her English pronunciation. Hence, Nadeema's lack of literacy was both shaped by and also shaped her gendered identities.

In the ESOL classroom: low-literacy as a hindrance

Nadeema attended pre-entry (pre-A1 CEFR) ESOL classes which focused on both the 'four skills' of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and on supporting migrants with their experience of living in a new community. Learners attended classes for 10 hours per week over four days. With around 20 learners in a class, the curriculum was organised thematically, covering themes such as transportation, employment, housing, jobs, health, community resources, and hobbies. Nadeema's pre-entry class was particularly 'work' or 'job-seeking-driven'. Nadeema, however, found that her limited L1 literacy impacted on her learning of English, as she struggled to comprehend what was happening in the ESOL classroom:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	لأن ما بعرف أقرأ و أكتب بالعربي كثير عم عاني بالصف ما عم أفهم شي نهائياً من الانكليزي... يعني ما عم أقدر استوعب.... بالصف بيتعلموا و بيستوعبوا أكثر مني لأن عم يكتبوا لفظ الكلمات و معناها بالعربي.	Because I can't read and write in Arabic, I'm really struggling in the classroom. I don't understand anything at all...They [other students] do learn and understand better than I do because they write down in Arabic the meaning and pronunciation of the English words.

(Nadeema, interview, 20/04/17)

On many occasions, Nadeema revealed how she was positioned by her Syrian classmates as an ‘incompetent’, ‘deficient’ and ‘slow’ language learner, which was confirmed by the data gained from her fellow ESOL classmates during the wider research project. She believed that her inability to write down the meanings and translations, in Arabic, of English words was the most significant reason for her falling far behind her classmates, and was unaware of other factors, such as study skills (Olson, 2002; Ong, 1988), that would most likely have enhanced her ability to succeed in the ESOL classroom and in L2 learning. After 4 academic years in the Pre-entry class, Nadeema stated that she did not get moved up (member check<sup>4</sup>,13/12/18), while some of her classmates reached Level 1. When discussing the classroom, Nadeema downplayed her capabilities and subjugated her knowledge and abilities to that of her classmates. Despite her slow progress, Nadeema never lacked interest or investment in learning English. To sum up, Nadeema’s gendered-based low-literacy seemed to be socially constructed as a tool of hegemony which relegated her to subordinate and disempowered identity positions as a mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and language learner. Her lack of literacy was integral to how Nadeema saw herself and others as language learners and individuals:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	هلق انتبهني بالصف أحياناً التيتشر بتكن عم تحكي والله العظيم بكون فهمانة عليها بس ما بتجرأ احكي لأن ما بعرف أقرأ و أكتب بالعربي. بخاف حتان أحكي شي كلمة غلط ويكون الها معنى ثاني.	sometimes I understand what the teacher is saying, but I don’t feel brave enough to answer because I’m illiterate in Arabic. I think to myself I might say a word, but this word could have another meaning.

(Nadeema, phone diary, 08/07/17)

In many ways, the narratives of Nadeema mainly centred around her positionality as ‘illiterate’. These negative social positionings accumulated and clustered over time and manifested themselves in Nadeema’s identity work as an unconfident language learner (Davies & Harré, 1999) who was inhibited to speak English and participate in the ESOL classroom:

Because I think it’s her first experience of education...she does plenty of cheating (laughs) and you have to do you find your ways to get the right answer to get the

approval from the teacher so you know she'll copy... she's still very dependent on other people.

(ESOL teacher, interview, 12/07/17)

In the ESOL classroom, it was observed that Nadeema relied heavily on other women to communicate her message in English and get things done. Of all the language learner participants in the research, Nadeema was the least confident learner inside and outside the ESOL classroom. While her limited English proficiency appeared to play a role, it seems that her lack of literacy in Arabic factored into her own understanding of her subject positions in English and consequently her confidence to speak English. From the identity position of an 'illiterate woman' who was discursively positioned as 'ignorant' and 'less of a person', Nadeema did not see herself as a legitimate language learner who had the right to try out and make mistakes. She wanted to speak English and participate in the classroom, but to her, her inevitable stumbling, errors and low self-esteem were grounds for exclusion and ridicule by her community members. By choosing not to contribute (as the quotation above illustrates), she chose to perform the role of a 'silent woman' in order to save face and avoid ridicule and rejection, contributing, in a way, to her own marginalisation.

English literacy as a tool to claim more powerful gendered identities

Responding to our prompts, Nadeema explained the relationship between her investment in learning English and the challenges she was experiencing:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Researcher	قلتيلى أنو تعلم الانكليزي كثير صعب و أنك عم تتعذي بالصف طيب شو يلي عم يخليكي تكلمي ؟	You said that learning English is extremely difficult and you're struggling in the classroom - what is it that keeps you going?
Nadeema	أنا حابة أتعلم مثل جوزي مثل ولادي بدي حس حالي متلون هنن مو أحسن مني بشي. بدي أرجي بيت حماي انو انتو تسمخرتو علي بس أنا مثل جوزي مثل بناتي ما أقل منون...	I want to learn English just like my husband and children. I just want to feel equal to them so they are not better than me. I also want to prove to my family-in-law who constantly bullied me that

		I'm just like my husband and daughters. I'm not less than them...
--	--	---

(Nadeema, phone diary, 08/07/17)

Through developing her reading and writing in English and the concomitant expansion of linguistic capital and symbolic power (Weedon, 1997), Nadeema saw that she could begin to reconstruct and modulate her identities (i.e. mother, wife, language learner, and daughter-in-law) as 'equal' and legitimate in the communities that were important to her. She realised that the condition of 'the oppressed' was not immutable, and she could become, through learning and literacy in English, a legitimate member in her communities. Nadeema's self-reported 'illiteracy' was, in effect, a tool of consciousness-raising, leading her to challenge and change oppressive social structures. English would provide Nadeema with more than new communitive codes – “it also becomes a powerful marker of group identity, a sense of ‘us’ ” (Egbo, 2004, p.248). For Nadeema, English was a tool of social connection and identification with her own family and a wider community of literate and educated people:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	الانكليزي تعويض عن فرصة التعليم يلي ما تعلمتها بسوريا.	Learning English is a compensation for a missed educational opportunity in Syria.

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17)

Thus, English literacy would be the catalyst to break free of the stigmatising discourses around 'illiterate' people in her intra- and inter-worlds, and to become a literate person that she and her family would admire. This supports Norton's (2001) argument that “an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space” (p. 166). Despite her dislike of and disinvestment in the UK, Nadeema was greatly invested in learning English as this was also an investment in her gendered and emerging literate identities. It is crucial to note, however, that Nadeema's ability to imagine more powerful and positive literate and gendered identity positions was originally

triggered and enabled by her participation in new communities of practice with different ideologies and practices of gender, age, and literacy:

Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	أختي بسوريا قعدت بمحو الأمية و سجلت و تعلمت تقرا و تكتب... انا شو قول بنات حماتي بيعرفو استحي منون ما استحسن يعني ما استحسن اتجراً روح قدامون اتعلم...بس وقت جيت لهون وشففت الناس الأكبر مني عم تتعلم تجرأت روح عالقولج و مابطل. أنا لازم أتعلم أنا أصغر منون كلون تقريباً.	Back in Syria my sister went to a literacy programme and learned to read and write in Arabic...but I felt ashamed because of my in-laws...when I came here and found out that people who are older than me are learning, I was encouraged to go to college. I should learn I'm younger than most of them [ESOL learners].

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17)

This aligns with Wenger's suggestion that leaving a community of practice can also involve "seeing the world and oneself in new ways" (1998, p. 55).

It is perhaps ironic that the migrant context, which Nadeema had strongly resisted, caused her to critically re-evaluate her previous conceptualisation of what she could do as a 42-year-old self-reportedly illiterate woman, consequently producing her age and gendered identities in the UK in ways that benefited her processes of learning English and identity (re)negotiation. Her adoption of new identity positions was not entirely a product of her own free choice and agency; it was co-constructed in collaboration with her new communities of practice that sanctioned and validated these identities. Nadeema's discursive renegotiating of dominant cultural, low-literacy, age, and gendered diaries aligned with the findings of many studies that suggest that the processes of language learning and participation in new discursive communities might trigger significant changes in how some language learners and users position and are positioned by others (Giroir, 2014; Kinginger, 2004; Norton, 2000). Language learning multiplies possibilities for self-expression and provides opportunities for agency in the performance of the self in new communities of practice:



Speaker	Original language	Translation
Nadeema	انا عم اتعلم مشان اطلع لحالي...مشان ازا بدني اشتري شي اشتري لحالي...عالقيلة مشان ازا ضعت أحسن أقرأ و هجي وين أنا.	I'm learning English so that I can get out alone, to buy things on my own without the assistance of anyone. At least if I get lost, I can read the name of the place I'm at.

(Nadeema, interview, 22/04/17)

For Nadeema, English literacy offered the independence and the freedom that she had been deprived of all her life whilst positioned as an 'illiterate', marginalised woman. In essence, Nadeema's imagined identity as an independent and empowered woman was as much a reconstruction of her low-literacy gendered identity in the past as it was an imaginative construction of her sense of self in the future (Norton, 2001).

### Conclusions and pedagogical implications

The evidence from this project shows how Nadeema's self-reported non-literacy in Arabic directly and/or indirectly, and positively and/or negatively, impacted on her sense of self and her (dis)investment in learning English in and outside the ESOL classrooms. Because Nadeema had a great sense of investment in her emerging literate identity, she was extremely invested in learning English; reading and writing in English and the concomitant expansion of linguistic capital and symbolic power was the underlying motivation which encouraged her to learn English despite her very slow progress. Nadeema's lack of literacy in Arabic, however, appeared to have restrictive effects on her learning of English. Consequently, she appeared to have low self-esteem and confidence, which explained her hesitance to speak and take risks in and outside the ESOL classroom. An 'illiterate' woman, from her perspective, does not have the right to make mistakes; nor is she the equal of her more literate and educated classmates. The intricate fusions of low-literacy and English learning experiences and opportunities indicate that the process of 'non-literacy enactment' in language learning is rarely simple and straightforward, and may entail paradoxical pathways for the same individual learner as we have witnessed in the case of Nadeema.

Teachers and other practitioners, including institutional managers, who are more critically informed about the role of low levels of literacy in learners' prior experiences, narratives and

understandings of their own lives can better appreciate the length of time it can take such learners to read and write in the target language and the considerable challenges they face while learning the language of their new communities. Teacher (and institutional) awareness of low-literacy language learners' experiences and challenges is central to developing a fuller understanding of, and offering support for, any challenges low-literate language learners might face both in the classroom and outside the classroom more generally.

Additionally, specialised teacher training and professional development are vital to address the slow progress and the unique challenges and frustration that LESLLA learners face (Condelli et al., 2010; Naeb & Young-Scholten, 2019). Condelli et al. (2010) state that working with well-qualified teachers improves LESLLA learners' chances of success. There is significant evidence that the adult language learning and literacy sector in many European countries seems to fall behind quality standards (Schellekens, 2011); it is increasingly underfunded with a growing reliance on part-time, unpaid and unqualified volunteer teachers. For example, there has been a real terms reduction of 60% to UK government funding for ESOL in recent years, from £212.3m in 2008 to £105m in 2018 (Refugee Action, 2019).

The findings of this investigation also suggest that traditional and conventional models of adult language learning and literacy provision and progression, which can take years to complete, fall short of meeting the linguistic needs for the migrant language learner, many of whom arrive in the host communities with pre-CEFR A1 literacy and a lack of study skills. As Sidawa (2018) notes, obliging learners to demonstrate progression by frequently taking level-based exams can significantly affect motivation. Thus, a more flexible, tailored adult language learning provision and progression to better meet the diverse needs and linguistic abilities of the learners is needed; alternative approaches might include: (1) a form of language learning education that does not solely oblige learners to experience a centralised curriculum and assessment regime; (2) integrating a course of study skills in the learners' own language into language learning provision to teach low-educated learners how to study and approach language learning; (3) an additional literacy course for LESLLA learners to enable them to tackle the complex task of learning how to write and read; (4) and special training to teachers working with learners with little or no literacy<sup>5</sup>.

Besides sustained funding, more flexible language learning provision and assessment, and specific training and support for teachers, the greatest hope for the adult literacy and language

learning sector seems to lie in collaborations: collaborations among teachers who are interested in adult literacy and want to share materials and ideas; collaborations among ESOL institutions which are keen to forge a common agenda and share resources and expertise; collaborations between ESOL students, teachers, and researchers who want to work together and learn from each other; collaborations among adult language learning institutions and policy makers who want to share decision making; and, finally, collaborations among countries and contexts to share experiences.

Although the focus of this chapter has been the experiences of an individual 42-year-old LESLLA learner, the issues raised in this research are likely to be relevant to most LESLLA contexts internationally. What challenges do such learners face in the language classroom and beyond more generally? What strategies do they develop and deploy to support their learning? What lessons are to be learned from listening to their voices? The results and implications of this project underscore the importance of expanding the language learning research agenda to regularly include LESLLA learners. There is much to be gained by acknowledging and including language learners of various literacy levels and educational backgrounds, developing theories to account for a broader scope of language learning contexts, designing more fine-grained research instruments and methods that provide opportunities for participants to express who they are and what they are genuinely experiencing.

<sup>1</sup> Also adopting this acronym, the international organisation LESLLA supports adults with little or no home language schooling or literacy, who are now learning to read and write for the first time in a new language. Established in 2005, LESLLA promotes, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary, and multilingual basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

<sup>2</sup> Nadeema's 53 references to 'illiteracy' emerged over the course of her 2 interviews, one focus group conversation, her phone diary, and the project's 'member check' interview. In contrast, a male LESLLA participant in the study, Adham, referred to his low level of literacy only 7 times in similarly collected data.

<sup>3</sup> All interview or diary quotations are by Nadeema herself, with the researcher's interpretation in the text.

<sup>4</sup> After the end of the project, the researcher conducted formal member checks with 10 learner participants and one teacher while the findings were written up and presented. This data is dated and presented in the discussion as 'member check'.

<sup>5</sup> The EU SPEAK Project is a collaborative endeavour involving partners from several European countries. It aims to provide teacher training and materials (in English and many other languages) to support the language acquisition and educational outcomes of immigrant and refugee-background populations with little or no formal education and emerging literacy skills.

## References

Altheide, D. L. & Johnson, J. M. (1994). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In N. Deniz & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, (pp. 485-99). London: Sage.

Barton, D. (2007). *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. New York: Routledge.

Bigelow, M. & King, K. A. (2015). Somali immigrant youths and the power of print literacy, *Writing Systems Research*, 7(1), 4-19.

Block, D. (2007). *Second language identities*. London: Continuum.

Blommaert, J., van der Aa, J., & Spotti, M. (2017). Complexity, mobility, migration. In S. Canagarajah (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Migration and Language* (pp. 349-363). New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Brewer, J. & Hunter, A. (1989). *Multimethod Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Carla Bagna, C., Luana Cosenza, L., & Salvati, L. (2017). New challenges for learning, teaching and assessment with low-educated and illiterate immigrants: the case of L2 Italian. In J. C. Beacco, H. J. Krumm, D. Little, & P. Thalgott (Eds.), *The Linguistic Integration of Adult*

*Migrants L'intégration linguistique des migrants adultes*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

Carter, S. (2006). Redefining literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 25(2), 94-125.

Condelli, L., Cronen, S., & Bos, J. (2010). *The impact of a reading intervention for low-literate adult ESL learners*. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences. Alexandria, VA: US Department of Education. [Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20114003/pdf/20114003.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20114003/pdf/20114003.pdf)

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Cummins, J. (2006). Identity texts: The imaginative construction of self through multiliteracies pedagogy. In O. Garcia, T. Skutnabb-Kangas, & M. Torres-Guzman (Eds.), *Imagining multilingual schools: Language in education and glocalization* (pp. 51-68). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Darvin, R. & Norton, B. (2016). Investment and language learning in the 21st century. *Langage et Société*, 157(3), 19-38.

Davies, B. & Harré, R. (1999). Positioning and personhood. In R. Harré & L. V. Langenhove (Eds.), *Positioning theory* (pp. 32-52). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Davis K. A. (1995). Qualitative theory and methods in applied linguistics research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(3): 427-453.

Egbo, B. (2004). Intersections of literacy and construction of social identities. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 243-265). Clevedon: Multilingual matters.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972- 1977*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I. & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, IL.

Giroir, S. (2014). Narratives of participation, identity, and positionality: Two cases of Saudi learners in the United States. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(1), 34-56.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Gurieva, S, Kõiv, K, & Tararukhina, O. (2020). Migration and Adaptation as Indicators of Social Mobility Migrants. *Behaviour Science* 10(1), 30. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs10010030>

Harste, J., Vasquez, V., Egawa, K., & Thompson, R. (2004). *Literacy as Social Practice: Primary Voices K-6*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Kanno, Y. (1998). Comments on Kelleen Toohey's "Breaking them up, taking them away": ESL students in grade 1": The use of the community-of-practice perspective in language minority research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 126–132.

Kinging, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity construction. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 219–42). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Kurvers, J., Vallen, T. & Hout, R. (2006). Discovering Features of Language: Metalinguistic Awareness of Adult Illiterates. I. In van de Craats, J. Kurvers, & M. Young-Scholten, (Eds.) *Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium Tilburg 2005*. (pp.69-88). Utrecht: LOT.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons.

Naeb, R. & Young-Scholten, M. (2019). Online training and development for those who work with adult migrants with little or no home language schooling. In F. Mishan, (Ed.) *ESOL Provision in the UK and Ireland*. Switzerland, Peter Lang.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities, and the language classroom. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 159–171). Harlow: Pearson Education.

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Norton, B. (2016). Identity and language learning: Back to the future. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(2), 1-5.

Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9–31.

Olson, D. (2002). What writing does to the mind. In Amsel, E. & Byrnes, J. (Eds.), *Language, literacy, and cognitive development: The development and consequences of symbolic communication* (pp. 153–166). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Ong, W. J. (1988). *Orality and literacy*. London: Routledge.

Parker, P. (2012). *Signals the interplay between literacy, gender, and semiotics* (Major Program's Thesis, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, the USA). Retrieved from <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorsthesis1990-2015/1338/>

Pavlenko, A. (2001a). “In the world of tradition, I was unimagined”: Negotiation of identities in cross-cultural autobiographies. *The International Journal of Bilingualism*, 5(3), 317-344.

Pavlenko, A. (2002). Poststructuralist approaches to the study of social factors in second language learning and use. In V. Cook (Ed.), *Portraits of the L2 user* (pp. 277–302). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Refugee Action (2019). *New research shows refugees suffering from lack of English classes, despite strong public support for action by government*. Retrieved from <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/new-research-shows-refugees-suffering-fromlack-of-english-classes-despite-strong-public-support-for-action-by-government/>

Schellekens, P. (2011). *Teaching and testing the language skills of first and second language speakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL.

Sidaway, K. (2018). The Effects and Perception of Low-Stakes Exams on the Motivation of Adult ESOL Students in the UK. *Language Issues: The ESOL Journal*, 29, 17– 29.

Street, B. (1997) The Implications of the ‘New Literacy Studies’ for Literacy Education. *English in Education*, 31(3): 45-59.

Suni, M. & Tammelin-Laine, T. (2018). Language and literacy in their social context. In E. Tarone, M. Bigelow & K. Hansen, (2009). *Literacy and Second Language Oracy-Oxford Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and Global Education Monitoring Report (2019). Meeting Commitments: Are countries on track to achieve SDG4? Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/meeting-commitments-are-countries-on-track-achieve-sdg4.pdf>

Walsham, G. (1993). *Interpreting information system in organisations*. Chichester: Wiley.

Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (2nd ed.). London: Blackwell.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Young-Scholten, M. (2015). Who are adolescents and adults who develop literacy for the first time in an L2, and why are they of research interest?, *Writing Systems Research*, 7(1), 1-3.

Young-Scholten, M. & Naeb, R. (2010). Non-Literate L2 Adults' Small Steps in Mastering the Constellation of Skills Required for Reading. In T. Wall & M. Leong, (Eds.) *Low Educated Adult Second Language and Literacy*. (pp. 80–91). Banff Calgary: Bow Valley College.

Young-Scholten, M. & Naeb, R. (2017). International training of teachers of low-educated adult migrants. In J-C Beacco, H-J Krumm, D. Little & P. Thalgott, (Eds.) *The Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants: Some Lessons from Research*. (pp. 419-424). Berlin: De Gruyter.