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L1 Literacy in the ESL Classroom: Working with Low-Literate Adult Refugees

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L1 Literacy in the ESL Classroom: Working with Low-Literate Adult Refugees

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Abstract

L1 Literacy in the ESL Classroom: Working with Low-Literate Adult Refugees

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Increased numbers of low educated adults lacking basic first language literacy skills are moving to the United States making literacy an important individual difference to consider in the field of second language acquisition and ESL instruction (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009; Young-Scholten, 2013). Many of the materials and instructional approaches typically used in ESL classes assume students are literate in their first languages which is increasingly not the case. These learners may be affected by difficult life experiences such as interrupted schooling resulting from long sojourns in refugee camps. Chapter one of this Report will give readers an introduction to some of these low-literate learners, focusing on the background of a specific group of Somali learners at Kakuma refugee camp. Chapters two and three review research on the development of literacy skills and the efficacy of various approaches to teaching basic literacy skills. Special attention is paid to how first language literacy skills might affect an individual's acquisition of L2 literacy. Chapter four examines a pilot ESL course which taught low-literate adult Somali refugees at Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern

Kenya and suggests introducing basic first language literacy skills into the ESL course curriculum.

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Chapter 1: Background

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago I became involved with a local nonprofit that offers assistance to refugees who have been resettled in Austin, Texas. A friend of mine was volunteering as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher despite having no teaching experience. She taught a group of adult refugees who had recently arrived in the United States from many different countries. A few of her students were from Iraq, and being that Arabic is my second language she thought that I might be interested in meeting her Iraqi students and helping out in class. Shortly after visiting her class I attended an orientation so that I too could volunteer teaching English to refugees.

During the three years which followed, I became involved with this nonprofit organization as a volunteer helping out in several different capacities. I provided ESL tutoring lessons to individual refugees at their homes, I taught a volunteer-led evening ESL class, and I was an assistant to a paid professional teacher in a daytime ESL class. One of the students I tutored was a young man around the age of my brother (early twenties) who was tragically blinded by a car bomb a few years prior in Iraq. He moved to Austin by himself knowing no English and still adjusting to a life without vision. I was inspired by his positive outlook and determination to learn both English and Braille. I was fascinated by the challenges he must face in acquiring a foreign language without being able to see the teacher, his classmates, the chalkboard, or the course materials.

Myself being an extremely visual learner, I often rely on my knowledge of the alphabet and my ability to transcribe new words as I hear them to aid me in recalling and

memorizing new foreign words. Being able to read the correct spelling of words has also helped me to correct mispronunciations of words I had heard incorrectly. For me it would be unimaginably difficult to learn a foreign language without any means to visually represent and manipulate the sounds of the words. Teaching ESL to refugee students with unique backgrounds has led me to seek out answers to challenging questions pertaining to second/foreign language instruction, such as: *how do you best teach a foreign language to someone who cannot read and write?*

WHO ARE REFUGEES?

The difference between immigrants and refugees is that immigrants choose to leave their home country for a variety of reasons while refugees are people who have been forced to flee their home countries due to danger or threats to their lives. As defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention,

> A refugee is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. ("Refugees" UNHCR, n.d.)

Upon the resolution of the turmoil or conflict which caused them to flee, many refugees are eventually able to return to their home countries (i.e. repatriation). When neither repatriation nor local integration in the country of refuge is a viable option, permanent resettlement in a third country is the last resort. Less than 1% of all refugees are eventually resettled in third countries and the United States welcomes over half of these individuals ("Refugee Admissions" n.d.).

The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is an interagency effort involving both governmental and non-governmental agencies each with their own role. Within the U.S. State Department is the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). PRM works closely with the United Nations (UN), international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which operate programs delivering assistance to refugees ("About PRM," n.d.). The number of refugees that can be admitted into the U.S., known as the refugee ceiling, is set by the President in consultation with Congress each fiscal year. The U.S. refugee ceiling for fiscal year 2012 was 76,000. The total number of refugees actually admitted that same year was 52,238, coming from 56 different countries. Refer to Table 1 for a snapshot of the where the majority of the refugees admitted to the U.S. in fiscal year 2012 came from (*Proposed refugee admissions*, 2013).

Table 1: Refugee Arrivals by Country of Origin, Fiscal Year 2012

Rank (# of Arrivals)	Country of Origin	Refugees Admitted	% of Total
1	Bhutan	15,070	25.88%
2	Burma	14,160	24.31%
3	Iraq	12,163	20.88%
4	Somalia	4,911	8.43%
5	Cuba	1,948	3.34%
6	Dem. Rep. of Congo (DRC)	1,863	3.20%

Note Adapted from "Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2014," 2013, p. 56-58.

RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Refugees are not able to choose where in the U.S. they will be resettled; Domestic resettlement agencies help to determine their placement. Usually refugees are placed near family members (if they have any) or in a city with a pre-existing ethnic community (Mott, 2010). Upon arrival in the U.S. refugees are met at the airport by someone from their sponsoring resettlement agency (Mott, 2010). The State Department gives the resettlement agencies a Reception and Placement (R&P) Grant of $1,875 per capita that helps cover initial services such as: sponsorship, pre-arrival resettlement planning, reception upon arrival, basic needs support for at least 30 days (include housing, furnishings, food and clothing), cultural orientation, and assistance with accessing health, employment and education services, including ESL classes (*Proposed refugee admissions*, 2013).

OVERSEAS REFUGEE PROCESSING

Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) are operated by international organizations contracted by the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) to assist in the overseas processing of refugees for admission to the United States. The RSCs pre-screen refugee applicants who have been referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for resettlement in the U.S. (*Proposed refugee admissions*, 2013). The RSCs prepare the refugees' case files for adjudication by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The average time from a refugee's initial UNHCR referral to their arrival in the U.S. is about 12-15 months. However it is

not atypical for refugees to wait many years in refugee camps before this process with the RSC and USCIS is initiated (Mott, 2010). If a refugee is approved by the USCIS for resettlement to the U.S., the RSC is also responsible for scheduling their medical screening exams and arranging for sponsorships by domestic resettlement agencies. The RSCs provide pre-departure cultural orientations to eligible refugees, funded by the Department of State. Cultural orientation trainings range from 1-5 days in length and aim to give refugees realistic expectations about what their lives will be like in the U.S. (*Proposed refugee admissions*, 2013).

CULTURAL ORIENTATION

Cultural orientation classes are attended by eligible refugees just prior to travelling to the U.S. and focus on topics such as employment, housing, education, health, money management, travel, and hygiene. Each refugee receives a guidebook published by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) titled, *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees*. There are many translations of the guidebook so that refugees may read it in their native language (assuming they are literate). The first chapter of this guidebook provides a definition of success and suggests that refugees can "be a success" by "keeping their family safe and healthy, finding work to become self-sufficient, learning English, and supporting their children and community" (p. 11, 2012). Chapter 2 discusses American culture and stresses the American values of self-reliance and hard work (*Welcome to the United States*, 2012).

In an investigation into the effectiveness of overseas cultural orientation programs, Kornfeld (2012) interviewed seventeen refugees post-resettlement in the U.S. Those interviewed felt the cultural orientation would be more beneficial if it covered fewer topics, but with more in-depth discussion. Refugees come to the U.S. understanding that they will be expected to work hard and find a job as soon as possible in order to become self sufficient, however many refugees expressed that their lack of English proficiency was the greatest challenge in being hired or keeping a job (Kornfeld, 2012). Many refugees have no knowledge of English prior to arriving in the U.S. They may be qualified for certain jobs, but because they lack the English to communicate effectively in interviews they are not hired. Many refugees believe that English language learning is connected to educational and employment opportunities (Warriner, 2007).

OVERSEAS ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Typically refugees do not receive any English language instruction prior to coming to the United States. Reports from 32 focus groups conducted in ten U.S. cities with immigrants and refugees who had been in the U.S. for less than ten years shed light onto specific needs related to adjusting to life in a new country (Mermin, 2006). Routine activities such as grocery shopping, using public transportation, and finding a doctor can be overwhelming for them. Cultural misunderstandings are also common. Many participants expressed their lack of English proficiency as a major barrier to a better life (Mermin, 2006).

To address the need for more English language instruction, in 2011 the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) commissioned and funded an overseas pilot English as a Second Language (ESL) program for refugees implemented by three of the Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs): RSC South Asia operated by International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Nepal, RSC East Asia operated by International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Thailand, and RSC Africa operated by Church World Service in Kenya.

The goal of the pilot program was to measure the benefits of offering English language instruction to refugees before they depart for the U.S. rather than waiting to provide language instruction until after they have been resettled state-side. PRM funded a second round of overseas English as a Second Language (ESL) pilot projects in 2013 at the same three RSCs located in Nepal, Thailand and Kenya. In the spring of 2013, I was hired by CWS RSC Africa to participate in this second pilot project as an ESL Instructor teaching Somali refugees at Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya.

My interest in the topic of teaching ESL to adults without native language (L1) literacy stems from my experience as an ESL instructor teaching preliterate adults at Kakuma refugee camp last year. RSC Africa's pilot ESL project was launched at two sites—Kakuma refugee camp in north-western Kenya and Gihembe refugee camp in Rwanda. The pilot project targeted adult Somali and Congolese refugees who had indicated they knew no English in their initial RSC interviews and were also approved by USCIS for resettlement in the U.S. Last June at the time of the pilot project, Kakuma refugee camp had a population of over 120,000 refugees with the majority coming from

the following countries: Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Uganda and Rwanda (*UNHCR SO Kakuma: Camp Population Statistics*, 2013).

This Report will explore factors affecting the successful acquisition of a second language as a low-literate learner. The development of alphabetic literacy skills and instructional methods for teaching these literacy skills will also be examined in an attempt to identify instructional methods that might work well with low-literate adult refugee learners. Social, cultural, and institutional backgrounds each influence the development of literacy (Grabe, 2009). It is important for foreign language teachers to understand and be aware of all of these factors to make adjustments according to their students differing backgrounds. For this reason the history of literacy and education in Somalia will be explored in the next section to better understand the background of students taught in last summer's pilot project.

HISTORY OF EDUCATION AND LITERACY IN SOMALIA

In America by age 6 most children have started learning how to read and are enrolled in formal education where they will continue to develop literacy (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2003). Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states everyone has the right to free, basic education ("The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," n.d.). Basic primary education, generally considered 5-6 years of formal schooling, is assumed to be the minimum length of education required for people to attain a minimal level of literacy (Farrell, 2009). Not everyone is afforded the opportunity to

go to school and to learn how to read, despite it being a universal human right. Seven hundred seventy-four million adults worldwide were unable to read and write in 2011 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013). Many of these adults are women, ethnic and linguistic minorities, the poor, people with disabilities and/or people living in rural areas or in countries affected by conflict (*The Millennium Development Goals Report*, 2013).

Before civil war broke out in Somalia in January 1991 upon the collapse of Siyaad Barre's regime, the estimated population was 7.7 million (Putnam & Noor, 1993). Most of Somalia's population was rural, 60% being either pastoralists or agro-pastoralists and 20% agriculturalists (Putnam & Noor, 1993). Somalia is located in the Horn of Africa with the Indian Ocean to the east and the Gulf of Aden to the north. It has the longest coastline in Africa and a total area slightly less than the state of Texas (Putman & Noor, 1993). Year-round the weather is hot and dry leading the pastoral Somalis to live a nomadic life always in search of water for their camels, cattle, sheep and goats (Putman & Noor, 1993).

Ethnically and culturally Somalia is the most homogenous country in Africa. Prior to outside influence from the Arabs and the European colonial powers, Somalis had an informal mode of education, where their histories and cultural values were transmitted orally and committed to memory (Nnoromele, 2001). Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2008) in her bestselling autobiography, *Infidel*, describes the orality of Somali culture, "Eloquence, the use of fine language, is admired in Somalia; the work of great poets is praised and memorized for miles around their villages, sometimes for generations. But few poets or people had ever written down any Somali words" (p. 15).

In 1960 when Somalia gained independence from Britain and Italy, the language of instruction in the schools was Italian, English or Arabic. At that time the Somali language was still only a spoken language. In 1972 the Latin alphabet was adopted for use with the Somali language and a countrywide literacy campaign was launched (Nnoromele, 2001). Prior to the adoption of a national script, only 5% of the population was literate, but by 1975 the government reported a 55% literacy rate (Putman & Noor, 1993). During the 1974-75 school year Somalia's secondary schools were closed so that students and volunteers could travel to rural areas and teach nomadic adults how to read (Nnoromele, 2001). In 1990 the United Nations estimated Somalia's literacy rate to be at around 24%, significantly lower than what the government had reported in 1975 (Putman & Noor, 1993).

Somalia has been in conflict ever since the collapse of the Siyaad Barre regime in 1991 and as a result many Somali citizens have been displaced since that time. As of September 2013, there were more than one million Somali refugees living in neighboring East African countries and over 1.1 million Somalis internally displaced ("Somalia," n.d.). A large majority of Somali refugees at Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya have lived there for 10 or more years and many are second and third generation refugees who were born and raised in the refugee camp. There are not enough schools in the refugee camps to provide education to all of the primary-school aged children, let alone to offer adult basic education to their parents. In 2012 it was reported that only 57,000 of Dadaab's 221,000 school-aged children were enrolled in school (Sehl, 2012).

While most foreign language teachers probably have experience teaching L2 reading to L1 literate students, it is less common for teachers to be familiar with teaching basic literacy skills. With many low-educated, low-literate adults immigrating to the U.S., it is important for ESL instructors who work with these students to familiarize themselves with teaching methods that do not assume L1 literacy and some methods for providing instruction in basic literacy skills. Chapter 2 of this report will begin with a review of the literature on topics related to literacy acquisition, including L1 literacy acquisition in both children and adults, and first-time literacy acquisition in a second or foreign language (L2). Chapter 3 will review studies that assessed the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching literacy. In Chapter 4, I will discuss my experience teaching ESL to pre-literate adult Somali students at Kakuma refugee camp and based on the literature review make some suggestions of how the curriculum which was used might be improved for future use with a similar group of students.

Chapter 2: Literacy Development

Low Educated Second Language Literacy Acquisition

One of the goals of second language acquisition (SLA) research has been to identify universal cognitive processes involved in the acquisition of second languages (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009). Despite this goal to identify universalities of SLA, much research done in the field has studied educated individuals coming from highly literate societies. Typically participants in SLA studies have been college undergraduate students. With a significant portion of the world's population being illiterate (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013) this limits the usefulness and applicability of findings from SLA research.

Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen (2009) argue that literacy is a very important individual difference that should be considered in second language acquisition research. They urge SLA researchers to conduct longitudinal studies considering the L2 acquisition of non-traditional, less-literate L2 learners (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009). Young-Scholten (2013) echoes this thought, claiming that SLA research has become less socially relevant because little attention has been paid to the L2 acquisition of low-educated low-literate immigrants. Second language acquisition research has focused on non-linguistic variables such as motivation, attitude, personality and learning style but little attention has been given to the variable of literacy (Young-Scholten, 2013).

The challenges faced by second language learners with little to no history of formal schooling have only recently begun to attract the attention of researchers who

recognize the importance of addressing the special needs of these learners who are often immigrants or refugees. An international forum of teachers and researchers was established in 2005 to convene annually to discuss their research on Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) for Adults ("Low Educated Second Language and Literacy (LESLLA) For Adults," n.d.). The LESLLA acronym is used to describe a group of second language learners who have little or no literacy in their first language and little experience in a formal education setting.

> LESLLA brings together researchers and practitioners from many countries with backgrounds in linguistics, psycho-linguistics, psychology and education to establish an international and multi-target-language research agenda. During annual symposia and information sharing throughout the year, LESLLA participants will increase the body of knowledge and outline the areas of research that require investigation for low-educated second language learners. The group's ultimate aim is to use research to improve practice and inform second language education policy in all those countries in which the immigrants most needing educational supports settle. ("Low Educated Second Language and Literacy (LESLLA) For Adults," n.d.)

Many conventional English as a Second Language (ESL) classes assume that their students have basic L1 literacy. Traditional materials and approaches to teaching ESL require a high degree of literacy (Burtoff, 1985). Germany is one of the few countries which have recognized the needs of its low-literate immigrant L2 learners. In 2005 Germany passed immigration law reforms which now require new immigrants and those already living in the country to participate in a government sponsored German language course. Initially the required course was 600 hours, but this did not come close to meeting the needs of the low-educated low-literate immigrants. A special 1,200 hour course was created for the low-literate immigrants with literacy problems. In the German

literacy level course, the first 400 to 500 hours focus on establishing phonological awareness. (Goethe Institute, n. d.). An individual's awareness of the sound system of their language, its phonology, is believed to be an essential precursor to alphabetic literacy acquisition (Homer, 2009) which is a likely reason why the German literacy course spends the first third of the course focused on phonological awareness.

Currently the U.S. has no federal department in charge of the integration of immigrants which might guide policy to ensure adequate ESL instruction is provided to LESLLA refugees and immigrants (Vinogradov, 2013).

> Large, multilevel classes, limited resources, substandard facilities, intermittent funding, limited contracts with few benefits: This is the context in which adult ESL literacy practitioners work. Adult education is a stepchild of K-12 education and an afterthought in U.S. educational policy. (Crandall, 1993, p.497)

Challenges abound not just for the refugee students but also for the teachers of the ESL classes provided by domestic resettlement agencies and their affiliates. The students in these classes often come from war-torn societies and may be dealing with various medical problems as well as post-traumatic stress. The refugee students' first languages are varied, as are their educational backgrounds. Many refugee ESL programs follow the open enrollment model which allows newly arrived refugees to begin ESL classes immediately upon arrival. While it is beneficial that students are welcomed to class early on to start learning, this model can be frustrating to teachers who continually must orient new students to the class and re-teach material from previous lessons.

Similar to what is found in other adult education contexts, absences are a particular problem for refugee students because they must juggle many responsibilities:

taking care of their families, finding schools for their children and applying for jobs. They often rely on public transportation which can be a challenge to navigate in addition to it not always being reliable, or affordable. Adjusting to a new country and finding a way to provide for your family within 30 days of arriving in a country where the culture and language are completely foreign to you is a challenge difficult to imagine. Adjusting to living in a foreign country that speaks a language one has proficiency is a challenge attested to by many people who move abroad with a plan in place for work or study. It is difficult to imagine the personal upheaval and the myriad difficulties faced by newly arrived refugee ESL learners, especially by the individuals who lack basic literacy skills.

FIRST LANGUAGE LITERACY ACQUISITION

Being that the U.S. is a highly literate society, most children are exposed to print early on in their lives. Many children in the U.S. will learn about reading and print long before they step foot into a classroom. Their parents will read storybooks out loud to them. They will notice various forms of print in their homes on cereal boxes, in magazines and junk mail. American children live in a print-rich society where even outside of their homes they will be exposed to the written word on advertisements and street signs around their neighborhoods. One of the linguistic prerequisites for the successful learning of L1 literacy is that children must have sufficient access to printed material in the language they speak (Brooks, 2013). This can be the language that they have grown up speaking, their native mother tongue, or it can be their second/foreign language (L2).

First language acquisition is relatively automatic in the sense that as long as children are exposed to enough language, they will develop some competency in speaking it. While children are rarely unsuccessful in acquiring oral skills in their first language, this is not the case for literacy. Despite being exposed to print from an early age, even children in highly literate societies typically require literacy instruction in order to develop reading skills (Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006). Traditional formal schooling and literacy go hand in hand.

Research has shown that children's understanding of the concept of "word" significantly increases around the age of six which is also around the time that many children enter primary schooling and begin receiving formal literacy instruction (Farrell, 2009). In contrast, adult refugee ESL learners may lack the basic awareness of what a printed word is. They may have had interrupted primary schooling, no access to schooling, or perhaps they come from an oral culture.

According to researchers who have interpreted brain-scans of literate and non-literate individuals, the acquisition of literacy in an alphabetic language actually changes the way the brain processes and stores information (Petersson, Reis, Askelöf, Castro-Caldas, & Ingvar, 2000). This may have implications for how literate students versus illiterate students learn a second language. Brain scans of literate individuals showed that they used similar neural networks to process both words and pseudowords in verbal repetition tasks. This indicates that the literate individuals were able to "automatically recruit a phonological processing network with sufficient competence for sublexical processing and segmentation" in both words and pseudowords (Petersson et al., 2000, p.

373). This was not the case for the illiterate individuals who processed the words and psuedowords differently in the oral repetition tasks. From their study the researchers conclude "that learning an alphabetic written language modifies the auditory-verbal (spoken) language processing competence in a nontrivial way" (Petersson et al., 2000, p. 375).

IMPORTANCE OF ORAL PROFICIENCY

The patterns of adult pre-literacy development have been observed to be similar to those of L1 children. For adults developing literacy for the first time in their L2 there is one notable difference, the size of their vocabulary (Young-Scholten, 2013). Children acquiring L1 literacy have already acquired much of their language's sound system and morphosyntax. LESLLA learners are challenged with having to acquire literacy skills at the same time that they are acquiring basic L2 proficiency (Young-Scholten, 2013). Brooks (2013) stresses the importance of having adequate command of a spoken language with a broad vocabulary in order to facilitate the acquisition of literacy.

Oracy skills (i.e. speaking and listening) are the building blocks for acquiring alphabetic literacy (Brooks, 2013; Strube, Van de Craats, & Van Hout, 2013). Exposure to oral language likely plays an important role in developing phonological awareness (Anthony & Francis, 2013). Phonological processing is a consistent predictor of word and pseudoword reading abilities (August & Shanahan, 2006). English oral language proficiency is not a robust predictor of word-level English reading skills in ESL learners (August & Shanahan, 2006). Oral proficiency does correlate positively and significantly

with word-level reading skills, but certain aspects of phonological processing abilities and working memory more consistently predict reading ability (August & Shanahan, 2006). Research points to the importance of developing phonological awareness, through the exposure to oral language because phonological awareness predicts later reading abilities.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Implicit phonological awareness refers to one's degree of sensitivity to the phonology, or sound structure, of one's language (Anthony and Francis, 2005; Wagner and Torgesen, 1987). It is widely believed that metalinguistic development, particularly phonological awareness, is an essential precursor to the development of literacy (Homer, 2009). Phonological awareness can also be an explicit understanding of the sound structures of spoken language and one's ability to analyze and manipulate those sounds (Homer, 2009; Riches & Genesee, 2006). Phonological awareness has been shown to have a causal relationship with literacy. Based on a meta-analysis of controlled experimental studies, the National Reading Panel's 2000 report concluded that instruction in phonological awareness has moderate and statistically significant effects on reading abilities (NRP, 2000).

A stream of speech can be broken down into sentences and sentences into words. Words can be segmented into syllables, then syllables into either onsets and rimes, or bodies and codas. A syllable is a basic unit of linguistic rhythm which typically consists of a consonant (or consonant cluster), a vowel, and another consonant (or consonant

cluster) (Parker & Riley, 2010). The CVC syllable can be further broken down in one of two ways: into either the onset and rime (C-VC), or into the body and coda (CV-C). English speakers tend to treat the rime (VC) as a more cohesive unit than the body (Cassady & Smith).

Phonological awareness can be assessed using a variety of tasks each with a different focus: rhyme detection, blending, and/or segmentation. The size of the unit of sound manipulated (phoneme, onset-rime, syllable, word) can also vary in each task. The smallest unit of a language's sound system is the phoneme. Research has shown that as children grow up they become increasingly sensitive to smaller and smaller parts of words (Anthony & Francis, 2005). Multiple studies have pointed to the following developmental sequence of phonological awareness: *word→ syllable→ rime→onset→phoneme* (Young-Scholten & Strom 2006). Figure 1 illustrates how the word *pencil* is broken down into these smaller sound components.

Figure 1: Phonological Units in the Word *Pencil*

LARGEST ↕ *SMALLEST*							
	Word :	pencil					
	Syllables :	pen			cil		
	Onsets and Rimes :	p		en	c		il
	Phonemes :	/ p /	/ ɛ /	/ n /	/ s /	/ ə /	/ l /

Note. Adapted from "Phonological Awareness Is Child's Play!" by H.K. Yopp and R. H. Yopp, 2009, January, *Beyond the Journal Young Children on the Web,* p. 3.

Studies considering the performance of preliterate children and illiterate adults on phonological awareness tasks have shown that rhyming tasks and syllable manipulation tasks are significantly easier than phoneme manipulation tasks (Geudens, 2006). Illiterate adults were found to be impaired when tested for their ability to aurally discriminate phonemes (Landgraf et al., 2012). The emergence of phonemic awareness occurs only with the acquisition of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006).

Some researchers have focused on the ways in which metalinguistic skills, such as phonological awareness, can contribute to the development of literacy. Others have argued that literacy supports the development of metalinguistic knowledge, and that by learning how to read and write we are better able to analyze and reflect on speech. These may seem like contradictory claims, but perhaps the relationship between metalinguistic development and literacy is more complex and bidirectional depending on what aspects and levels of metalinguistic awareness you are considering (Homer, 2009; Riches & Genesee, 2006).

ORTHOGRAPHY AND THE ALPHABETIC PRINCIPLE

Learning to read an alphabetic script requires that the reader understands the connection between print and speech. When someone speaks, the sound waves coming out of their vocal tract are continuous, but humans are able to perceive this continuous stream as distinct sounds. These discrete segments, called phonemes, are the abstract psychological units of a language's sound system (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009).

For example, the first sound (or phoneme) in the word *boy* is represented by the letter <b>, the first sound in the word *ship* is represented by two letters <sh>.

The orthography of the English language is phonological, meaning that most of the language's phonemes have a graphic counterpart (Grabe, 2009). The English alphabet has 26 graphemes (or letters) but almost double that number of phonemes (somewhere around 44 phonemes, depending on which variety of English one speaks). This means there is no one-to-one correspondence of grapheme to phoneme. The <sh> in ship is one such example of a two grapheme combination corresponding to one phoneme. The letter <x> is an example of a single grapheme that can correspond to more than one phoneme. The <x> corresponds to different phonemes in the words *xylophone*, *box* and *exam*. In *xylophone* the grapheme <x> corresponds to the phoneme /z/, whereas in *box* and *exam* the <x> corresponds to two different *pairs* of phonemes /ks/ and /gz/. The /f/ sound can correspond to the single grapheme <f> or to the digraphs <ph> and <gh>. English does not have a clear one-to-one correspondence between graphemes and phonemes (i.e. letters and sounds) and as such is said to have a deep or opaque orthography (Grabe, 2009).

An orthography that has a clear one-to-one relationship with the phonology is considered a shallow (or transparent) orthography according to the Orthographic Depth Hypothesis which states that "orthographies have varying degrees of transparency between the phonological segments of the language and the orthographic symbols intended to represent the phonological segments" (Grabe, 2009). Learners of transparent languages like Spanish or Italian do better than learners of English at an earlier age on

tests of phonological awareness which require phoneme manipulation, such as segmentation or deletion tasks (Geudens, 2006).

Chinese orthography consists of logographic characters, meaning each symbol (or grapheme) represents a meaning (or morpheme, the smallest meaningful unit of language). This can be contrasted to a phonological orthography, like English, where graphemes represent phonemes (i.e. the smallest sound units of a language). Since 1958 China's primary schools have taught an alphabetic writing system, Hanyu pinyin, to children just prior to their learning how to read the Chinese logographic characters (Read, Yun-Fei, Hong-Yin & Bao-Qing, 1986). Hanyu pinyin uses Roman characters and is a phonemic representation of the Beijing dialect of Chinese. Read et al's study was conducted with two groups of adults, one was literate only in the logographic Chinese characters and the other had learned the alphabetic Hanyu pinyin in addition to learning the logographic characters. The two groups had similar backgrounds and levels of education, making the only significant difference between them the fact that one group had received alphabetic instruction in primary school due to their slightly younger age (Read et al., 1986).

Participants were tested in their ability to add and delete consonants in spoken Chinese words. The adults who were only literate in the logographic Chinese characters were not able to add and delete consonants in the spoken Chinese words. The adults who had knowledge of both the logographic characters and the alphabetic writing system for Chinese were able to perform those tasks. The results of this study seem to imply that

there is a strong connection between alphabetic literacy and peoples' ability to segment speech into phonemes (Read et.al., 1986).

TRANSFERABILITY OF LITERACY SKILLS

There is strong evidence that the basic universal cognitive abilities (e.g. working memory, orthographic processing, automaticity, phonological awareness) supporting L1 and L2 reading are essentially the same and as such L2 reading development can partially be explained by those same abilities as measured in the L1 (Grabe, 2009). There is evidence that certain literacy skills seem to transfer from the L1 to the L2, but not all skills transfer. Studies exploring the transfer of literacy skills in bilingual children have shown a high degree of transfer from the L1 to the L2 for phonological awareness skills, word-decoding skills, reading strategies, metacognitive awareness, and pragmatic skills (Grabe, 2009).

In her 2003 paper describing the challenges in implementing a bilingual education program, Benson advocates the use of the mother tongue or L1 as the basis for literacy skills. Once the foundational literacy skills in the L1 are in place, competence in L2 skills can be built upon them. From a socio-political stance she argues that providing individuals with education in their L1s helps them to "develop a stronger sense of identity and self-worth" (Benson, 2003, p. 48). One of the advantages of bilingual programs is that the content being taught in the L1 can be understood as opposed to postponing the understanding of the material to be learned until a student has acquired enough of the language instruction to facilitate understanding (Benson, 2004).

When children are taught literacy skills for the first time in a language that is not their mother tongue, they struggle to break the code from a set of unfamiliar sounds which they have learned through rote memorization. In the 1990s Benson and colleagues followed an experiment in Guinea-Bissau's educational system where the students' lingua franca, Crioulo, was used for initial instruction in literacy and content areas in order to facilitate the eventual learning of the official language, Portuguese (Benson, 1994). Students who learned literacy in Crioulo were successfully able to transfer those skills to Portuguese (Benson, 1994).

A study conducted in New York in the 1980s aimed to investigate if native language literacy instruction would assist low-literate Haitian ESL learners in developing greater English language proficiency (Burtoff, 1985). Other research has shown that literacy is more than a set of coding and decoding skills; the acquisition of literacy actually changes the way the brain processes information (Petersson, Reis, Askelöf, Castro-Caldas, & Ingvar, 2000). With this in mind, Burtoff conducted her experimental study to see if acquiring literacy in an L1 would assist in the general acquisition of another language. The study was conducted with Haitian subjects who were illiterate, had little or no education (less than 2 years), and had no control of spoken English. The Haitian Creole literacy treatment group (n = 21) received 12 weeks of Haitian Creole literacy instruction followed by 12 weeks of ESL instruction. Each week consisted of three 2-hour classes for a total of 6 hours of instruction per week. The ESL Only treatment group (n = 8) received only ESL instruction for the 24 weeks of instruction (Burtoff, 1985).

The subjects who received L1 literacy instruction did not develop greater L2 proficiency than those who received only L2 instruction. L2 proficiency was measured pre- and post-experiment by the Core Section of the Basic English Skills Test (B.E.S.T.) which includes sections testing listening comprehension, communication, fluency and reading/writing. While overall L2 proficiency outcomes were not better for those participants receiving L1 literacy instruction, there was some evidence suggesting L1 literacy instruction has beneficial outcomes. Examination of the mean scores for the reading/writing component of B.E.S.T. (the component which measures literacy skills) showed that the Haitian Creole literacy group gained more points than the ESL Only group, approaching statistical significance. This suggests that some Haitian Creole literacy skills transferred to their English literacy abilities (Burtoff, 1985).

Chapter 3: Approaches to Teaching Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The National Reading Panel (NRP) released a large and influential report in the year 2000, which assessed the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching literacy to children (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). The NRP did not specifically address second language literacy learning, however an examination of approaches which have been effective in teaching L1 literacy to children may provide some insight for how beginning literacy can be taught to LESLLA adults learning to read an alphabetic language. The National Reading Panel emphasized five areas of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (NRP, 2000).

Reading is a complex cognitive process which can be broken into subcomponent processes (Grabe, 2009). Learning to read can be split into two basic processes: that of converting letters into words and that of comprehending the meaning of print (NRP, 2000). Decoding is the conversion of letters into sounds and the blending of those sounds into words. Students with this skill can read anything, in the sense that they can read (i.e. pronounce) any word out loud. This does not necessarily mean that they know the meanings of the decoded words. "Armed with a couple of rules of pronunciation, most of us could do an admirable job of reading a Latin text aloud, but we wouldn't necessarily have any idea of what we were saying" (Bell & Burnaby, 1984). Readers need vocabulary knowledge in order to comprehend the meanings of the string of sounds made by decoding the letters written on a page.

Sight vocabulary words can be identified without explicit decoding and are stored in readers' lexicons. They are not completely processed phonologically before the word meaning is accessed (Grabe, 2009). With extended reading practice all highly redundant words become retained in memory as sight words. The automatic access to the meanings of sight words assist in fluent reading. Fluency is the ability to quickly and accurately read a text with proper expression and is a skill which depends upon well developed word recognition skills (NRP, 2000). Comprehension is a complex, higher-level process, in which meaning is constructed. Reading comprehension is influenced both by the text and the reader's background knowledge and experiences (Grabe, 2009).

Since "fluent reading comprehension is not possible without rapid and automatic word recognition of a large vocabulary" (Grabe, 2009, p.23) the focus in reviewing the National Reading Panel report was on the sections that teach readers how to recognize words. As beginning readers of an alphabetic script, it will be important for LESLLA students to automatize the lower-level processes of reading such as word recognition (Grabe, 2008). The second chapter of the NRP report, titled *Alphabetics*, included two parts: one on phonemic awareness instruction and the other on phonics instruction both of which are building blocks of word recognition.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS INSTRUCTION

To examine the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction the NRP examined ninety-six instructional comparisons from fifty-two articles. In each comparison there was a group of children who were taught phonemic awareness and

another group of children, as the control, who received regular classroom instruction. It was found that phonemic awareness improved students' ability to spell and to read, as measured by word and pseudoword reading tasks and tests of reading comprehension. Phonemic awareness is the ability to manipulate phonemes in spoken words. To be clear phonemic awareness is just one aspect of phonological awareness, which includes the awareness of segments of speech larger than the phoneme, such as syllables and onsets/rimes. Studies that taught phoneme discrimination were not included in the analysis. Phoneme discrimination tasks are simpler because individuals only have to recognize whether two words said aloud are the same or different. Refer to Figure 2 for examples of phoneme manipulation tasks.

Figure 2: Examples of Phoneme Manipulation Tasks

Task	**Example**	**Correct Answer**
Phoneme isolation	"Tell me the first sound in paste"	/p/
Phoneme identity	"Tell me the sound that is the same in bike, boy, and bell"	/b/
Phoneme categorization	"Which word does not belong? Bus, bun, rug"	rug
Phoneme blending	"What word is /s/ /k/ /u/ /l/?"	school
Phoneme segmentation	"How many phonemes in ship?"	three: /ʃ/ /ɪ/ /p/
Phoneme deletion	"What is smile without the /s/?"	mile

Note Adapted from "National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction," by National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 2-2.

In the analysis of the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction, the NRP found that training which focused on just one or two of the above skills, rather than many, to be most effective in improving students' reading and spelling skills. In particular blend-and-segment training produced more benefits in children's reading than multiple skills. Blending is a skill that helps with decoding unfamiliar words, while segmenting helps with spelling unfamiliar words. Another interesting finding was that using a visual aid which shows the letters was more effective in helping the students acquire phonemic awareness than doing the exercises orally without showing their corresponding symbols (NRP, 2000).

PHONICS INSTRUCTION

The National Reading Panel examined the effectiveness of phonics instruction in their analysis of 66 treatment-control group comparisons from 38 studies of phonics instruction. Reading programs which did not explicitly and systematically teach phonics were included in the control groups. Whole-language programs and sight word programs do not explicitly focus on teaching the letter-sound correspondences of the alphabetic system and any phonics instruction in these programs is incidental (NRP, 2000). In systematic phonics instruction the students are explicitly taught a set of letter-sound relations and then to practice decoding, they are given a text which utilizes the relations they have learned. For example students might read a story about *cats in hats*.

There are many different instructional approaches to teaching phonics explicitly and systematically, including: synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics,

analogy phonics, onset-rime phonics and phonics through spelling. The NRP found no significant difference in the effect of these various approaches to systematically teaching phonics. The systematic approaches to teaching phonics were more effective than the non-phonics approaches in promoting children's literacy development. The effect sizes were calculated for literacy development by measuring one of the following six outcomes: decoding regularly spelled real words, reading pseudowords, reading irregularly spelled words, spelling words, comprehending text, or reading text accurately aloud (NRP, 2000).

One of the phonics programs examined by the NRP (2000) was a 2.5 year program that began in kindergarten with 11 weeks of phonemic awareness instruction because students need phonemic awareness first in order to make use of the letter-sound information taught in phonics programs. On average, prior to starting the program the children knew only two letter sounds and did not know how to write their names. In essence, they were starting from zero, with no knowledge of the alphabet. Learning all of the shapes and names of the letters of the English alphabet is difficult and time-consuming. The relationships between the shapes and the sounds are meaningless and arbitrary. By the end of the phonemic awareness portion of the instruction, students knew on average 19 letter names and 13 letter sounds. After the phonemic awareness portion of the program the students were assigned to ability groups for the 1st grade because despite receiving the same instruction, there was variation in how quickly students learned what they were taught (NRP, 2000).

In her exploration of beginning literacy instructional methods, Marrapodi (2013) analyzed various activities and explained why they may be problematic for use with LESLLA adults. Phonics instruction sometimes uses flashcards with a letter and a picture of a word beginning with that letter. For example, the letter A would be paired with a picture of an apple. The teacher will hold up the card and the child is supposed to say the letter *A*, the word for the picture *apple*, and the sound */æ/* (Marrapodi, 2013). This kind of activity has the potential to be ineffective when used with low-educated, low-literate adults.

In order for this phonics activity to be effective for use in a LESLLA class, the student must know the word for the picture. (Is *apple* in the student's L2 vocabulary?) The student must have the phonemic awareness to identify the first phoneme in the word apple. (Does the student recognize */æ/* as a phoneme? Does the */æ/* sound exist in the student's L1? Is the student able to segment the initial sound from the word?) The student must be able to recognize the formation of lines is a letter, not a number or some other symbol. The student must recognize that this specific formation of lines is the letter *A*, not the letter *H* or one of the many other similar configurations of lines (Marrapodi, 2013). The student must also know the name of the letter, pronounced */eɪ/* which sounds like the *A* in the word *ape*, not like the *A* in the word *apple.*

Another issue with phonics instruction for LESLLA learners is the challenge they will face in hearing the differences between new sounds that are not in their L1s. Marrupodi (2013) suggests that teachers provide LESLLA students with activities where they practice hearing discrete differences in the L2 phonemes, such as minimal pair

exercises. Phonics instruction may be problematic for the lowest level preliterate L2 learner until they can discriminate the sounds of the L2 phonemes (Marrapodi, 2013). To mitigate this, teachers could wait until their students have gained phonemic awareness in the L2 to begin teaching phonics.

Marrupodi brings to light many issues ESL instructors should consider and mitigate prior to teaching phonics to LESLLA adults. Phonics activities intended for use with L1 literacy learners would need to be modified and/or students would need to have some basic L2 language skills (i.e. preliteracy and oracy skills) to ensure phonics instruction is effective with LESLLA learners. The National Reading Panel (2000) recognizes that even L1 beginning readers, "need to develop foundational knowledge such as concepts about print, phonological awareness, and letter names prior to formal reading instruction" (p. 2-105).

Chapter 4: Teaching ESL to Preliterate Somali Adults at Kakuma

INTRODUCTION

This next chapter will provide a detailed description of my experience and observations as an ESL instructor teaching Somali refugees last summer at Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya. Factors that may have contributed to the students' learning outcomes will be analyzed. Keeping in mind the findings from the previous sections' literature review, suggestions will be made on how last summer's course content, curriculum and instruction might be improved for future use in a similar context.

STUDENT FACTORS AFFECTING OUTCOMES

Forty-five Somali refugees were selected to participate in the pilot ESL course based on their scores on a pre-course assessment. Individuals scoring the lowest in both oral English skills and basic literacy/numeracy skills were selected to participate in the pilot. Two levels of classes were taught at Kakuma; I taught the lower level class which met Monday through Friday 9:00am-12:00pm for four weeks and a total of 60 hours of English language instruction. The students who participated in the pilot ESL program ranged in ages from 18 to 74 years old, with most students being between the ages of 30 and 50. The majority of the 23 students in my lower-level class were women, likely because as women they were not afforded as many educational opportunities as the men and hence scored the lowest on the pre-course assessments. There were a few male

students in the lower-level class, but the majority of the pilot's male students were in the higher-level section (which was still considered low-literate).

Physiological factors such as hearing and eyesight affect students' success at acquiring literacy. Undiagnosed and uncorrected vision problems can cause problems for students (Brooks, 2013). My students mostly being older, some even elderly, meant that poor vision was common among them. Their vision problems were uncorrected because they have limited access to healthcare as refugees. Women who struggled with nearsightedness could not see many of the visual aids that were used in class. Other students struggling with farsightedness were observed squinting at their papers, or adjusting the distance between their eyes and the paper. It appeared my oldest student suffered from cataracts, evident from the visible clouding of his lenses. Should there in the future be another ESL course at Kakuma, it would be beneficial to test students' vision and hearing in advance and attempt to provide correctional treatment.

It was surprising to me that absences were an issue during the four-week course at Kakuma. Based on my prior experiences volunteering in ESL courses offered to refugees state-side, I had assumed that at Kakuma refugee camp absences would be less of an issue than they were state-side because students would not be stressed out searching for employment and adjusting to the culture shock of living in the U.S. However I was not aware of the harsh realities of living in a refugee camp which caused unavoidable student absences. Once a month refugees have to collect their rations, which caused a number of absences. Malaria and other illnesses were another cause of absences. There were students who missed class either for their own medical appointments or to accompany a

family member to an appointment. Towards the beginning of the four week ESL pilot, fighting broke out between two South Sudanese communities which resulted in the deaths of eight people and injuries to many more. During the two days of fighting some students were absent from class because they could not safely travel from home to school. The absences described above may have been unavoidable, however it is still important for teachers to make lessons useful and interesting to their students which will help to promote attendance and keep adult students motivated to attend.

CLASSROOM RESOURCES

Classes were held in a primary school which was built out of corrugated metal sheets with wire grid windows (leaving the class open to the elements). High temperatures impacted students' ability to focus and occasional dust storms would blow through disrupting class. The classroom's desks were constructed with primary school children in mind and were too small to be comfortable for adult students. The adult students sat two to a desk, despite the desks' small size. The desks were not easy to get in and out of, and they were difficult to move around to reconfigure the classroom for various activities. The desks were mostly kept in a semi-circular formation with rows facing the front of the class. The desk top was not large enough to fit an 8.5 by 11 inch piece of paper in portrait orientation and students would often turn their papers horizontally to have them fully supported by the writing surface. This was a problem for students learning to read and write for the first time, as their papers were often not

oriented correctly, causing them to write at a slant. Refer to Appendix A to view photos of the classroom.

The classroom did not normally have electricity but for the pilot project we had access to a generator and used it to power a projector, speakers and a laptop for showing videos, pictures and PowerPoint presentations to the students. There was a blackboard in the front of the class. We also had access to an easel with a dry erase board and large pads of paper to write on with markers. Eventually we had to retire the easel because it was in poor condition and collapsed onto students more than once.

The facilities and resources available for use at a refugee camp are undoubtedly going to be limited. I presume the class site was chosen for its proximity to the students' homes. Holding class at a location close to where the students lived probably helped reduce the number of absences and instances of tardiness. An alternate site, normally used for Cultural Orientation trainings, was further away but in my opinion had a preferable classroom set up (including adult-sized desks) which would have been more conducive to adult education. It is rare for teachers to have the "perfect" classroom set-up with every resource they could possibly want to use. Oftentimes teachers must do their best to improvise and work with what is available, however it is still relevant to consider what is available in the classroom as factors that may affect the students' learning outcomes.

CURRICULUM

The curriculum was originally designed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and revised by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). The curriculum framework included key topics, English language/literacy competencies and learning indicators for teachers to focus on. The topics covered by the curriculum reflected the pilot's purpose which was to help refugees acquire survival English skills based on the topics taught in the RSCs cultural orientations. The curriculum included a daily lesson plan for each of the 20 days of the pilot program, with time allocated down to the minute for each of the day's lessons.

The curricular units were well organized and the format of the lessons was consistent across the units. The lessons were numbered and categorized by curricular unit each focusing on a different topic (alphabet, numbers, writing, introductions, telling time, etc.). Each individual lesson included multiple activities of varying difficulty, so that the teachers could work their way through the activities according to their students' progress. If there was not enough time to complete all of a lesson's activities in the time allotted in the schedule, the lesson could be recycled and replace the next day's lesson from that same curricular unit.

The higher level class with the semiliterate students was able to adhere fairly closely to the prescribed daily lesson plans, making it through most of the curriculum. For the lower level pre-literate students who had no experience in a formal education setting, this pace of instruction was too fast and many of the first week's lessons were recycled during week two, at which time the pace was also slowed down. RSC Africa

developed supplemental activities for the pre-literate learners to reinforce basic literacy skills. These literacy activities were especially helpful in teaching the pre-literate students basic concepts about print by among other things, helping them to understand the concept of "word".

The lessons categorized as *Learning how to learn* were well-suited for the pre-literate class of students. The first few lessons went over class expectations and introduced language learning strategies. Other lessons in this category were focused on building preliteracy skills, such as the ability to discriminate between shapes or understanding that English is written from left-to-right and top-to-bottom of the page. Bell and Burnaby (1984) advocated lessons of this type to train students in pre-reading skills and suggest starting with activities that give students practice discriminating shapes (e.g. circles and squares) which will prepare them to later discriminate between the shapes of the letters.

A problem encountered in the curricular units geared towards building oral skills in specific topics (e.g. asking directions, introducing self, calling 911, responding to offers, expressing needs) was that some dialogues were too complex and had to be altered for the lower-level class. While the higher-level class was able to copy down and read dialogues that were written on the board, the low-literate students relied on rote-memorization and repetition of each phrase they heard. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the auditory-verbal language processing competence of illiterate learners is different from their literate peers (Petersson et al., 2000). Literate learners use phonological processing to segment unfamiliar words into their sounds for storage in short term memory during

oral repetition. Preliterate learners who are lacking in phonological processing abilities may have a difficult time with oral repetition of lengthier and more complex phrases. As a result some of the dialogues' language had to be simplified and broken down into smaller chunks so that the pre-literate students could successfully repeat and remember the phrases.

A unique aspect of the curriculum is that portions of the lessons were interpreted into the students' L1. The interpreters were especially helpful in explaining cultural concepts foreign to the students. It would not have been as useful for students to learn to recognize sight words encountered at an airport if they were unable to understand what an airport is, when they will encounter the sight words in an airport and what the sight words mean. Interpreters were also helpful in giving directions to activities in the students' L1. Low-educated students with no experience in a formal education setting will be lacking familiarity with classroom routines. Students who are used to learning through rote-memorization and oral repetition may have a difficult time understanding what is expected of them in a foreign language classroom where the correct response to *How are you?* is *I am fine* (not a repetition of *How are you?*).

Each class had two non-Somali speaking instructors (a lead instructor and an assistant) and one Somali-English speaking interpreter. Despite the interpreters' main responsibilities being giving directions about activities and clarifying cultural concepts, it was challenging for interpreters to stay in the role of passive conduit because of their desire to help the students succeed. During writing lessons the sole interpreter could not be in enough places at once to provide interpretation for the two English-speaking

instructors attempting to give individualized attention to the twenty-three Somali-speaking students. The interpreter must have felt like a rope with more than two ends in a multiple-team game of tug-of-war. During individual activities, such as writing practice activities the interpreter was summoned by multiple students at the same time who each needed help and wanted their questions answered. Sometimes this meant that the interpreter would answer the students' questions rather than interrupting one of the English-speaking instructors who may have been occupied with another student. Eventually this caused the students to treat the interpreter as the class's third ESL instructor. I believe it was necessary to have the assistance of an interpreter for this course, but that perhaps the interpreter could have been utilized differently. The interpreter may have become a crutch for the students which could have impeded students' L2 acquisition. Perhaps in future classes which utilize an interpreter, he/she could leave the classroom during certain lessons that do not require much explanation in the students' L1.

LITERACY & NUMERACY LESSONS

According to the suggested daily lesson plans, students were supposed to learn up to 6 new letters each day. By the end of the 6th day of class (after less than 2 hours total of class time devoted to the subject) students were supposed to know the names and symbols for all 26 uppercase letters of the alphabet. While the low-literate class was able to proceed according to this schedule, the pre-literate class needed more time devoted to learning the arbitrary and meaningless relationships between the letters and their names.

Lessons on letters of the alphabet proceeded in alphabetic order, beginning with the uppercase letters (for example day 1 covered A, B, C and D). The objective of the alphabet lessons was for the students to be able to visually identify and pronounce the letter names. The teacher would hold up a laminated 8.5 by 11 inch paper with a large letter and the students would repeat the letter name after the teacher. Eventually students were quizzed on their ability to recall the letter names by only looking at the symbol. One thing lacking from the curriculum's alphabet lessons was instruction on what sounds the letters make (phonics instruction). The lessons were scripted and focused solely on the identification of the symbol and memorizing the corresponding letter name for that symbol.

Learning how to write the letters was taught in separate lessons which were more flexible in how they could be enacted in class (e.g., tracing letters in the air or on paper, copying letters, writing letters from memory, writing meaningful information). Students in the preliterate class struggled with writing because their fine motor skills were not well enough developed to hold a thin pen or pencil and write legibly within the lines. In the future it may be beneficial to provide large crayons or markers that require less control to use in the beginning stages of instruction before advancing to use of a pen or pencil.

The numeracy lessons proceeded in a similar fashion as the alphabet lessons. During the first week of class, students learned the Arabic numerals and the names of numbers (0-12). The numeral and name was connected to the meaning of the number by holding up fingers, or counting things around the class. Starting in the second week students practiced writing the numerals. Literacy and numeracy activities scheduled for

the second and third weeks were too advanced for the lower-level class, while those who began the course with some basic literacy were more successful. For example, students were given employment application forms and medical information forms to practice filling out, but most of the preliterate class could not write small enough to fit their information into the spaces provided. The lower-level class needed help figuring out where the information was supposed to go, because many of the form's fields were not sight words they could recognize and the preliterate class was lacking decoding skills.

A Change in Focus from Foreign to Known

Auerbach promotes the use of a participatory model of literacy education, where adult students are "involved in curriculum development at every stage of the process, from deciding the content, methods, and processes of instruction to participating in evaluation" (1996, p. 12). The adult Somali refugees did not direct their learning experience and had little say in the course content and objectives. A participatory model is based on adult learning theory, which suggests that "adults learn best when instruction is contextualized in their life experiences" and is "related to their real needs" (Auerbach, 1996, p. 11).

The ESL model used in the pilot intended to help refugees acquire survival English language skills preparing them for their lives in the U.S. by teaching the language through the cultural orientation topics, however these topics were not contextualized in the refugees' life experiences nor were they related to their real immediate needs. By immediate needs I mean that refugees would have little opportunity to practice using the

English they learned outside of the classroom. The refugees recognized the importance of learning English because they all expected to be resettled in the U.S. at some point in the future and knew they would need English language skills to be self-sufficient in the U.S. However, despite the fact that students had been approved for resettlement in the U.S., they may be waiting at Kakuma for anywhere from months to years before their security background checks are complete and they can finally travel to the U.S. Some of the new concepts taught in the ESL lessons were locating one's gate at the airport, knowing if the airplane toilets are vacant or occupied, taking public transportation, understanding entry-level jobs, and contacting emergency services by calling 911. Students expressed their doubts that they would ever get to use the phrases taught in the Airport/Airplane lessons. They did not see the relevance of such topics.

Some of the cultural orientation topics are cultural practices completely foreign to the Somali students who had spent the past decade or more living at a refugee camp. I recognize the value of teaching students basic English language to help them survive in the foreign situations they will encounter along their journey to resettlement, but perhaps the cultural orientation topics should be taught in cultural orientation trainings (often given in the refugees' L1s, or interpreted into their L1s) and the English language instruction should be focused on basics that will help them to survive in any context, including Kakuma refugee camp which is located in English-speaking Kenya. My observation was that students were more engaged when we went over basic vocabulary in the minutes before official class began. Using picture flashcards, the students would teach me the Somali words for table, bed, door, water, chicken, etc. and I would teach

them the English equivalents. Perhaps the students seemed to enjoy these topics because they were already familiar with the concepts, or because they could see the immediate applicability of learning these English words.

IMPROVING LITERACY INSTRUCTION OUTCOMES

Research has shown that certain lower-level literacy skills (e.g. phonological awareness skills, word-decoding skills) transfer from the L1 to the L2 (Grabe, 2009). Working from this understanding, students could be taught basic literacy skills in Somali which would then form the foundation for later acquisition of English literacy. The Somali alphabet uses all but three of the letters of the English alphabet (letters not used are P,V, and Z). Fifteen of the Somali language's 33 sounds are very much like their English counterparts (Putnam & Noor, 1993), so instruction in letter recognition, letter names and phonemic awareness could start by focusing on the 15 letter-sound pairs that are common between Somali and English.

Since oral skills are the building blocks for acquiring alphabetic literacy (Brooks, 2013; Strube, Van de Craats, & Van Hout, 2013), adult Somali refugees could also be taught phonological awareness and basic word-decoding skills in their L1, either before beginning Basic English Oral skills instruction or while simultaneously learning oral English language. Studies conducted with bilingual children have shown that some basic L1 literacy skills such as phonological awareness and word decoding skills transfer from L1 to L2 in studies of bilingual children (Grabe, 2009). Teaching basic Somali literacy will promote "a meaning-based conception of literacy" (Auerbach, 1996, p. 15) where

students' word-decoding skills can immediately be put to use in making meaning of written language. Somali words or well-known proverbs could be used as decodable text so that Somali students would have oral language required to make sense of what they are reading. Basic English oral skills could be taught while simultaneously teaching basic literacy skills using the students L1 which would likely transfer over when they begin learning English literacy after they have the required ESL oral skills.

Somali refugees who speak both English and Somali could be trained as teachers to provide basic Somali literacy instruction and the English language instruction, instead of hiring American or Kenyan teachers. This was the model used at the overseas ESL pilot site in Rwanda, at Gihembe refugee camp. The two instructors at Gihembe were Congolese refugees themselves, both of whom had previously been teachers. By hiring teachers from the communities of the learners, their shared cultural background allows them to "elicit and facilitate learning around learners' life experiences because they have shared them and can understand them" (Auerbach, 1996, p. 17). Both of the Somali interpreters working in the Kakuma classes had gone to school in the refugee camp where they learned Kiswahili and English as second languages. With some training on how to use the curriculum they would be good candidates for teaching beginning L1 literacy and beginning ESL oral skills.

The pilot program's curriculum did not focus on teaching the sounds the letters make, instead it focused on teaching the letter names and recognition of the letter shapes. Using Somali words which mean something to the students, the letter sounds could be taught as an aid to remember the corresponding English letter names. For example a

letter could be introduced by holding up a card with the grapheme and saying, "This is the letter B. It makes the first sound in Basra's name. What are some other words starting with the same sound?" Students could name other words (Somali or English) that start with the letter *B.* Students could then choose one Somali word as their memory prop for that letter and draw it on a notecard as a reminder of the sound the letter makes (Bell & Burnaby, 1984). Alternatively, materials could be made in advance using the letters and sound that are similar between Somali and English with a Somali word chosen for each letter of the alphabet illustrated beside the grapheme for that word-initial letter. For example, an alphabet flashcard for the letter *B* would have the Somali word for car *baabuur*, a picture of a car, and the upper- and lower-case letters *B* and *b* printed on it (Refer to Appendix B for samples).

Instead of teaching students to recognize and write the letters of the alphabet in alphabetical order, starting with the uppercase letters, it has been suggested to group letters that are similar (e.g. *M, N, W*) and teach them at the same time to be able to point out the distinctive features (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Boyd-Batstone, 2006). Boyd-Batstone (2006) suggests teaching the letters with straight lines first, followed by the angled letters, the circle based letters, and finally the letters with curves because they will be the most difficult to produce. Bell and Burnaby (1984) also suggest presenting upper and lower case versions of the letters simultaneously and presenting the letter in a word known to the students (like one of their names).

Boyd-Batstone (2006) described a Total Physical Response (TPR) activity that can be done at the beginning of each writing lesson where students use their whole bodies

to demonstrate letter formation. Imagine your forehead as the top line, your feet the bottom line and your waist the invisible or dotted middle line. For example, students would stand up and demonstrate making a lowercase *l* by touching their heads, then touching their toes. My class enjoyed and frequently requested some of the Energizers such as the *Head Shoulders Knees and Toes* song. For this reason, it seems likely that they would enjoy and benefit from a TPR letter formation activity.

By teaching basic literacy skills in the students' first language they start with something familiar (the sounds, words and meanings from their language and culture) to learn something unfamiliar (literacy). An approach that builds off of what the students already know may be more successful when teaching students at the lowest levels of literacy and Oral English skills. Once students gain some phonological awareness, phonemic awareness and understanding of alphabetic principles in Somali they may be better positioned to transfer this knowledge to their English literacy acquisition, possibly increasing their chances of success in an ESL classroom.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The increased immigration to the U.S. of adults lacking basic literacy skills has been a challenge to ESL instructors who are often teaching in multi-level classes where most students are literate and only a few are low-literate or pre-literate in their L1s. Grouping all of the illiterate learners together in one class would allow instructors to focus on teaching the lower-level literacy skills they are lacking with oral language materials that do not assume L1 literacy. The overseas ESL pilot which taught preliterate/low-literate Somali adults was an opportunity to focus on providing students with a level of L2 instruction tailored to the unique needs of a preliterate learner.

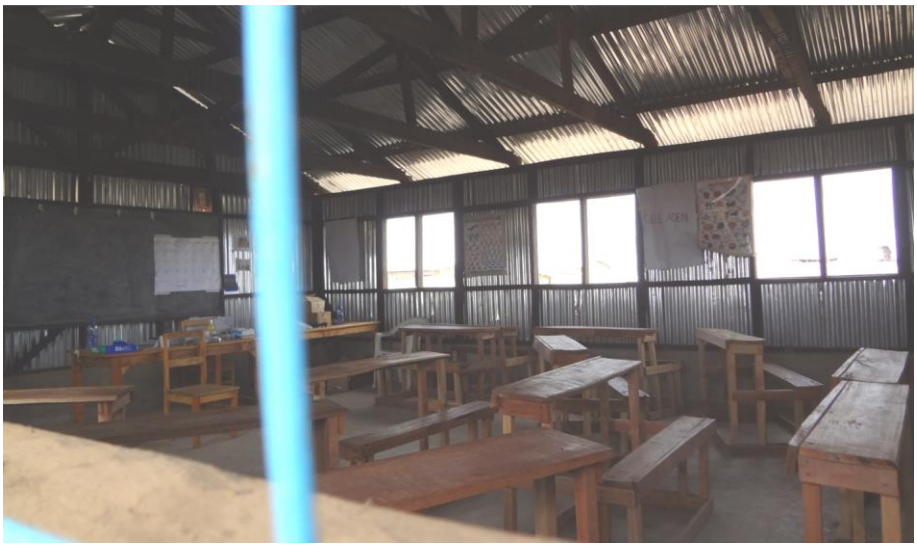
There have been calls for second language acquisition researchers to conduct more studies on how low-educated low-literate students acquire a foreign language. Do students lacking L1 literacy learn a foreign language in the same way as an L1 literate student? Studies have shown that the acquiring alphabetic literacy changes the brain's structure which may have implications for how literate students versus illiterate students learn a second language. This paper aimed to review the literature concerning the development of literacy skills, the effect of literacy on SLA and methods for teaching basic literacy skills in an ESL context.

After a review of the literature it seems that in the context of teaching Somali refugee students overseas, it would be worthwhile to explore the possibility of teaching students basic literacy skills in their first language. Students would have the L1 oral skills required as the foundation of literacy acquisition and research has shown that some lower-level literacy skills do transfer from L1 to L2. Studies done in the field of

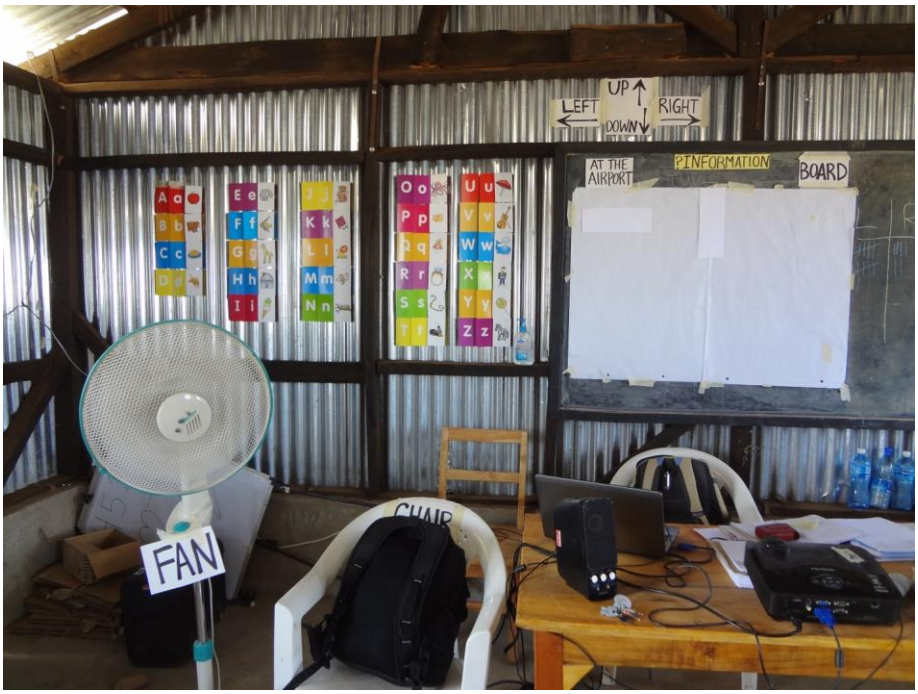
bilingual education suggest that teaching L1 literacy can be beneficial and aid in L2 literacy acquisition (Benson, 1994; Benson 2004). Perhaps in the future additional research will be done in the field of ESL instruction which will demonstrate the effectiveness of a model that incorporates L1 basic literacy instruction into an L2 program for illiterate adults (see for example Burtoff, 1985).

Appendix A

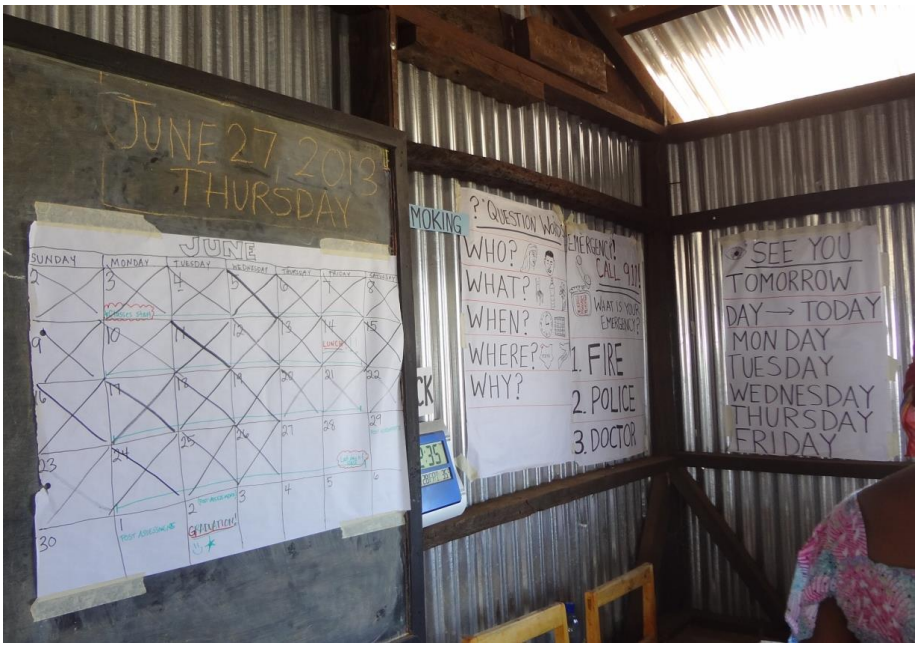
PHOTOS OF THE CLASSROOM AT KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP



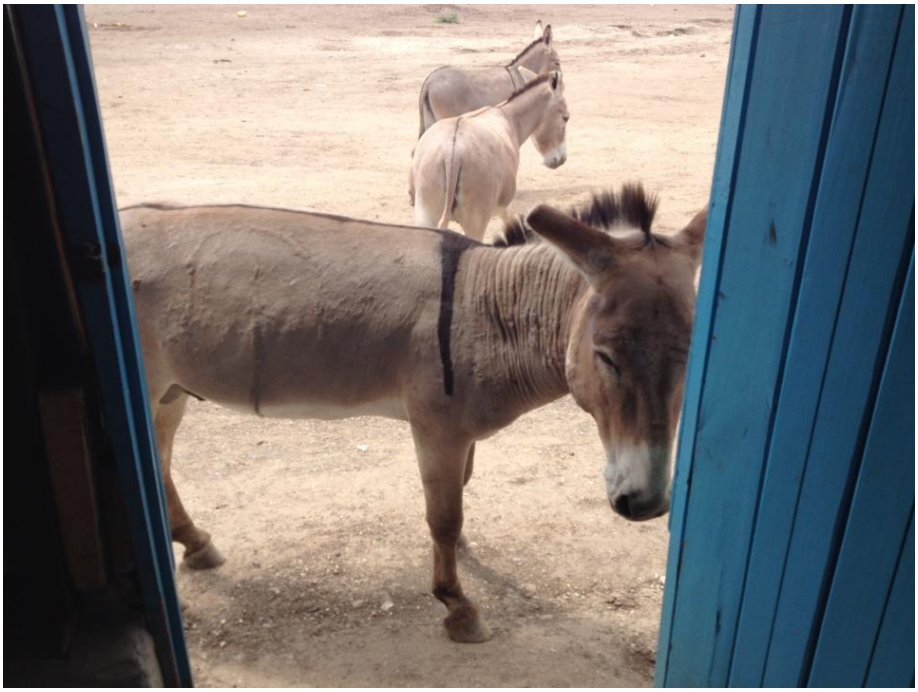
Desks used by the adult students in the classroom at Kakuma



Sight words labeling items in the classroom



Class calendar and sight word posters


Donkeys peeking into the classroom

Appendix B

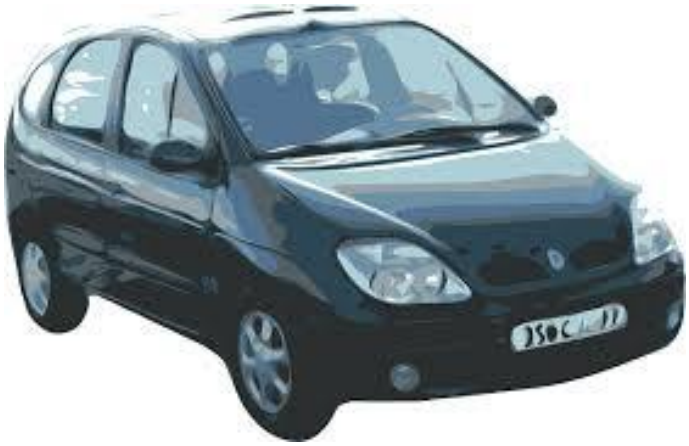
SAMPLE L1 LITERACY MATERIALS

The following sample L1 literacy materials were created using some of the consonant sounds shared by the Somali and English languages. Fifteen of the Somali language's 33 sounds are very much like their English counterparts (B, D, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, S, SH, T, W, and Y) (Putnam & Noor, 1993).

B b

BAABUUR

baabuur



D d

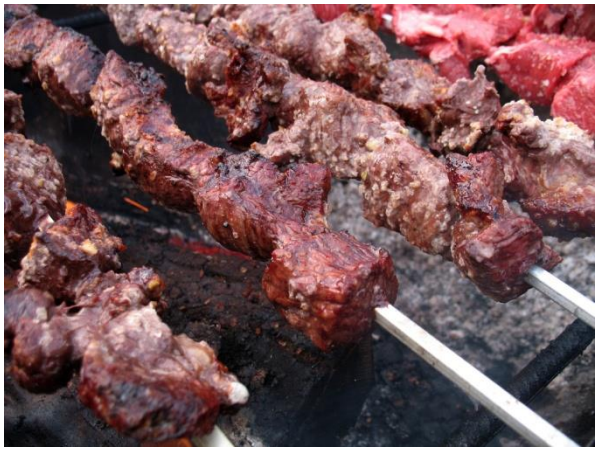
DAAWO

daawo

H h

HILIB

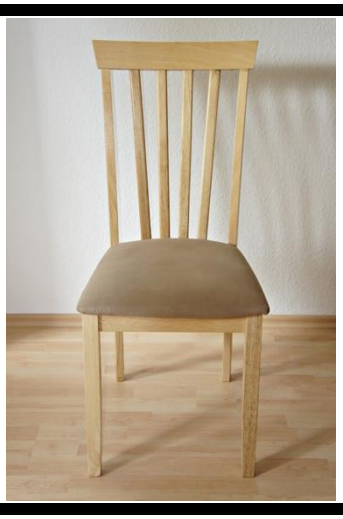
hilib



K k

KURSI

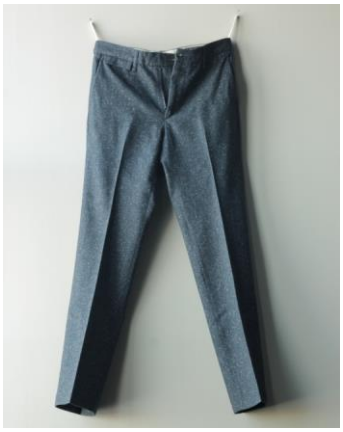
kursi



S s

SURWAAL

surwaal



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