



ALFIE

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ALFIE Learning Partnership

**ALPHABETISATION FOR SECOND
LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN EUROPE:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

CONTENTS

Introduction *p. 3*

I) Evidence *p. 4*

II) Raising Awareness *p. 6*

III) A Framework for Second Language Literacy Acquisition (Entry Level) *p. 8*

IV) Professional Development *p. 10*

V) Understanding and Using Digital Technology in Initial Literacy Teaching *p. 12*

Annex *p. 14*

INTRODUCTION

*** Why this document?**

This document is the result of discussions and exchange in the ALFIE (Alphabetisation of Immigrants to Europe) partnership. Our goal is to outline current challenges and to propose possibilities for further development in the field of alphabetisation (initial literacy) for adult immigrants. What we have learned through our work in the partnership confirms that there are major issues that we have in common, and this brief summary lists a selection of issues that should be the target for further study, research and development within the framework of European cooperation.

*** Who is it for?**

The document is aimed at stakeholders in the field of alphabetisation; both at system level and at implementation level. Our intention is to list rather broadly our common challenges, which could then be taken further both in practical development and in more research-based studies. Also decision-makers could profit from the information and ideas summarised in this document.

*** About ALFIE**

The ALFIE partnership is a Learning Partnership within the Grundtvig / LLP programme, cooperating with the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN). It gathers partners from five European countries; policy makers, researchers, teacher training institutions and training providers in the field.

The partnership aims primarily at establishing a meeting place for the exchange of knowledge, experience, insights and practical models related to initial literacy training. Also, pointing out directions for further work that can promote and improve initial literacy training is a major objective. The project period runs from August 2011 to August 2013.

*** The ALFIE web blog**

An important source of information on the work of the partnership is the ALFIE web blog. It presents the aims and objectives of the project, and the partners themselves. The web blog is updated regularly with relevant material, including reflection notes in which each partner reflects and reports on the topics discussed in the seminars, and what can be learned from it and/or taken back to be used in their own situation. Please visit the web blog for further reading: <http://alfieproject.wordpress.com/>

*** How this document is organised**

This document is the result of the work done in the ALFIE group during our five seminars. The initial points have been honed through further discussions and a series of written drafts, distributed for consultation in the partnership and beyond.

On the following pages are the recommendations we found to be crucial for further development in the alphabetisation field. Each chapter explores current challenges, target groups, ideas on content and ways to approach the issues. Our hope is that the initial work presented in this document could help outline and/or form the basis of new ideas, projects and studies. Please feel free to use, disseminate and develop our material!

I) EVIDENCE

Background

Learning to read and write is a vital element in enabling the individual to become an active citizen in society, and it is of crucial importance for employability and for bringing up the next generation. Literacy is and should be a right for all.

In order to initiate effective measures so as to meet the challenges that arise with a growing number of illiterate¹ immigrants, it is vital to establish a good evidence base, at European level as well as nationally. Existing evidence need to be collected, updated and presented systematically, and new evidence should be produced to mirror reality.

Through our work in the ALFIE partnership, we have found that there is a need for information at all levels, including examples of good practice. The group of illiterates tend to disappear in the larger picture of immigration in general, since there is little knowledge about this group in particular. Good evidence is vital in order to raise awareness about alphabetisation challenges and support a cross-sectoral, multi-level approach to future solutions.

Such evidence needs to be accessible to people who do not have a background in the education sector, e.g. to politicians, ministries of integration, labour, social welfare and finance, integration institutions, local authorities, and the general public, in order to increase awareness of the importance of the matter and secure cross-sectoral attention. One important area of evidence would be to make clear how spending on literacy measures can benefit individuals, families and children, as well as the labour market and society.

Target groups

There are many potential target groups for this kind of evidence. At different levels, evidence would be used for policy-making, awareness raising and cross-sectoral cooperation. It would support development of the subject field, and contribute to increased knowledge for practitioners and other stakeholders, e.g. in teacher education and in-service training. Also directors and headmasters of schools, institutions and other providers would be among the target groups.

Possible further work

In this paragraph, we list ideas and outline possibilities as to what can be done in further work and/or projects. We are well aware that some of these ideas would lead to immense amounts of work, but we put it all out here to trigger new ideas that can result in more manageable projects, maybe involving just a small part of what we have suggested.

1. Make an overview of existing knowledge/research/evidence. Check what can be found in Eurydice and/or other databases, at EU level, in the OECD, in UNESCO, and at national level, such as in universities, research institutions, companies, ministries, curriculum

¹ We are well aware of the ongoing discussion about concepts like 'illiterate and 'illiteracy'. In this document, we will use these concepts for the sake of brevity. We are talking about people who have not learned to read and write in any language, and who have very little or no previous schooling.

plans etc. in different countries. If there is nothing or very little data, the evidence base needs to be increased both at European level, at national level and at local level.

2. Increase the evidence base by collecting information also on best practice. Although important, it is not sufficient to rely on theoretical research only. Both theory and practice should be explored and seen in connection. Researchers and practitioners should cooperate to find out more about schools/classrooms/courses where immigrant literacy thrives.

3. Research on immigrant adult literacy should be promoted at university level. Also, adult learning agencies and other stakeholder institutions need to be updated on alphabetisation issues, and should support and promote specific research in the alphabetisation field. The results from such research should be shared with all stakeholders involved in adult learning. Research funding should be channelled especially to the field of initial literacy / alphabetisation of adult immigrants.

4. Map and explore teacher education in Europe for alphabetisation teachers (and possible data for the effectiveness of such education).

5. Map and explore available courses and literacy education in Europe for immigrants.

6. Research could be undertaken to define the need for alphabetisation; exploring the effects of illiteracy for the individual and for society, family literacy of immigrant families, how illiteracy affects the next generation.

7. Another angle would be looking at language and literacy in the labour market and in schools - differences between learning through practice and learning in schools, workplace learning.

II) RAISING AWARENESS

Background

As mentioned in the previous chapter (on evidence), it is a major challenge when working in the field of alphabetisation that there is little knowledge about this particular group. This challenge must be approached from many different angles.

We realise that awareness can be raised at different levels through horizontal and vertical cooperation. Examples would be (horizontal) cooperation between language teachers and literacy teachers and their organisations, sharing resources and methods, and using channels of communication vertically to influence politicians and decision-makers.

Since decisions about legislation and budgets are necessary as a basis for systemic change and development in the field, it is crucial that politicians and decision-makers at all levels are made aware of the situation so as to make informed decisions. There should be a focus on long-term policies rather than project-based initiatives, to secure funding and sustain development and research. Since we are facing long-term and cross-sectional challenges, solutions must be seen in this perspective.

An awareness of existing challenges and possible pathways towards solutions would also make it easier to profit from exchange between different levels and different countries, especially in terms of avoiding “re-invention” of already functioning measures.

Target groups

As mentioned above, politicians and decision-makers at all levels are important target groups for awareness raising. The research community (especially teacher training institutions) also needs to be aware of immigrant literacy as a topic separate from second language learning. The challenges of alphabetisation and all it entails should be known not only by educationalists but by people who work in other services like health, social services and public employment services, who are likely to work with immigrant groups. Last but not least, awareness raising measures should also reach out to the general public, including potential learners.

Possible further work

Like in the previous chapter, we list ideas for further work and/or projects – not taking into account how big or small these undertakings would be. Our main aim is to present a variety of possibilities, to trigger new ideas for concrete projects.

1. Define the content of awareness raising, and tailor messages to different target groups; – “What is it they need to know?”
2. Make the group of illiterate immigrants more visible. The messages should be positive and informative; focus on achievements, and that something can be done. The main message would be that this group of people *exist*, even if they are often invisible exactly because of illiteracy. It should include information about what it means to be illiterate in modern European societies.

3. Explore how alphabetisation can benefit society and the individual (e.g. long-term gains, parents as role models, social cohesion, health issues, employability, active citizenship).
4. Create arenas for co-operation between researchers and practitioners.
5. Create awareness (and pressure) through cooperation with a wide range of groups, networks and organisations, such as ethnic communities, literacy teachers, municipalities, groups of learners, NGOs.
6. Use existing channels to reach target groups, e.g. Adult Learners' Week, professional campaigns, work in projects and partnerships under LLP / Erasmus for All. Also, increased media coverage and use of social media to generate public interest will in turn influence politics.
7. Collect and disseminate success stories (to give learners a voice, present positive role models, show how alphabetisation can benefit society etc.).

III) A FRAMEWORK FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LITERACY ACQUISITION (ENTRY LEVEL)

Background

Many immigrants that have come and will come to Europe have no formal schooling and cannot read or write in an alphabetic language or in any language. Many, if not all, need to be educated in the broadly used European mental tools; written language, the clock, numbers. The fields of education, research and policy making in Europe have no formal combined means of reference for developing and maintaining a strong, high-quality education for these immigrants.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)² is a well-established and useful tool in language learning across Europe. The CEFR describes what a learner is supposed to be able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing at each level. But in our opinion, something is missing. Our concern is the group of people who not only cannot read or write, but are also second language learners and may lack the most basic grasp of the language used where they live.

Seeing what the implementation of the CEFR has meant in building concepts for language learning; to ease description, planning, facilitating and exchange and to increase awareness around language learning for this group, we recommend that work is initiated to develop a framework for second language literacy acquisition (entry level) that will be linked to the CEFR. To have the necessary impact, an agreed final version of such a framework will have to be adopted at European level as an indispensable addition to the existing CEFR.

It is of major importance to distinguish between the L2 *literacy* skills and standard L2 skills. Relating alphabetisation to the CEFR is a complex process because an "alpha module" would be both a preparation and a foundation for A1, but maybe not "pre-A1" because processes might be more parallel. Reading skills (automatisation) and many other basic skills of the learners are often still too frail for regular L2 courses, so prolonged and more intensive instruction is needed on the one hand, and consciously absorbing the learner into regular L2 courses on the other.

Target groups

An addition to the CEFR would greatly impact the way stakeholders think about and work with alphabetisation. Target groups for such a change would be policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders at all levels. In addition, learners would be a secondary target group, as they would profit from increased awareness and a better tool for reference.

Possible further work

Since developing a framework for second language literacy acquisition is clearly a substantial undertaking unsuitable for smaller, exploratory projects, the form of this paragraph will differ from the other chapters. Instead of listing ideas for further projects, we will make initial suggestions as to points to consider when designing such a framework, and what it could encompass. We have not addressed the question of the

² A short overview of the CEFR can be found in the annex on p. 14.

other mental tools mentioned above; the clock and numbers, nor will the development of literacy into digital forms be discussed here.

The design of the framework would have to be done by European L2 literacy specialists and teachers from the field, drawing on experience with existing entry level / pre-A1 level frameworks in European countries. In the process, the designers should also take into consideration space for language-dependent and culture-dependent use of the framework, and for non-academic types of learning. The way the framework is constructed should be well considered; because of the wide range of skills to be addressed at this stage, the entry level / pre-A1 level could become too difficult for learners to master as a whole, especially when the framework will be used to produce tests that cover all the skills.

As to the contents of the framework, we would like to emphasise the role of oral training as a prerequisite for literacy acquisition. The importance of oral training in providing basic vocabulary and communication tools should not be underestimated. If alphabetisation is carried out in the learner's mother tongue, he/she already has the necessary oral base, whereas in an L2, the building of an oral base in the L2 is necessary. Other ideas as to the contents include pre-reading and pre-writing skills (direction of text, separation of words, motoric training). It is essential to recognise the role of real-life experience and meaningful content, and the characteristic role and importance of emerging learning skills related to the target group. The tacit cultural understanding of what schooling is needs to be addressed; different approaches may have to be applied.

IV) PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Background

Realising the need for high-quality initial literacy training, it is necessary to take a closer look at professional development for practitioners. (In this document, we use “teachers” as a common concept, even if we are aware of the differences across Europe in who actually provides such training.) As within other lifelong learning fields, e.g. basic skills, professional development must be given priority to improve quality. Through our work in the ALFIE partnership, we have learned that there is a need to professionalise and increase the status of the field. Many countries lack systems for initial and continuing education for alphabetisation, available professional development is scarce and random, and there is a lack of incentives both for individuals and institutions.

The main challenge is already mentioned in chapter II, Awareness Raising. Awareness is needed at different levels (institutional/national) about how to develop staff according to accepted views and theories of literacy. Teachers also need to be aware of (or be made aware of) their own training needs, and how training can benefit them in their daily work.

As discussed previously, there is little knowledge about alphabetisation. Not enough people realise that teaching illiterates both literacy and a new language is a complex process which requires special knowledge and skills beyond “ordinary” L2 teaching. Thus, teacher education should include and integrate three main strands; teaching L2 (second language), teaching *literacy*, and teaching *adults*.

In our opinion, measures need to be taken at system level. There is a need for specialised teacher education up to Master level, including adult education / andragogy, L2 specialisation, initial literacy, basic skills, and there is a need for national standards/requirements for teachers in the alphabetisation field. At the same time, local initiatives should be encouraged, to foster bottom-up development and change in practice.

Target groups

Naturally, the main focus is on educating *teachers*, be it through continuing education courses building on previous education, or through full specialist study paths. However, administrative staff in adult education institutions also needs to recognise what alphabetisation implies; to know the basics about what it is and what kind of work is needed. This is important because such staff will need to facilitate for co-operation and networking (allocate time and resources etc.), and to keep in touch with alphabetisation teachers and learners.

Possible further work

There are endless opinions and ideas about what teachers should do and be, and many discussions in the ALFIE partnership have centred on what teacher education should include. In the following, we will present suggestions which might lead to project ideas, without claiming to have covered every possible angle of this complex issue.

1. Build local and international networks to keep up professional development, motivation and inspiration. Such networks can contribute to spreading knowledge, experience and ideas and to creating developmental work.
2. Develop models for teacher education.
3. Create (shorter) continuing education courses. (See chapter V p. 13 for courses involving digital technology.)
4. Explore related fields. What kind of additional knowledge might be required from alphabetisation teachers? What kind of education would they need to work with related fields? (Examples could be numeracy, ICT skills, media literacy.)

V) UNDERSTANDING AND USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN INITIAL LITERACY TEACHING

Background

Digital technology has become an integral part of life in modern society, and as such should have a natural place in initial literacy teaching. Through our work in ALFIE, we have learned that there is untapped potential for using digital technology more extensively and systematically for alphabetisation purposes. Using digital technology, however, does not exclude traditional teaching – on the contrary, they can both work effectively together in a combination of approaches and tools (blended learning).

The objective would be twofold; firstly, the use of digital technology could be instrumental in helping in the alphabetisation process itself, and secondly, the wider objective of learning life skills would be supported, as digital skills are essential in today's society. It is worth noting that illiterate people may be competent and confident with the use of technologies, and this may benefit learning processes hugely.

A better understanding and a more widespread use of digital technology in initial literacy teaching would be advantageous for learners and teachers alike, e.g. making learning more efficient, making it easier to tailor teaching to individual needs, supporting learner autonomy, enhancing motivation and, of course, opening up limitless possibilities for collecting and sharing information, methods, materials etc. Thinking outside the box (the classroom) could help solve accessibility issues – e.g. mobile phones are widely used and can be used as learning tools.

Target groups

There would be two target groups for different initiatives in this field, as both teachers and learners need digital skills training. For teachers, it would be particularly important to learn more about the didactic use of technology. The focus should not be solely on learning to use digital tools, but also on understanding the immense potential for communication and learning in professional and everyday contexts.

This said, there is a risk that digital technology may be viewed as a means to solve all problems. It is vital that the learners are put first and that technology should be used for didactic purposes, not as an end in its own right.

Possible further work

A two-way approach to development in this field could and should be supported; firstly, the need for funding and the need for fast development, including didactic software and materials, calls for top-down development. Such initiatives will of course depend on an awareness of the existing challenges, as discussed in chapter II. Secondly, a bottom-up approach would be appropriate when it comes to collecting and sharing experience with digital technology in alphabetisation, and also method development. Such topics would be suitable for projects under LLP / Erasmus for All.

As in the previous chapters, some ideas for possible projects, large and small, are listed below.

1. Create programmes / software content for the specific purposes of teachers and learners; → developers should involve people with pedagogical competence.

2. Find out about / list /classify existing programmes for alphabetisation purposes.

(linked with:)

3. Explore possibilities for development of one or several databases of resources for alphabetisation. Separate databases could be linked. Possible content could be articles in English, e.g. about teaching methods and models, and materials which can be used by all, e.g. images for oral teaching.

4. Create short in-service training courses for teachers, aimed specifically at providing practical training in didactic use of digital technology for alphabetisation.

5. Follow-up on existing European projects, such as “Digital Literacy Instructor” (DigLIIn): <http://diglin.eu/>

ANNEX

III) A FRAMEWORK FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LITERACY ACQUISITION (ENTRY LEVEL)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The CEFR divides learners into three broad steps which can be further divided into six levels:

- A Basic User
 - A1 Breakthrough or beginner
 - A2 Waystage or elementary
- B Independent User
 - B1 Threshold or intermediate
 - B2 Vantage or upper intermediate
- C Proficient User
 - C1 Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced
 - C2 Mastery or proficiency