

# Teaching adult immigrants with limited formal education: Theory, research and practice

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Volume 57, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106320ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1106320ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hardin, K. (2022). Review of [Teaching adult immigrants with limited formal education: Theory, research and practice]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 57(2), 241–243.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1106320ar>

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## BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE-RENDU

PEYTON, J. K., & YOUNG-SCHOLTEN, M. (Eds.). *Teaching Adult Immigrants With Limited Formal Education: Theory, Research and Practice*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. (2020). 208 pp. \$34.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-78-892699-7).

Around the world, 750 million adults live in unstable conditions where conflict and poor infrastructure limit their access to formal schooling and threaten them with displacement. This figure grows every year, as does the number of displaced people who settle in a new land and need to learn a new language. Many governments have responded by creating newcomer education programs, but only recently have the specific language learning needs of adult newcomers with limited formal education gained significant scholarly attention. As a result, resources for teaching these learners are scarce and scattered. Peyton and Young-Scholten's recent volume — *Teaching Adult Migrants With Limited Formal Education: Theory, Research and Practice* — represents a major step toward rectifying this problem, providing a concise reference work informed by a nearly decade-long project entitled *European Speakers of Other Languages: Teaching Adult Migrants and Training Their Teachers*. Although the resulting text is steeped in the European tradition of language education, it remains valuable to any researchers and teachers of migrant adult language learners regardless of geographic area.

The volume contains seven chapters. The first provides important context from second-language acquisition research, concluding with a thorough description of the research project on which the volume is based. Chapters 2 and 3 offer theoretical overviews of literacy acquisition from a social and psycholinguistic perspective, respectively. The most significant contribution of Chapter 2 is its discussion of variation in the cultural significance of literacy and the implications of this variation on teaching practice. Chapter 3 goes beyond pure psycholinguistics, not only explaining the various skills that make up print literacy, but also offering a welcome introduction to critical literacy instruction and extensive reading. Chapter 4 addresses vocabulary, providing much-needed guidance on practical matters such as developing vocabulary knowledge that is both broad and deep. Chapter 5 discusses morphosyntactic (that is, vocabulary and grammar) development, one of the few topics in this book to benefit from

an extensive body of research specific to adults. Chapter 6 makes a compelling argument for the importance of helping adult learners to support their families' multilingual development. The final chapter ties together loose ends through a discussion of strategies for teaching and tutoring adults with limited formal education.

The lack of a solid research base on adult language and literacy instruction is a self-perpetuating cycle; it is difficult to research a topic when there is so little prior work to build on. However, this volume overcomes this hurdle by leveraging research on first-language literacy acquisition and adult second-language acquisition to draw conclusions about teaching adults with limited formal education. For instance, Chapter 3 extrapolates from research on children's reading development to that of adults, resulting in a detailed overview of the development of literacy skills, from decoding and phonetic awareness to textual interpretation. In contrast, Chapter 5 benefits from a comparatively strong research base on the morphosyntactic development of adults with limited formal education. However, this research deals predominantly with European adults who have migrated within Europe, raising the question of whether its findings can be simply extended to the linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms of today.

At times, chapters seem lacking in theoretical cohesion. This is particularly apparent in Chapter 6's treatment of multilingualism and home language maintenance, a vitally important topic for teachers of newcomers to understand. For example, a several-page discussion of the linguistic and cognitive costs of multilingualism ends with the paradoxical admonishment that these should "not be interpreted as disadvantages" (p. 111). The chapter concludes with a much-needed discussion of specific language impairments among multilingual children and a reiteration of the benefits of supporting children's multilingual development. However, due to the deficit-oriented and sometimes confusing information presented earlier in the chapter, a skeptical reader is unlikely to be convinced.

The volume ends on a high note with a clear and succinct discussion of practical topics such as lesson preparation, classroom organization, and teaching multilevel classes. This chapter complements the preceding, more theoretically oriented, chapters, offering strategies for teaching print and phonemic awareness and conducting formative assessment. This makes for a strong conclusion that delivers on the book's promise to incorporate theory and research into practice.

In all, Peyton and Young-Scholten's volume covers a lot of ground in less than 200 pages, although it may be too densely written for readers who are not already familiar with the concepts it covers. Conspicuously lacking is a chapter on trauma-informed pedagogy, a topic of great interest and importance to teachers of migrant adults. In addition, within each chapter, topics are often not synthesized, but presented sequentially instead. This can leave the reader unsure what conclusions to draw or how the information can inform their teaching practice. That being

said, a major strength of the book is the inclusion of numerous connections and cross-references across chapters. This lends coherence despite the volume's wide-ranging subject matter and reinforces key principles throughout the book.

The lack of research on the literacy development of adults presents a barrier for both research and pedagogy. Peyton and Young-Scholten's volume successfully integrates the research that does exist, resulting in a comprehensive introduction to the language learning of adults with limited formal education. It provides a theoretical and empirical foundation that will encourage future scholarship in this area. The glossary and the inclusion of numerous outside resources highlight the editors' intention to create a book that is accessible to experts and laypeople alike. At the same time, its deep dives into research in first- and second-language literacy development provide a welcome entry point for researchers in adjacent fields who want to extend their knowledge of adult migrant education. The book is a unique, valuable, and timely contribution to an increasingly necessary area of inquiry.

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