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PREDICTORS OF SUCCESS IN ADULT L2 LITERACY ACQUISITION

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1 Introduction

The question as to how many hours it takes an adult student to learn to read and write for the first time in a new language (the learning load) is a crucial issue for all those involved in planning a learning track. It is not only curriculum designers, teachers, and the literacy students themselves who want to know how many hours it takes to be a reader and writer, but funding institutes and the ministry responsible for integration also want to know what the learning load is for an average L2 literacy student. The government of the Netherlands requires immigrants to be able to read and write in Dutch at the A2 proficiency level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEF (Council of Europe, 2001).[12] The literacy track is generally kept separate from integration courses and is seen as a prerequisite for the latter. The description of the CEF levels (in can-do statements) is also based on the assumption that adult language learners are already readers. Therefore, it was necessary to integrate literacy learning into the levels of the CEF.[13] For Dutch as a second language (DSL), this was done by splitting up level A1 into three smaller parts: the literacy levels A, B, and C, as shown in Figure 1. CEF level A1 for reading is described as follows:

> "I can understand familiar names, words, and very simple sentences, for example, on notices and posters or in catalogues."

and for writing:

> "I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form."

The three literacy levels, into which CEF Level A1 was split up, can be characterized by three decoding steps and related functional skills. They roughly correspond to reading and writing CVC words and words learnt as sight words (level A), reading and writing high-frequency words including words with consonant clusters and regular grammatical morphemes such as plural *–en* (level B), and reading short and simple texts on familiar subjects (level C).

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[12] See Kurvers & Van de Craats (2008) for a short overview of language and integration policy in the Netherlands.

[13] See Stockmann (2006) for details on the DSL Literacy Framework and the description of the three sublevels.

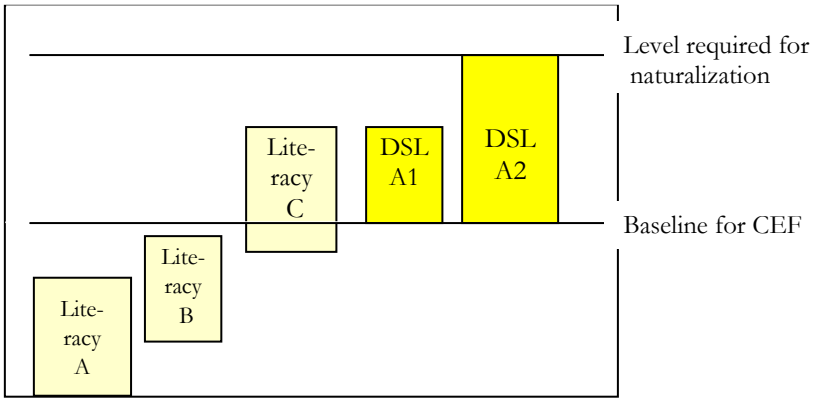

Figure 1: Proficiency levels for L2 literacy and Dutch as L2 (DSL)

However, there is a serious risk that the length of the literacy programme will prevent learners from taking part in the integration programme. An integration programme normally takes one year for a learner who has had primary school and about two years for a learner who has had secondary education in the country of origin. In such programme DSL is taught as well as knowledge of the Dutch society. A literacy track, seen as preparatory to the integration programme, however may last much longer. Moreover, many learners never reach the level of reading and writing required for the integration programme. Therefore, the Ministry of Integration aims at determining a benchmark for learning to read and write based on what is realistic for the average L2 literacy learner. A more efficient way of teaching literacy has become an issue for the Ministry. Therefore, as a first step, a literature review was commissioned by the Ministry and carried out by the Dutch national test institute Cito. This resulted in a long list of potential factors determining success, 12 of which were mentioned most often in the literature as potentially determining the results of teaching L2 and literacy (Cito, 2008b).
As a second step, this list was presented at a national consultation meeting to teachers and experts in the field of adult L2. The literacy field ranked them as follows:

1. possibilities for the learner of having language contact with speakers of the target language by means of language buddies, learning outside school, internship;
2. transparent way of tutoring by means of intake, tracks and student tutoring;
3. use of a literacy portfolio;
4. competent teachers;
5. giving a clear and real context to what is being taught;
6. working with clear targets and a clear structure in the lessons;
7. stimulating learners to become autonomous learners;
8. use of audiovisual course material;
9. adapting the content of the lessons to the interests of the learners;
10. giving learners sufficient time to practice reading and to read extensively.

Until 2009, the Ministry has not had any clear-cut data on the learning load (=how many hours of instruction are required for attaining a specific objective, in this case

to be able to successfully participate in an integration programme) of literacy students because exact data on beginning and end levels was lacking. Therefore, we suggested doing two preliminary studies, partly based on already collected data, to investigate the learning load and search for empirical evidence for the success factors derived from the literature review. The first data collection comprised a sample of 322 students attending literacy classes in 2008 and/or 2009; their literacy level at the start was known exactly and part of them were tested again after one year. This study (Kurvers & Stockmann, 2009) aims to give an indication of the learning load (in hours of instruction) and to present a number of predictors of success. The second data collection (Kurvers & Van de Craats, 2009) comprised 720 students who were all candidates for naturalization between 2005 and 2008 but did not meet the requirements for naturalization (i.e. level A2 CEF) and therefore applied for dispensation. Dispensation is given to applicants with less than five years of schooling who can show that they have invested a great deal of time and have applied themselves seriously to the task without being successful. Because their educational history was well documented, the data allowed us to see what they had learned in a fixed interval of time and, maybe also to determine what factors caused their lack of success.

2 Study 1: Learning load and predictors of success in adult L2 literacy

The main aims of study 1 were (i) to paint an up-to-date picture of the adult L2 literacy landscape in the Netherlands since the introduction of the new integration policy in 2007, (ii) to investigate the learning load of L2 literacy students for each of the literacy levels, and (iii) to determine potential predictors of success in adult L2 literacy (cf. Condelli & Spruck Wrigley, 2006). Subsection 2.1 presents the outline of the study, subsection 2.2 gives a description of students, teachers and educational practices in the adult L2 literacy classes, subsection 2.3 continues with the learning load needed for the literacy levels, and subsection 2.4 presents the predictors of success.

2.1 Outline of the study

In order to reach the research aims within the time limits set, we decided to search for and investigate the L2 literacy students that had already participated in the pre-testing of a newly developed adult literacy test in 2008 (Cito, 2008a). As far as possible, these students were tested again in 2009, and all the relevant background data and educational data were collected.

Participants

From the 296 students who had participated in the 2008 pre-testing, 190 were still attending classes in 2009. This number of students was expanded by students who started literacy classes after August 2008, leading to a total of 322 students, 80% of whom were women and 20% men. They had been attending 58 different classes taught by 50 different teachers in nine different adult education centres in different regions of the Netherlands.

Instruments

The main instruments used in this study were the adult Literacy Achievement tests for the literacy levels A, B and C (*Voortgangtoets Alfa*, Cito, 2008a), a student's background questionnaire, a teacher questionnaire and a questionnaire on instructional methods and practices. All questionnaires were filled in by the teachers and were intensively discussed and piloted in a pre-meeting with the participating centres.

The student questionnaire consisted of questions about the students' background (gender, age, home country, L1, length of stay in the Netherlands, years of education in home country, work, marital status and number of children) and data on their literacy and L2 education (starting level in oral (spoken) and written Dutch, the total number of hours already attended, attendance rate, home work, or contact with native speakers of Dutch).

The teacher questionnaire consisted of questions related to age, gender, and educational background, expertise in the mother tongues of their students, their experience and special in-service training on L2 language and literacy teaching.

The educational practice questionnaire consisted of questions about the class (group size, group levels and main backgrounds), the number of hours of instruction a week, division of time spent on reading and writing or on oral skills, and time spent on different activities (individual work, small group work, whole group work). Other questions were devoted to methodologies used (course materials, additional extra-mural activities, homework), student assessments and the use of L1 in teaching (see also Cito, 2008b; Condelli & Spruck-Wrigley, 2006).

The adult L2 literacy achievement test (*Voortgangstoets Alfa*, Cito 2008a) consisted of functional reading and writing items at the three different L2 literacy levels A, B, and C. An example of reading at level C is reading a letter from the primary school of the children; an example of writing at level B is filling in a form to attend a meeting at the community centre. Teachers filled in the written questionnaires; missing or unclear answers were completed where possible by additional phone call interviews with the teachers.

2.2 The adult L2 literacy landscape in the Netherlands

Table 1 presents the main background data of the students in the study.

The students originated from 39 different countries: many of them came from Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Turkey, while a smaller number came from countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, China, Thailand and Eritrea. The mean age of the students was 41 (range 17-67). More than 60% of the students did not attend primary school in their home country; about 35% attended primary school for some years. More than 40% of the students had been living in the Netherlands for more than 10 years, while about a quarter had arrived more recently. According to the teachers, about 60% of the students used only their L1 at home, and more than half of them had very limited contacts with native speakers of Dutch. The majority of the students started the course without any skills in written Dutch (80%), while a minority had some skills in reading and writing. Most students attended their classes regularly (12% had an attendance rate below 70%), and did their homework regularly (70%).

Table 1: Background features of adult L2 literacy students

Characteristics	Value	N=322	%
Gender	Female	255	79,.9%
	Male	64	21.1%
Age	Younger than 30	49	15.8%
	30-49	199	64.0%
	50 or older	63	20.2%
Country of origin	Afghanistan	18	5.9%
	Iraq	26	8.5%
	Morocco	119	38.8%
	Somalia	21	6.8%
	Turkey	37	12.1%
	Other	86	28.0%
Years of schooling	No schooling	185	61.3%
	1- 6 years	108	35.8%
	6-10 years	9	3.0%
Stay in Netherlands	<5 years	87	28.8%
	6-10	76	25.2%
	11-20	78	25.8%
	>20	61	20.2%
Dutch spoken in family	Yes	93	34.7%
	No	175	65.3%
Contact with native speakers of Dutch	Hardly	188	54.9%
	Moderate	87	30.6%
	Much	42	14.8%
Starting level oral Dutch	Zero	151	53.0%
	0.5- A1	115	40.4%
	A1-A2	19	6.7%
Starting level written Dutch	Zero	239	81.6%
	0.5-Literacy A	40	13.7%
	>Literacy A	14	4.8%
Attendance rate	<70%	32	11.7%
	70-89%	119	43.3%
	90% or more	124	45.1%
Doing homework	Yes	188	69.4%
	No	83	30.6%

The mean age of the 50 teachers in the sample was 52 (range 22-64). Most of them were women (84%) and native speakers of Dutch (88%). The majority of the teachers had been trained as primary school teachers (38%); others had a background in academic language studies (30%), while several others had backgrounds such as teaching science or agriculture (30%). On average, the teachers had been working in the adult L2/literacy field for 15 years (SD 9.0). Not all of them had attended specific pedagogical L2 training (74% had) or L2 literacy (49% had). About half of the teachers (51%) reported having some proficiency in one or more of the students' languages (including English, French and Spanish, second languages for some of the students).

The mean adult L2 literacy class consisted of 12 students (SD 4.2, range 3-26), and was heterogeneous in terms of the students' background, L2-level and gender. About 20% of the students attended literacy classes of 6-8 hours a week, 42% courses of 9-11 hours a week and 37% attended more intensive courses of 12-15 hours a week (mean 10, SD 2.4). About 65% of the groups were taking lessons from two different teachers (at different times), 24% from one teacher only and 11% from three or more teachers. Intake was flexible in most of the groups: new students could start every week or month.

The basic course material used for literacy teaching were either a combination of a phonics approach for decoding skills and additional authentic (whole word) material for functional reading and writing skills (55% of the groups), or a combination of literacy materials with regular L2 materials intended for literates (17%). In a few groups phonics-only literacy material was used (14%) or no material at all (4%). About 74% of the teachers used some authentic material (i.e. not specifically geared to literacy learners) in their classes, 80% assigned homework and 67% used portfolios. Internships were less common (17%).

On average, 42% of the time was spent on oral skills in Dutch (range 10-65%), 47% on reading and writing (range 30-90%), but there was a lot of variation among teachers: while one teacher spent 90% of her time on reading and writing, another did so only 30% of the time, spending 65% of the time on oral skills in Dutch.
Table 2 presents the division of time over the different activities in the adult literacy classes.

Table 2: Percentage of time spent on various classroom activities

Classroom activities	Mean % of time	SD	Range
Computer work	16.7	9.7	0-40%
Individual work	20.9	16.0	0-70%
Small group work	27.4	14.7	0-68%
Whole class work	33.2	15.8	0-75%
Other	5.4	8.8	0-35%

As can be seen in Table 2, on average, the students spent the largest portion of their time on whole-class activities (33%), and less on computer exercises or other activities. What is more interesting, however, is the variation among the teachers: some teachers spent 75% of their time working with the whole group, while others spent only a very small amount on whole group work. Comparable variation among teachers can be seen for all other classroom activities, percentages of time ranging from 0 to 70%.

2.3 Learning load

One of the main questions examined in this research was how many hours it took the students to reach one of the literacy levels A, B, or C (see Introduction). Level C is comparable to level A1 in the Common European Framework of Languages, CEF, (and still below the level that is required for citizenship and naturalization).

Table 3 presents the number of students who attained each literacy level and the mean number of hours they had needed to reach that level. Only the hours of instruction were counted here. Only students with a starting level of zero are

included. The learning load is presented separately for non-literates (less than two years of schooling) and low-educated students (2-10 years of schooling).

Table 3: Mean learning load for different literacy levels with non-literates and low-educated students

	All (N=236)	Non-literates (N=190)	Low-educated (N=46)
Reading			
No level attained	N=92	N=79	N=13
Level A attained	N=71	N=57	N=13
Mean number of hours	842	804	1005
Min – max	103-2786*	103-1490	258-2786*
Level B attained	N=40	N=29	N=10
Mean number of hours	1011	1131	728
Min – max	103-3870*	103-3870*	258-1342
Level C attained	N=33	N=23	N=10
Mean number of hours	867	909	770
Min – max	155-2150	155-2150	193-2064
Writing			
No level attained	N=64	N=57	N=7
Level A attained	N=112	N=87	N=24
Mean number of hours	929	972	774
Min – max	103-3870*	103-3870*	206-3096*
Level B attained	N=35	N=29	N=6
Mean number of hours	790	827	612
Min – max	103-1741	103-1741	193-1819
Level C attained	N=25	N=16	N=9
Mean number of hours	985	976	1001
Min – max	155-2150	155-2150	387-2064

*= Mean influenced by outliers (> 2700 hours)

As can be seen in Table 3, the variation in learning load among the students is huge. A considerable number of students (92 for reading and 64 for writing) did not reach any literacy level at all (in, on average, 850 hours of instruction) and only a small number of the students (33 for reading and 25 for writing) reached literacy level C (in on average 985 hours). More students attained literacy level A (71 for reading and 112 for writing) or level B (40 for reading and 35 for writing). On average, they needed more than 850 hours of instruction. The variation in the number of hours within each level is tremendous. A few students attained the highest level in less than 300 hours, but a great many students needed more than 1000 hours to reach the lowest literacy levels and quite a few even needed more than 2000 hours. This nicely illustrates the heterogeneity in adult L2 literacy classes compared to nearly all other educational fields. To give some indication, the majority of the children would reach decoding skills comparable to level B in about 300-400 hours of instruction time, level C in 400-600 hours.

When the non-literates are compared to the low-educated students, it can be seen that on average more low-educated students reach higher levels in fewer hours. The low-educated students reach one of the literacy levels in about 100-200

hours less than the non-literates (outliers not included). If we compare younger students (below 40 years of age) with the older ones (40 or above), the older students on average need about 150 hours of instruction more to attain one of the literacy levels.

For additional insight into the learning load we composed groups of students that had attended school about the same amount of hours (400-600, 600-800 etc.) and we investigated how many students attained one of the literacy levels in each of the groups. Figure 2 presents the outcomes graphically.

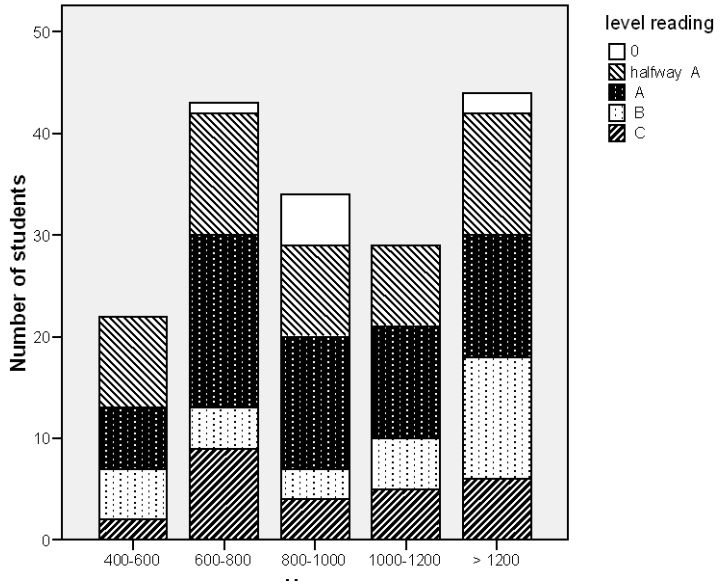

Figure 2: Reading levels by groups based on attendance hours

The most striking outcome is, once more, the partitioning of literacy levels attained within each of the groups. One might have expected higher numbers of students to have reached level B or C in the bars on the right (more than 1000 hours of lessons) and relatively more students with lower levels in the bars on the left (less than 800 hours). In fact, in each group the number of students that scored halfway level A or level A is the biggest, which again illustrates that for many literacy students it is very difficult to learn to read and write on a functional level, and few students succeed (see also study 2).

2.4 Predictors of success

In order to determine success factors, the reading and writing scores and the growth scores (i.e., scores indicating the difference between the scores of 2009 and 2008) of students who were assessed in 2008 and 2009 were correlated with learner variables on the one hand and educational variables on the other. Table 4 presents correlations with learner variable, and Table 5 presents correlations with educational variables. Correlations that were not significant (not shown in Table 4) ranged between -.14 and .14.

Table 4: Pearson correlations of student characteristic with reading and writing scores

	Reading	Writing	Growth reading	Growth writing
Age	-.22**	-.23**	-.16*	-.19*
Years of schooling	n.s.	.17*	n.s.	.17*
Contact native speakers	.38**	.23**	n.s.	n.s.
Attendance rate	.23**	.23**	n.s	n.s
Student doing homework	.18**	.18**	.21*	.14†

† p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01
n.s. = not significant

Although broadly speaking the correlations are low, five learner characteristics show a significant correlation with one or more of the literacy scores. On all literacy scores, the correlations with the age of the students are significant and negative: the older the student, the lower the scores on reading and writing. Years of schooling correlates significantly with writing scores, not with reading scores. Reading and writing scores also correlate positively and significantly with the frequency of contact with speakers of Dutch, with student's attendance rate and with the students' rate of homework completion.(the latter also being significant for growth scores in reading). Years of stay in the Netherlands (not included in the table) show the same negative correlations as age (most of the older students also have been living in the Netherlands for many years). All other learner variables are not correlated to literacy achievement.

In Table 5, most correlations with educational variables are low as well, although some reach significance. First of all, some educational variables are negatively related to reading and writing in Dutch. These are: group size with growth scores in writing, percentage of time allotted to whole-group work with all the scores, and percentage of time allotted to written Dutch with growth scores. The latter outcome might seem counter-intuitive, but in fact this probably indicates that students who need more time for reading and writing, for example because they progress slowly, are getting more time. Whole-group activities seem to have a negative influence on reading and writing achievements. Positive and significant correlations are found with the number of different teachers (indicating that having two different teachers seems to work better than having just one), percentage of time spent on computer work with reading scores (practising decoding skills is an important part of computer programs in beginning reading), and individual work with writing scores. The use of student's L1 in the lessons correlates positively with scores on reading and writing, and use of the portfolio is positively related to three of the four literacy measures (probably because it offers both students and teachers insight into the learning process and students' progress).

Table 5: Partial correlations of reading and writing scores with educational variables, controlling for age and years of schooling of the students

	Reading	Writing	Growth reading	Growth writing
Group size	n.s	n.s.	n.s.	-.18*
Number of teachers	.15*	.14*	n.s.	n.s.
% time written skills	n.s.	n.s.	-.19*	-.19*
Portfolio	.13†	.18*	n.s.	.21**
Use L1 in lessons	.13†	.16*	n.s.	n.s.
% time allotted to computer work	.17*	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
% time allotted to individual work	n.s.	.21**	n.s.	n.s.
% time allotted to whole group work	-.19**	-.22**	n.s.	n.s.

† p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01
n.s. = not significant

Since correlations cannot indicate causality, a regression analysis was carried out as well, with reading and writing scores as dependent variables and the learner and educational variables as independent variables. Only the variables that had reached significance in the correlation analyses were entered into a stepwise regression analysis. For reading, the following variables reached significance: language contact, use of L1, attendance rate, years of previous schooling, percentage of computer work (all positive), while whole-group work had a significant negative impact on reading. For writing, the same list can be given, but also use of portfolio and percentage of time spent on working individually turned out to be significant.

Summarizing, for older students (i.e. students older than 40) and students without any schooling in the home country it is more difficult to progress quickly in L2 literacy than for younger students or students who had attended primary school. All other significant correlations (language contact with L2 speakers, attendance, home work, portfolio, whole class or individual work, use of L1 and portfolio) seem to point in one major direction: those activities that keep students actively involved seem to work best in L2 literacy learning (cf. Condelli & Spruck Wrigley, 2006).

3 Study 2: Data from the feasibility assessment

3.1 Background of the applicants for naturalization

Contrary to the data in Study 1, the data in Study 2 is from a specific group: former literacy students that did not meet the requirements for naturalization (i.e. CEF level A2 for all four language skills including for reading and writing) and therefore applied for dispensation for reading and writing. Dispensation is given if applicants have shown that they have invested a great deal of time (attending an intensive course of two years is equivalent to approximately 1200 hours of instruction) and have applied themselves seriously to the task. There is no dispensation possible for listening and speaking. A specialized institute in Amsterdam is commissioned by the Immigration and Naturalization Service to assess the feasibility of the requirements within five years starting from the moment of testing. Only 1% of the applicants were assessed as 'feasible within five years', which means that they were

expected to reach level A2 for reading and writing skills within five years. Their mean age was 32.2 and the mean amount of schooling in their native country was 2.1 years (only applicants with less than primary school are allowed to ask for dispensation). This is much younger than the mean age of those who got the assessment 'not feasible', as can be seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Assessment of reading and writing skills at A2 level within five years (based on data in the period: 2005-2008)

	Raw numbers	Percentage	Mean age	Schooling in country of origin
Feasible	8	1%	32.2 years	2.1 years
Not feasible	715	99%	39.3 years	1.1 years
Total	723			

The applicants for naturalization who requested dispensation came from 50 different countries. The countries of origin mentioned most often are summed up in Figure 3. Most applicants were former asylum seekers from countries currently at war or characterized by internal conflicts such as Sudan and Sierra Leone. These people do not feel safe without a Dutch passport.

The languages most often indicated by the applicants as their mother tongue were consecutively: Dari, spoken in Afghanistan, Kurdish, spoken in Iraq and Turkey and Arabic. Fula, spoken in the western African nation of Guinea, came fifth in the list.

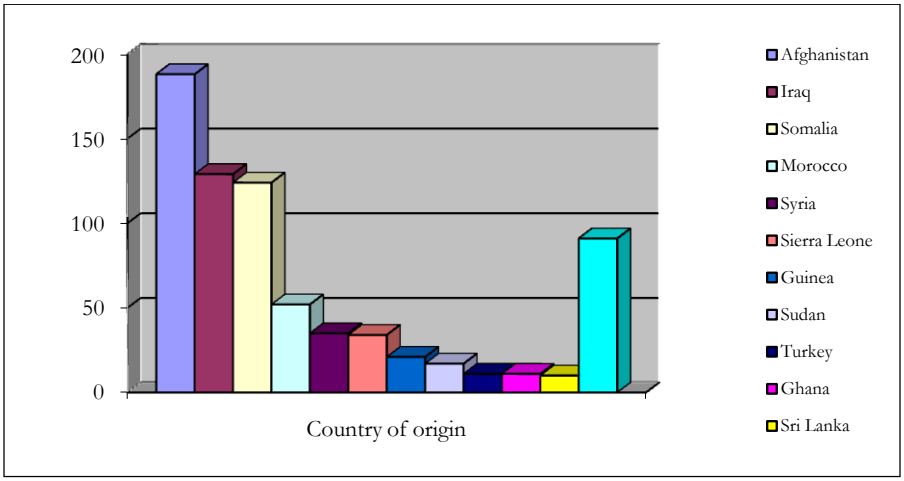

Figure 3: Number of applicants by country of origin (right bar indicates all other countries)

The age of the applicants judged as 'not feasible' varied from 20 to 85 years old, with a mean age of 39.3. The majority of these applicants (80%) were younger than 50. From Sierra Leone, Guinea, Turkey and Ghana no applicant was older than 50. As can be seen in Figure 4, applicants from Sierra Leone and Guinea were younger than those from the other countries. This difference turned out to be significant ($p < .05$). Whereas the mean age was 39.3, the mean age of applicants from Sierra Leone and Guinea was 25.8. They may have been child soldiers or victims of very

traumatic events, as can be deduced from personal communication with the applicants.

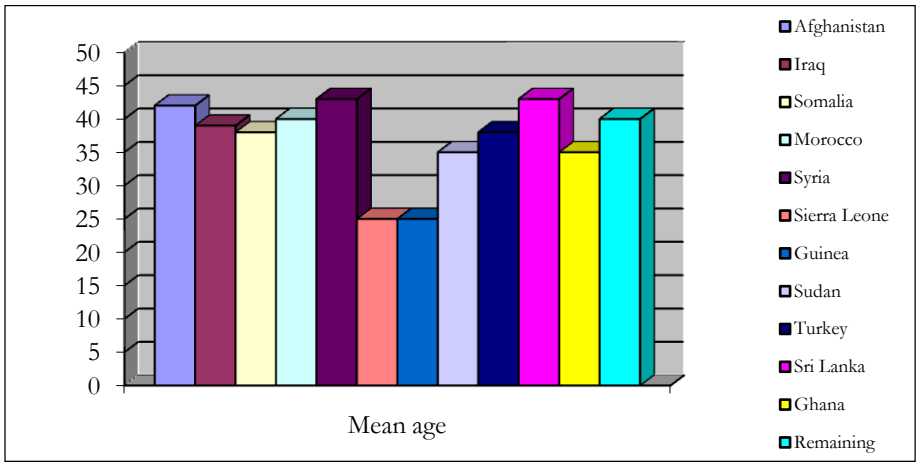

Figure 4: Mean age of applicants per country (listed from left to right)

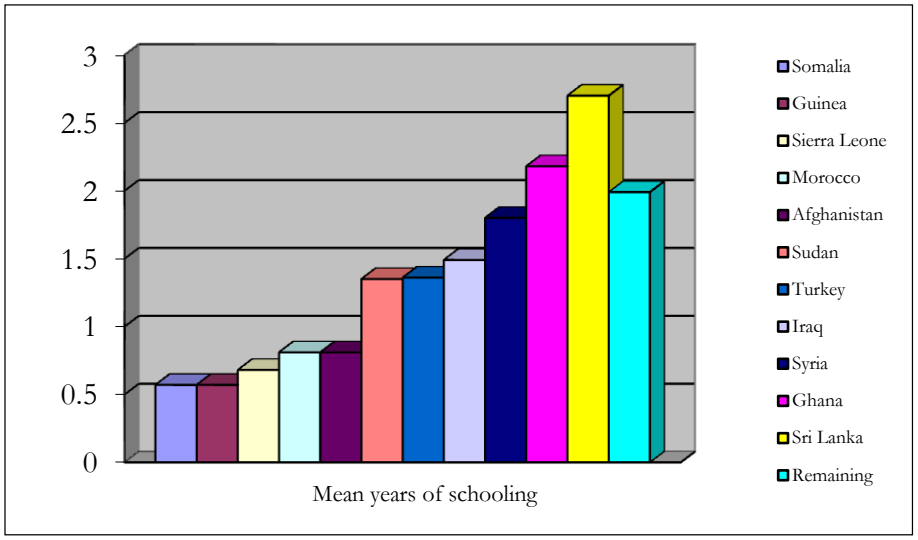

Fig. 5: Years of education in country of origin

The data from the feasibility assessment also provides us with a view on the level of education in the various countries of origin (see Figure 5). In many of these countries, there are great differences in the levels of education between men and women. The 479 women in our data collection on average had had 0.96 years of education, the 244 men had had 1.49 years (a significant difference: $p<.05$). The mean number of years in primary school is given in Figure 5, with Somalia and Guinea showing the lowest mean number (0.58 years) and Sri Lanka the highest(2.7 years).

3.2 *Results for reading and writing*

At the beginning of the Dutch literacy course, all applicants had a zero level for Roman alphabet and no or some knowledge of another script. At the moment of the assessment, the same applicants had attained a proficiency level below A1 on average, more precisely, a literacy level (note that this is a sublevel of the CEF level A1) between level A and halfway level B (see Figure 1 for the various levels), not the required A2 level. Since we know the time of the start of the learning process we can compute how many hours it took for this result to be attained.

Table 7: Time necessary for attaining literacy level A/halfway B

Group	Number	Mean number of hours	Standard deviation (SD)
Men	233	1429	1341
Women	455	1320	742
Total	688	1357	987

As shown in Table 7 the mean number of hours of instruction is high, the variation within the group is also high (see standard deviation) and the skills they have mastered are very modest. What learners know at level A roughly is: decoding simple CVC words and some sight words, while at level B they can read and write longer words with (consonant) clusters as well. The latter, however, has not yet been attained by any of the applicants.

For reasons of comparison with the previous study we have computed the time allotted to reading and writing in hours of instruction and split up the literacy learners according to the proficiency level (A, B, and C according to the Literacy Framework, which are sublevels of the CEF level A1) they attained for reading and writing. The overview of the results can be found in Table 8.

Table 8: Time allotted (learning load) to reading and writing

Level attained	N	Mean hours	Range
Study 1			
Literacy level A	71	842	103-2786
Literacy level B	40	1011	103-3870
Literacy level C	33	867	155-2150
Study 2			
Literacy level A/halfway B	688	1357	80-5400

If the results of the two studies are compared, it becomes clear that the learners of study 2 need more time (with a wider range) to reach a less high level. Their learning load is much higher. What might be the cause of this difference between average literacy learners and those who apply for dispensation regarding the requirements for naturalization?

As far as language education is concerned, the teacher characteristics in principle are not different from those in study 1, and neither is the course material (or so at least one might conclude on the surface). However, a closer look at the basic course material used and reported by the teachers and the education centres does reveal some differences. We divided the answers into the following categories:

(i) course material for teaching how to read and write, (ii) material for teaching how to read and write and teaching Dutch as a second language intended for literate learners as well, (iii) material focused on teaching Dutch only, (iv) any other course material without a special focus. The results of this inventory are given in Table 9.

Table 9: Overview of the focus in course material used in L2 literacy classes

Course material focused on	Study 1	Study 2
Reading and writing	69%	36%
Reading and writing and Dutch as L2	17%	**32%**
Dutch as L2 only	0%	**21%**
Other course material	6%	5%
Unknown	4%	6%

The most striking fact that can be derived from Table 9 is that 21% of the learners in Study 2 probably did not get the right course material. Instead, they worked with textbooks in printed form compiled for learning Dutch, rather than materials aimed at learning to read and write for the first time. As a result, the materials were too difficult for people with less than a literacy level B. Moreover, the 32% of the learners in Study 2, who worked with a mixture of literacy material and Dutch as a Second Language (DSL) textbooks (maybe for developing the oral skills) were unable to read these books well enough to profit from what was presented and taught in the lessons.

Summarizing Study 2, we can say that mainly former asylum seekers from countries that are involved in a war inside or outside their borders apply for dispensation and take the feasibility test because they cannot meet the requirements for naturalization. Study 2 also shows that the learning load for this group of learners is high, while the literacy level attained is low. The cause of these low results can, for a minority of the population, be attributed to traumatic experiences in the past (one of the hampering psychological factors in L2 learning) or to their high (advanced) age (cf. Abrahamsson & Hyltenstamm (2009) and Long (1990:251) for a relationship between age and L2 language skills). Another main cause, moreover, seems to be incorrect placement, whether at the beginning of the learning track (the level of literacy was incorrectly assessed; no or too little literacy material is used) or in the course of the track, for instance, when a student is moved up to the next class at a premature time.

4 *Conclusions*

The two studies presented here lead to two main conclusions. The first conclusion is that it takes most LESLLA learners many hours to attain a level in the use of the written second language that meets the standards of what might be called functional basic skills. It is probably safe to conclude that a small group of fast learners can attain level A1 of the Common European Framework within about 800 hours of instruction, that a larger group needs at least the same amount of time to attain literacy level A, and that the average literacy student needs about 900 hours to attain literacy level B. It is important to add that the individual variation is tremendous and that, therefore, the idea of introducing a benchmark for L2 literacy tracks (with all kinds of implications for funding) does not seem to work very well. A better implication for educational practice might be that teachers need to adapt

their teaching to the students' potential and challenge the faster students so that they do not have to wait for more slowly progressing students. It comes as no surprise that those students that applied for dispensation to get a Dutch passport needed even more time than the numbers mentioned above to attain a very low literacy level, partly because they had learning disabilities or because the materials they got were not well-tailored to literacy learners, and perhaps partly because their traumatic experiences hampered the learning process. However, the studies also show strong indications that literacy and second language teaching of LESLLA learners can be improved.

Secondly, it turns out that the most promising educational measures to improve literacy teaching and learning seem to be all those measures that keep the students active and involved every minute of their time: working on the computer, in small groups or individually, always attending classes and always doing their homework, stimulating all possibilities of contact with speakers of Dutch and using a portfolio to keep both teacher and student alert and aware of what has been achieved or still has to be learned.[14] Besides this, as the second study implies, literacy learners need teaching materials tailored to what they have to learn first and foremost, which is to read and write, and to prevent them from working with materials that presuppose well established literacy skills.

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[14] As one of reviewers noted, the Right to Work requirement which applies to US refugees from shortly after their arrival (i.e. they must seek work while they are still settling in) would be a form of active language learning.

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