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# THE RED BOOK: A ROLE-BASED PORTFOLIO FOR NON-LITERATE IMMIGRANT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Annemarie Nuwenhoud, Impuls and University of Amsterdam

## Abstract

The Red Book is a portfolio that shows the development of LESLLA-learners. It is also used as teaching material. And thirdly, it can serve as an exam portfolio. The content of the Red Book is based on the roles that the students have in everyday life. They make it themselves, by drawing, colouring, pasting pictures and writing words in their Red Book. This turned out to be empowering for LESLLA learners. This article describes the setup and use of the Red Book portfolio in the former adult literacy program of a school in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The Red Book portfolio can be applied in other adult literacy projects and classroom contexts as well. Some suggestions for the use of the Red Book portfolio in other contexts are being made, as well as a few recommendations for research.

**Keywords:** portfolio, LESLLA learners, empowerment, drawing and literacy, creative expression and literacy.

## 1. Introduction

In 2011, I taught a class of non-literate immigrant women with little to no experience with formal education. The majority of the women in my class had been living in the Netherlands for over 10 years, yet they spoke and understood very little Dutch, below CEFR level A1 (Council of Europe 2001). Many of them led isolated and inactive lives and struggled with health issues such as migraine and obesity. They had low self-esteem and were ashamed of their lack of education. We started to work on the themes closest to their own world: my family, my house, my street. At a later stage we worked on themes that were based on the roles the students had in daily life, such as a patient and a mother. I developed a portfolio that was role-based and tailor-made to their needs:

- empowerment,
- practical language learning and literacy,
- a visual exam portfolio that would exempt them from the obligatory Dutch Integration Exam.

I found large, red sketchbooks with thick drawing paper. They were solid enough for our students. Every lesson, the women filled their sketchbook with colourful drawings, photographs and pictures about the theme of the lesson. The students called this sketchbook '*het Rode Boek*', the Red Book. Working in the Red Book helped them to process and memorise the curriculum. They were very proud of the result. At the oral exam at the end of the year, they could talk surprisingly well about what they had learned, because they had their Red Book portfolio to look at together with the examiner. Just looking at their own drawings and pictures made them remember and gave them confidence to talk about everything they had learned. The Red Book showed the development of the students in their year at school. It was also used as teaching tool. We looked at the book together and read in it, to repeat and reflect on what we had learned so far. And at last, it was being used as the exam portfolio.

In this article, I will describe the set up and use of the Red Book portfolio in our adult literacy program. The Red Book portfolio can be applied in other adult literacy projects and classroom contexts as well. Some suggestions for the use of the Red Book portfolio in other contexts are being made. And finally, I will offer a few recommendations for research.

## 2. Background and context

### **The adult literacy program in Amsterdam**

The Netherlands used to have a government-sponsored adult literacy program that enabled non-literate DSL (Dutch as a Second Language) learners to go to school for up to five years. However, the results were disappointing; in Amsterdam, over 60% of the students did not reach full literacy. Their proficiency level remained insufficient to continue their education in the official Dutch integration program. The department of Education and Integration of the Amsterdam City Council was confronted with budget cutbacks at the same time (Dalderop 2010).

Therefore, the department of Education and Integration of the City Council organised an expert meeting in 2010. They collaborated with centres for LESLLA education in Amsterdam and LESLLA experts in the Netherlands, and developed a new literacy program. This new program was much shorter than the previous one and provided a tailor-made literacy course for different types of learners. Students were tested on their learning abilities and proficiency level for reading, writing and the oral skills. After the first three months of classes, the school assessed the progress of the student, and gave a final advice on which program the student could follow.

Fast learners were enabled to follow up to two and a half years of schooling. The focus of this program was on literacy and (parts of) the official Dutch Integration Exam. Some very talented students managed to pass the complete Integration Exam on CEFR level A2 within a year and a half, but most of them needed the extra year to pass the most difficult parts of this exam. <sup>1</sup>

### **The participation program for 'slow' learners<sup>2</sup>**

For a large group of learners, it was found to be unrealistic that they could pass the Integration Exam within one and a half year or two and a half years, if ever. These learners, who made a very modest progress in acquiring both the oral skills and reading and writing, were offered a different kind of literacy program. They went to school for one year, where the focus lied on social participation and practical language and literacy for daily life. This program was called the 'participation program'. Students went to class twice a week. Once a week they engaged in another activity, such as sports, field trips and practical assignments, computer lessons or volunteer work (Dalderop 2010). This article focuses on this particular group of 'slow' learners within the Amsterdam literacy project.

### **Type of learners**

The students in my class had no first language literacy. They were mothers and housewives with an average age of 45. Most had three to seven children. The majority of the students struggled with health problems that were related to an inactive lifestyle, such as diabetes, obesity, chronic fatigue and pain, or high blood pressure. Students had been living in the Netherlands for quite a while, with an average of ten years, some even up to 25 years. They had a low level of speaking and understanding Dutch (below A1 of the CEFR). Many led isolated lives, within their own closed community. Before the start of the classes, the department of Education and Integration of the Amsterdam City Council tested the students on their learning ability. Based on the results of the test and the profile of the students, it was expected that these students would not reach full literacy within a year. Therefore, they were placed in the participation program.

### **Goal of the participation program**

The goal of the participation program was to increase the social participation and self-supportiveness of the students. The program aimed to improve the level and the frequency of speaking and understanding Dutch in daily life. The literacy classes were focused on improving basic reading and writing skills for daily life use, such as:

- understanding an appointment card for the doctor;
- recognizing their name and address on the mail;

- correctly copying their full name and date of birth on forms;
- recognizing the names and numbers of the buses and trams and on street signs.

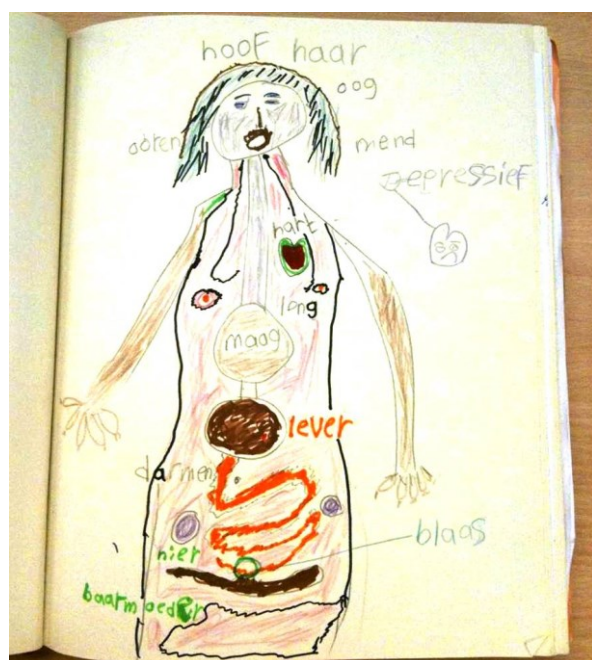
The activities outside of the school played an important role in achieving these goals.

**Content of the program: bottom-up or top-down?**

The Amsterdam City Council required that students would engage in some form of participation. The idea was that you learn more Dutch if you use it and hear it around you. Volunteer work was considered to be an important aspect of the program. Also, the principle of reciprocity played a role here. If you get a government sponsored literacy program for free, you should give something back to society in return, such as helping out in the community centre or at a home for the elderly. Students with a job were exempted from this duty.

However, the students in my class were still a long way from doing volunteer work. The students were all housewives and most of them had no immediate ambition to work outside the home. They primarily wanted to be in a classroom with a book, a pencil and a teacher. The value and usefulness of doing volunteer work were not always recognised. They did want to become more active. Instead of doing volunteer work, they were allowed to choose activities such as sports and computer classes. Together with the group, they made field trips. They also did assignments outside the classroom in small groups.

When asked about their learning goals, students made clear that they longed for more self-supportiveness and independence from their husbands and children. They wanted to be able to talk to their doctor themselves and to understand what their child's teacher told them. Figure 1, for example, shows a drawing of the female body with organs, that one of the students made in her Red Book. She and her classmates wanted to know where the organs in the body are situated and what they are called in Dutch. The subject of depression came to discussion in the same lesson. The students described it as a form of illness 'in the head'. That is why this student also wrote the word 'depressed' at the right side of the head, accompanied by small drawing of a sad face (see Figure 1).



Translation of the words  
written in Figure 1

Hoof(d)	Head
Haar	Hair
Oog	Eye
Oren	Ears
Mond	Mouth
Depressief	Depressed
Hart	Heart
Long	Lung
Maag	Stomach
Lever	Liver
Darmen	Bowel
Nier	Kidney
Blaas	Bladder
Baarmoeder	Uterus

Figure 1: Drawing by one of the students on the theme my health, learning the organs

### **The roles of our learners in everyday life**

The content of the Red Book portfolio is based on the roles that the students have in everyday life. The majority of the women in this class lived in their own Moroccan or Turkish community and had little contact with Dutch speaking citizens. Table 1 gives an overview of the roles of the students and the language they needed in each specific role.

As shown in Table 1, the students did not need the Dutch language in all of their roles. They did their groceries in Turkish and Moroccan supermarkets. Their social contacts were mainly family members and neighbours from the same country. They spoke their own language to their husbands and children. Only in the roles of 'patient' and 'mother' the students really needed to speak and understand the Dutch language.

Table 1: *Overview of the social roles and the language needed in a specific role*

Role	Language needed
Housewife	L1 Example: - Doing groceries
Neighbour	L1 and Dutch Examples: - Introducing yourself to a new neighbour - Small talk with the neighbours: "How are you?", about the weather, etc. - Asking for help or helping the neighbours
Patient	Dutch Examples: - Making an appointment - Communicating with the doctor - Knowing about the human body, healthy lifestyle, and the Dutch healthcare system
Mother	L1 and Dutch Examples: - Interacting with children: playing, singing, talking - Understanding written communication with the school - Knowing about the Dutch education system - Communicating with the teacher of the children

### **Need for teaching materials and another literacy portfolio**

In the Netherlands, we have good teaching materials and a portfolio for adult literacy learning. The portfolio is based on the framework for literacy in DSL (Stockmann 2006). However, in this relatively short and low-budget participation program, the goal was no longer to reach full literacy. Moreover, many of the learners were not likely to reach full literacy. When tested, they would not even reach the lowest level of the framework, level Alfa A. Students in the participation program did make progress, but the results were too small to be measured by the existing framework. It was necessary to find another form of showing the result of the program at the exam. The goal of the program was to increase the social participation and self-supportiveness of the students. Students would still work on the development of their reading and writing skills, but this was no longer the main goal of the program. Therefore, the need arose for tailor-made teaching materials for practical, daily life language and literacy.

Experience has learned that non-literate learners need sturdy teaching materials. In our program, teachers were prone to produce all kinds of stencils in folders about the themes we worked on. Although these materials were adequate, they would often get lost or damaged. Students at this level were not used to handle folders with loose papers. I found large, red sketchbooks with thick drawing paper. They were solid enough for our students and they could be filled with everything that we needed.

At the same time, we were looking for visual teaching materials for empowerment. The students in the participation program often had low self-esteem. We needed a visual and tailor-made portfolio to show the progress of our learners. There was also the demand from the City Council for a portfolio for the final oral exam at the end of the year.

### **3. Functions and use of the Red Book portfolio**

One of the advantages of working with a portfolio in adult literacy education is that it stimulates learner autonomy. LESLLA learners often do not have this autonomy yet. On top of that, LESLLA students in one class are usually very different from each other in background, language needs and aptitude. Therefore, the teacher has to differentiate. The learner, on his turn, has to become aware of his own learning needs and responsible for his own learning. The use of a portfolio facilitates both class differentiation and learner autonomy (see Feldmeier this volume).

The use of a portfolio in DSL education is widespread in the Netherlands. Along with the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a portfolio for second language learners was made. Soon, a Dutch adaptation of this European portfolio followed. However, the portfolio for DSL learners proved to be too difficult and too abstract for LESLLA learners. (Janssen – Van Dieten 2006). So a new portfolio especially for literacy in DSL was developed (Stockmann 2006). This portfolio has both a pedagogic-didactic function and a reporting function. Adult learners gain insight in what they are learning and in what they want to learn. This makes them more independent from the education they receive. Also, working on the portfolio invites the involvement of the outside world into education. Learners collect evidence in the form of samples of their work which show what they can do and what they have learned. This is the reporting function of the portfolio. Working with a portfolio with LESLLA learners is only effective when it is entirely tailored to the needs of the learner (ibid.)



In the participation program, the Red Book portfolio has three functions. First, it shows the progress of the student throughout the year (developmental portfolio). Second, it is used as teaching material (teaching portfolio). Third, the Red Book portfolio has a reporting function: it plays an important role at the oral examination at the end of the year (exam portfolio).

### **Development portfolio**

The Red Book portfolio shows the progress of the learner in several respects:

- knowledge of themes
- vocabulary
- writing skills
- self-esteem and empowerment

As mentioned before, LESLLA learners often struggle with low self-esteem and feelings of shame about their poor literacy. It makes it even harder to go through the slow process of becoming literate as an adult. Therefore, empowerment of the learner is an important goal in the classroom. In the Red Book portfolio, learners make drawings and write words and sentences (if possible) to become aware of who they are, what is important to them and what they are proud of. Below, five photographs of pages from the Red Book that are related to empowerment are shown.

Figure 2 shows a self-portrait of one of the students. Making a self-portrait was an empowering thing to do. I made them aware of who they were. Figure 3 shows the drawing a student made of her family. It shows her house and garden, with her eight children (four girls in red and four boys in green). In the centre, we see her husband. She drew herself on the right side. The family had great value for the students and it made them proud to picture them in their portfolio. In Figure 4 we see a list that a student wrote about who she is. This list was the result of a group conversation in class about their qualities. The list was written down on the blackboard with help of the teacher, and then copied in the Red Book. The drawing and text in Figure 5 is about what this student is good at and proud of. This page was also the result of a group conversation. The students were proud to be good housewives and mothers.

After discovering what they were good at, the students thought about what they wanted to become better at. Students set their own learning goals, such as writing their address or making an appointment with the doctor. Throughout the school year, it proved to be empowering for the students to make their own book. They were very proud of having their personal book and enjoyed working in it.

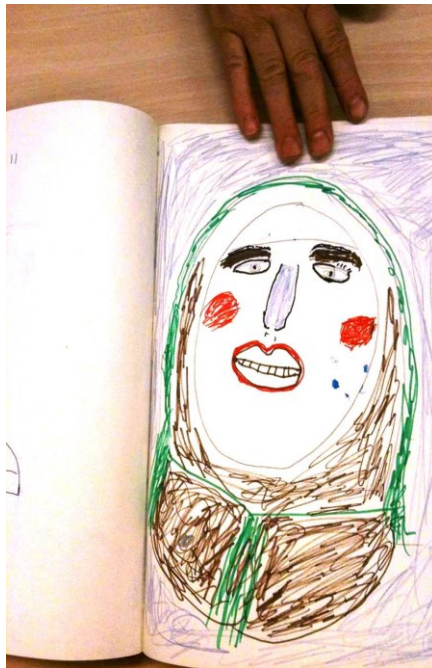


Figure 2: *Empowerment with the Red Book portfolio: This is me (self-portrait)*



Figure 3: *Empowerment with the Red Book portfolio: This is my family*

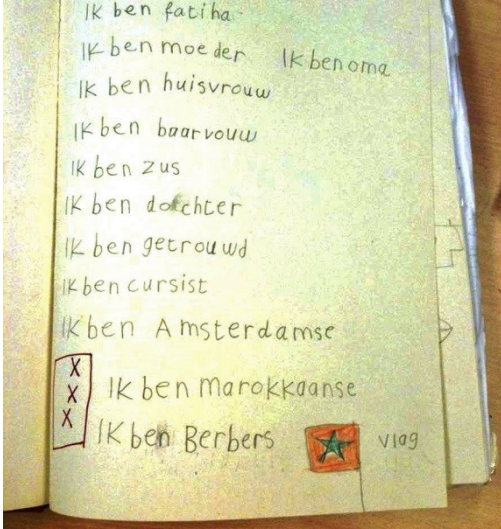
	Ik ben Fatiha	I am Fatiha
	Ik ben moeder	I am a mother
	Ik ben oma	I am a grandmother
	Ik ben huisvrouw	I am a housewife
	Ik ben baarvrouw	I am a neighbour
	Ik ben zus	I am a sister
	Ik ben dochter	I am a daughter
	Ik ben getrouwd	I am married
	Ik ben cursist	I am a student
	Ik ben Amsterdamse	I am Amsterdammer
	Ik ben Marokkaanse	I am Moroccan
	Ik ben Berbers	I am Berber

Figure 4: Empowerment with the Red Book portfolio: Who am I?

### Teaching portfolio

The Red Book portfolio was also used as teaching material. When we worked on a theme with the group, the students made a page in their Red Book about it at the end of the class. It was their preference to work in the Red Book together, as a group. Every student made her own page, often with drawings and a summary of what had been discussed in the lesson. Some students wanted to copy the drawing the teacher made on the whiteboard, others made their own drawing. By use of the Red Book, students trained several skills both in class and at home, such as:

- memory,
- vocabulary,
- the use of a book for looking up information.



Maandag 24  
januari 2011

Monday,  
January 24,  
2011

Les 7 Lesson 7

Ik ben een goede I am a good  
huisvrouw housewife

Trots Proud

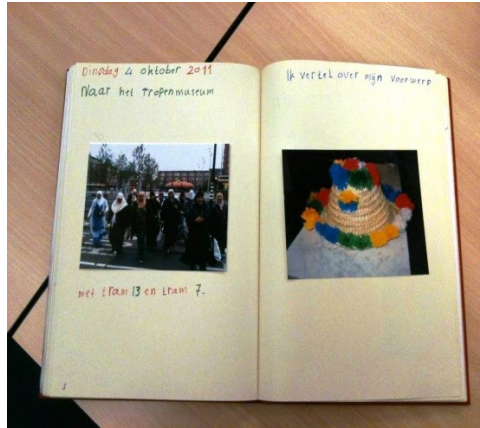
Netjes Tidy, decent

Schoon Clean

€ Zuinig € Economical €

Figure 5: Empowerment with the Red Book portfolio: What am I good at?

With this level of students, repetition of the themes and the vocabulary was essential. Students got tasks with the Red Book, alone or in small groups and presented the results to the class. An example of a task with the Red Book portfolio is found in Figure 6. This student previously made a page about a field trip to a museum. The task was to find back the page about the field trip and tell the group what we had done that day. Figure 7 shows another example of a task. This student had previously made a plan of her neighbourhood. It shows her street, her house, the bus lines and three important buildings in front of her house (the mosque, the police station and the supermarket). The task was to find this page in her book and tell the group about it.



	Translation
Dinsdag 4 oktober 2011	Tuesday, October 4, 2011
Naar het Tropenmuseum	To the museum of the Tropics
Met tram 13 en tram 7	With tram 13 and tram 17
Ik vertel over mijn voorwerp	I tell about my object

Figure 6: Find 'October 4' and tell the group what we have done that day.

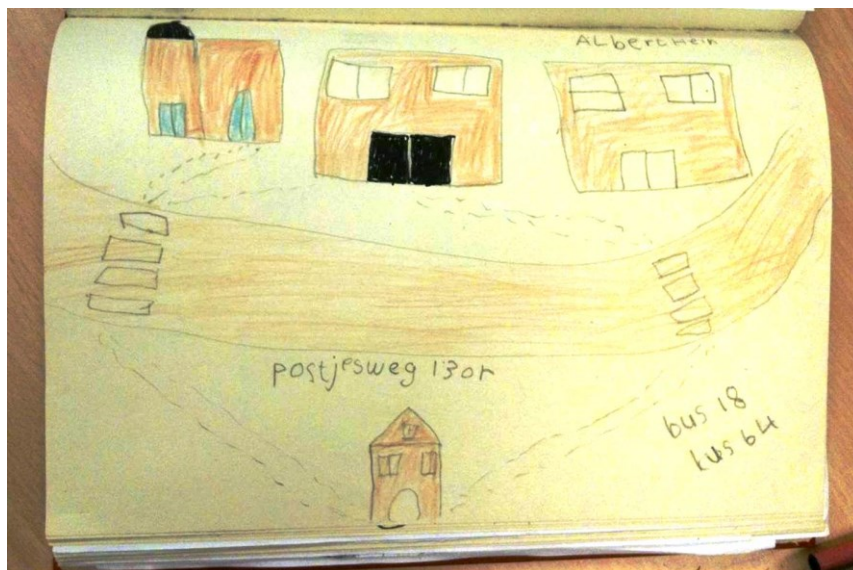


Figure 7: Task: Find the page with your street and tell the group about it.

### The Red Book portfolio as an exam portfolio

All students in the participation program had to make an exam portfolio. The oral exam at the end of the year was about the exam portfolio. Depending on the proficiency level of the students, the oral exam was taken at level A1 or A2. The

examining board consisted of two people: a teacher and a certified examiner. The exam took about 30 minutes. After an informal introduction, the student was asked to tell the examiners about three out of the ten situations in which the candidate had communicated in Dutch. Next, the student could tell about other things (s)he had learned.

Examination of slow learning, non-literate students used to be problematic. The previous exam measured if full literacy was reached. Since this was not the case with 60 % of the students, the impression rose that 60 % of the students had failed. This was very disappointing and discouraging for both the students, the teachers, the school and the City Council. Students were unable to show that they had actually learned many things, but at their own modest level and at their own pace.

Also, LESLLA learners often feel intimidated and shy in a formal exam setting. This prevents them from showing their full potential. Moreover, the topics discussed at the oral exam were often too abstract without visual support. The Red Book portfolio gave students the visual support they needed. At the oral exam, they could talk surprisingly well about everything they had learned, because they had their Red Book portfolio to look at together with the examiner. Just looking at their own drawings and pictures, made them remember and confident to talk about everything they had learned.

In consultation with the Amsterdam City Council and the other three schools that carried out the literacy program, the minimum requirements of the exam portfolio were decided. We also developed a checklist for the teachers and a simple standard form for the portfolio that the students had to fill out, alone or with help. The minimum requirements of the exam portfolio were:

- The exam portfolio contained at least ten forms that show evidence of the student using the Dutch language in a practical situation. For example:
  - I have talked Dutch with the doctor;
  - I have talked Dutch with the teacher of my child;
  - I have listened to my neighbour who talked Dutch;
  - I have written my name and address on a form.
- The exam portfolio contained at least six forms that show evidence of the student speaking Dutch (in the other situations the student had been listening, writing or reading);
- The conversations have been held in at least four different domains, for example:
  - My health
  - My children
  - Public transport

- Public institutions
- My neighbourhood
- My education.

At our school, I integrated this exam portfolio in the Red Book. A separate folder with loose forms would probably have gotten lost or damaged and would have had less meaning to the students. Towards the end of the year, the student, with help of the teacher, chose ten pages in the Red Book portfolio that (s)he wanted to talk about at the exam. The teacher made sure that they fitted the criteria of the portfolio. The checklist and the official forms were added. The examining board received a copy of the relevant pages. This way, the student kept the Red Book portfolio and brought it to the exam. After a year, the Red Book portfolio had become an important personal document the students were proud of.

#### **4. Results and application of the Red Book portfolio in other settings**

I developed the Red Book portfolio for a class of non-literate women in 2011. During that year, I also implemented it in other classes at the same school. Between January 2011 and December 2014, the Red Book portfolio has been used in about fifteen groups at the literacy project of the Impuls Foundation<sup>3</sup>. In this period, over 200 students took part in the participation program of this school in the West of Amsterdam.

These 200 students passed their oral exam at level A1 and sometimes at level A2. This oral exam exempted them from the obligatory Dutch Integration Exam. With the support of their Red Book portfolio, the students now enjoyed taking the exam, while taking an exam used to be a stressful and embarrassing experience for many of them. Students were better able to show the examiners what they had learned. When a student saw a page with cut outs of healthy foods for example, it made them remember that a dietician had visited the class. The student could explain which foods are healthy, and which are unhealthy. Without this visual support, having a conversation at level A1 about healthy lifestyle, would probably have been too abstract.

Using the Red Book at the oral exam actively and enthusiastically, showed that the students had grasped the value and use of a book: it contains information that matters. You can look it up when you want to know more about it or when you need to talk about it. Even when you are not likely to ever reach full literacy.

### **The application of the Red Book portfolio in other settings**

The Red Book portfolio can be applied in other settings than the program that is described in this article. It could be valuable for the LESLLA learner that by and large fits the following description. The LESLLA learner:

- is an emergent learner;
- has little or no first language literacy;
- is a slow learner for whom existing exams and portfolios are too difficult;
- has very little reading and writing skills in the L2 (below level 'Alfa A');
- needs to build basic L2 vocabulary;
- needs visual support to learn words;
- needs to become familiar with the use and function of books.

### **Choice of the content**

The content of the Red Book portfolio should always be based on the roles that the students have in daily life. In my class, the most relevant roles were mother and patient. In another class, students were employees or looking for a job. There were also students who had just arrived in The Netherlands and wanted to know how to get around in Amsterdam. Often, the students in one class have different roles. The Red Book portfolio is suitable for differentiation: not everyone in class had to do the same thing on the same proficiency level.

The 'arts' that are being used also should be adapted to the talents and affinity of the learners. The women in the participation program were enthusiastic about drawing, colouring, cutting and pasting. Even though they considered their own drawings childish and silly, they had fun when making them and enjoyed showing them at the exam. Drawing and colouring is however not suitable for every type of student. Another class with male students did not like it at all. They found it embarrassing to make drawings. They were more comfortable with pasting photographs, timetables, forms and leaflets in their Red Book portfolio.

## **5. Recommendations for research**

### **Drawing and literacy**

When working with the Red Book portfolio, I noticed that there was a relationship between the literacy level and the drawings the students made. For students who had never been to school before, it was the first time they held a pencil in their hands. They drew very primitive figures of puppets, comparable



to the drawings of a three year old child. As their literacy and fine motor skills grew, their drawing skills evolved as well. Students who could already write some letters and read a few monosyllabic words, made more detailed and refined drawings. Their fine motor skills were already more developed.

It seemed that making drawings about the themes in the Red Book, helped the students with more than just their fine motor skills. I had the impression it helped them to understand the function of written language. The drawings in the Red Book referred to things that really existed in their own life: my family, my house, my street. And so did the words that accompanied the drawings. The book they made, contained information about real life. Students who made drawings in their Red Book, seemed to be more aware of this notion than students who hadn't.

One could also imagine how the brain makes more connections when literacy is combined with drawing. It would be interesting to investigate the precise effect of drawing on the development of literacy of adult learners.

### **Creative expression, motivation and empowerment**

Making a book with drawings, pictures and photographs was a form of creative expression that empowered and motivated our students. For the first time in their lives, they made their own book. The book was about them and they liked what was in it. They treated their Red Book as a valuable object.

Teachers often report about the surprising enthusiasm of their LESLLA learners about creative expression. Projects with creative writing (Drijkoningen & Borgesius 2014), making a book or a film, seem to have a very positive effect on the motivation and empowerment of LESLLA learners. It could be interesting to investigate the effect creative expression on the motivation and empowerment of adult literacy learners.

### **Notes**

- 1 A1 and A2 are proficiency levels described in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001).
- 2 Note that the term 'slow learner' in the Netherlands is a neutral label that refers to the fact that a certain group of LESLLA learners makes progress in literacy and language learning at a very modest pace. In the Dutch context the term 'slow learner' is not a sensitive term.
- 3 Impuls is a foundation for child care and social work that operates in the western neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. By commission of the City Council of Amsterdam, Impuls carried out the adult literacy program in these neighbourhoods from August 2010 until January 2015.

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