

# **Digital poetry for adult English learners with limited education: Possibilities in language learning, literacy development and interculturality**

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*Abstract: Studies on the role of digital technology in teaching and learning English tend to focus on secondary or higher education contexts and/or with literate or educated students. The recent global pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to advance digital equity and inclusion for adult learners with limited education and literacy. Despite their basic digital, language and literacy skills, classroom observations and studies have challenged stereotypes of this cohort of students' limited capacity for online learning (Pobega, 2020; Tour et al., 2021). This paper will discuss a digital literacy project which involved poetry writing using an online book creator app with adult learners with limited English print literacy skills. Moving beyond merely mastering the mechanics of digital technologies (Kern, 2015), this project was an exploration of how language classrooms can be set up as supportive spaces where adult English learners perform "social acts of meaning mediated by the creation of texts" (Bhatt, 2012). Drawing on their personal histories, the learners made connections with the people, events, and spaces, from their past and present, emphasising the need to focus on human connections in language learning and the development of digital literacy skills (Guillén et al., 2020). Through poetry as a familiar literary form, the project serves to expand and strengthen the epistemic contribution capability (Fricker, 2015) of English learners with limited education and print literacy skills.*

## **Introduction**

As literacy skills and becoming literate are highly valued in Western formal education systems (e.g., Marrero Colón & Désir,

2022), it is unsurprising that beginners' English language classes primarily focus on mastering basic reading and writing skills. Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are integral components of early literacy instruction (Peyton & Young-Scholten, 2020), particularly supporting additional language learning and developing literacy skills for adult students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Consequently, the expectations of academic and written output in these beginning classes are often low, which then perpetuate negative stereotypes of adult English language learners and limits the possibilities for them to achieve higher levels of English literacy. In light of online learning during the pandemic and recent technology-driven advancements, developing literacy skills is even more pertinent in today's digital society. Based on sociocultural understandings of language and literacy, as "people participate in social and cultural practices of making meaning for real purposes" (Green & Beavis, 2012, p. 63), this article will present a digital literacy project which provided rich opportunities for developing language and literacy skills of beginning adult English language learners through digital poetry.

This paper begins with the background and context for undertaking a digital literacy project with an adult beginner English language class in Australia. Next, I will explore a strengths-based approach in the classroom, combining poetry with the use of digital tools and technologies to enhance the language and literacy skills of adult English language learners with emergent print literacy. Finally, I will discuss the process and results before concluding with implications or recommendations for application in the adult migrant language classroom or further exploration in future research projects.

### **Learning English with adult beginner learners in Australia**

This digital literacy project was undertaken with a beginners' class in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), an English language tuition program freely provided in Australia by the federal government to newly arrived migrants and humanitarian entrants. The recent reforms have removed the requirement for learners to complete the program within a specific timeframe or entry point, enabling them to progress to a vocational English level (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). Students in this class project were from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, Eritrea,

South Sudan, Nepal, China, Rohingya (Myanmar), the Philippines, and Brazil, and ranged from their early 20s to 60s. Our class survey revealed 15 languages represented in the classroom, with only two that used the Roman alphabetic system. Although some students were highly literate and well-educated in their home languages, there was a significant representation of adult SLIFE in our class, also called LESLLA (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults) learners, which reflects their growing presence in migrant language programs worldwide (Pentón Herrera, 2022). Impacted by globalisation and forced migration, LESLLA learners face the challenge of simultaneously learning a new language and developing literacy skills without foundational support from their home language(s) (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). LESLLA learners are often positioned as deficient in Eurocentric social structures and educational systems due to their limited years of formal education or ability to articulate their knowledge and experiences in the dominant language (Fricker, 2007). Negative stereotypes often influence the discourse and pedagogical practices around adult language learners with limited print literacy skills. They may be viewed as not capable of learning (Fricker, 2007) due to their “slow” progress with mastering print literacy skills, their unfamiliarity with the structure and expectations in formal education settings, and their limited skills and engagement with technology (in the dominant language).

At the time this digital literacy project was undertaken, I had just begun my doctoral studies and was interested in anchoring classroom practice with pedagogical theory (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In the second term of the school year, my students expressed their frustration and unpreparedness for online learning after the previous school term abruptly ended with emergency remote instruction (Hodges et al., 2020). While one or two students indicated that another family member had a computer or laptop at home, most of the class accessed online learning through their smartphones. When they returned from the two-week school holidays, our class discussion turned to the importance of digital literacy in everyday communication and lifelong learning (DiLitE Project, n.d.). The students decided they needed to further develop their digital literacy skills, from familiarising themselves with the keyboard (typing), sending emails, or discovering other smartphone applications and functions. These class discussions indicate that adult English learners with limited education and

literacy are cognisant of the role of digital technology in language learning (Pobega, 2020; Tour et al., 2021). Adult learners with basic digital, language and literacy skills also desire and have the capacity for online learning.

Rather than decontextualised tasks, “busy work,” or merely focusing on learning how to operate the tools in the computer room, I sought to frame this project, redirecting our focus on language, communication, and community. Based on a multifaceted “3D model of l(IT)teracy”, the following elements were considered in this project: operational (learning how to operate digital tools), cultural (using language in poetry and digital skills for pleasure and making meaning), and critical (exploration of social identities and values; and providing opportunities for both consumption and production of texts) (Green & Beavis, 2012, pp. 64-65). The project sought to capture learner-initiated interest in mastering digital literacy skills and provide learners with opportunities to access and create familiar literary forms on screen, which is the contemporary “dominant space of representation” (Green & Beavis, 2012, p.62). In formal education, learners typically receive orientation and guidance on a broad range of literary forms, such as narratives, poetry, and essays. As narratives and poetry transcend formal and print learning environments, the project aimed to honor and value students’ knowledge, memories, and experiences through these widely recognized forms of literature. The meaningful connections and interactions this project have generated in our classroom also reflect the sociocultural aspect of language learning.

### **Learning with a strengths-based approach**

As the class mainly consisted of LESLLA learners, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) checklist also provided a versatile frame for designing lessons and instruction (DeCapua & Marshall, 2022) that were responsive to learners’ knowledge, experience, and ways of knowing (Watson, 2019). Teachers can design instruction and learning using MALP, a “culturally responsive instructional model” applicable to learning systems across the lifespan (K-12 to adult education), to support SLIFE in their transition to formal education systems while honouring their linguistic and cultural knowledge (DeCapua & Marshall, 2022, p. 131). A culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) is especially pertinent in multicultural Australia, where a monolingual and monocultural ethos persists in its migrant English programs

(Cummins, 2007; Hajek & Slaughter, 2014; Schalley et al., 2015). The digital literacy project considered the following aspects from the MALP checklist: accepting conditions for learning, combining processes for learning, and focusing on new activities for learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2022). Firstly, working with our immediate conditions for learning included responding to students' initiative to familiarise themselves with technology; acknowledging and building on the strengths of learners' oral cultures; recognising poetry as an art and literary form, as well as a tool for imparting knowledge in various cultures; and connecting our lived experiences with the text from the reader series we were currently discussing. Next, I ensured the learners had opportunities to share and take individual responsibility in the processes for learning in the project. Given that some students had limited print and digital literacy skills, oral interaction was necessary to scaffold the written component. Scaffolding included dialogic exchange and transcribing students' responses to the poetry prompts. Students' epistemic contributions based on their knowledge and experiences were also honoured through collaborative learning (DeCapua, 2016) and in the exchange of their stories in the target language (Rodrigues, 2018). This digital project aimed to use students' full linguistic repertoire by considering what they can do in their home languages, not just the target language. Finally, although we were focusing on new activities for learning, the poetry component was accessible based on familiar language and content from the reader series and students' lived experiences, while the digital literacy activities were integrated into the regular classroom routine (DeCapua & Marshall, 2022).

### **Learning new digital literacy skills**

Access to digital devices and network connectivity has been one of the greatest barriers in remote learning for many language learners and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bonar et al., 2021). However, the dimensions of digital equity and educational inclusion must extend access (Resta et al., 2018) to meaningful, high-quality, and culturally relevant content in local languages; creating, sharing, and exchanging digital content; educators who know how to use digital tools and resources; and high-quality research on the application of digital technologies to enhance learning (p. 991). The various digital tools used in the project - smartphones, tablets, and computers - reflect the reality of everyday digital communication as seen and experienced in the

learners' daily interchanges. Our class discussion on the integral role of digital tools in everyday and transnational communication (DiLitE, n.d.) is unsurprising, considering a number of refugee-background students navigated their journey and reoriented themselves to a new life in their host and settlement countries through their smartphones (UNCHR, as cited in Drolia et al., 2020). The UNCHR report detailed how mobile phones served as tools for orientation, accessibility to information, availability of aid services, availability of education and linguistic resources, word/phrase translation in home languages, admissibility to labour markets and entrepreneurship opportunities, communication with loved ones in their home country (and other locations), socialising with the local population and other refugees, money transfer, interactivity with the host government, volunteer coordination and self-help aid services (Drolia et al., 2020). Considering students' experiences with and use of mobile phones, teachers and support workers for adult English language learners must use strength-based approaches by identifying and using material, cultural, and social assets that support and develop students' digital literacy skills (Tour et al., 2021). Strengths-based approaches include examining the ways students use digital tools inside and outside of the language classroom (Darvin, 2016), and incorporating digital literacy activities in the classroom that involve processing input, producing output, and are centred on human connections (Guillén et al., 2020, p. 322).

The impetus for this digital literacy project came from the students initiating their desire to become more familiar with technological tools. In the same way that literacy is not only about decoding and encoding graphic signs on either page or screen, learning new digital literacy skills also extends to “performing social acts of meaning mediated by the creation of texts” (Bhatt, 2012, p. 290). Learning to operate the tools was only a part of the project, as we needed to focus more on what we do or make with these tools (Kern, 2015). Activities designed for mobile assisted language learning (MALL) have tended to be teacher-centred exercises where learners are limited to prompted feedback based on closed-item assessments (Pegrum, 2014). The challenge is to design activities where language learners can use digital tools to “access authentic target-language materials” (content), “produce language for an actual audience” (creation) and “solve problems and bridge communication gaps together in real-time” (communication) (Pegrum, 2014). Based on this understanding of

digital literacy, we began our project by accessing prior knowledge and foregrounding the project based on our collective understanding, experiences, and purpose for developing our digital literacy skills. Through the surveys, the class and small group discussions that followed, students articulated their learning goals in the classroom for out-of-school applications. These goals included identifying the tools they would like to familiarise themselves with, such as learning games or accessing online government services. We discussed how various digital tools enable communication with friends, families, and institutions such as our language school, their children's school, banks, or various government departments. We also discussed how our technological tools strengthen our connections to ourselves (identity), to the class (learning community), and our social networks (often beyond our local community). The learning activities for the project were chosen based on their potential to connect language learners to their environments and a much more diverse set of people, stories, and environments (Vanek, 2020). Thus, technology combined with poetry provided “new opportunities for representation, construction and performance of multiple identities” (Darvin, 2016, p. 525), and we noticed that language and literacy in English were not barriers to participation or contribution in our communities.

### **Using multimedia poetry with adult English language learners**

As English language learners often come from cultures whose knowledge and ways of knowing are not limited to the written word or the typical constraints of education in the classroom, there is a need to involve and integrate meaning-making through “storytelling, poetry, metaphor, myths, ceremonies, dreams and art” to engage and effectively support adult learners with emergent print literacy (Graveline, 2005, p. 308). While poetry can seem like a high form of literature, it is, in fact, an old and “beloved feature of oral cultural educational practice” (Watson, 2019, p. 217). Often committed to memory, elders and poets conveyed history and values to the community through poems using dramatic speech, “rhythmic qualities, repeated and formulaic expressions, and rhyme schemes” (Watson, 2019, p. 217). The role of poetry in developing students' language and literacy skills is often overlooked in the classroom. Pedagogical practices have been influenced by traditional approaches, which often involve decontextualized instruction and activities that focus solely on linguistic structure

and grammar (Mickan, 2023). Yet, poetry can provide purposeful, playful, and accessible opportunities for exploring language, words, and meaning (Beaumont, 2022). Using a ‘right-sized’ poem that is brief yet rich in content is manageable for adults with limited print literacy skills (Dutton & Rushton, 2021). Poetry in the English language learning classroom enables personal exploration and multimodal representation of language and identity and supports learners’ agency as they choose content from their memories and lived experiences to create poems (Dutton & Rushton, 2021). Poetry writing as an “interim discourse” also provides safety and latitude for English language learners to explore conventions of the language before moving to more “academic discourses” (Dutton & Rushton, 2021, p. 110), as demonstrated by select refugee-background students in primary and secondary schools in the UK (Assaf & Clanchy, 2018). Poetry offers opportunities to recognise and integrate learners’ languages, cultures, and lived experiences as rich funds of knowledge (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011) and pedagogical resources for learning (Bhatt, 2012; Burke & Hardware, 2015). The process of poetry writing encourages and promotes epistemological contribution (Fricker, 2015) from adult English language learners. Poetry writing then challenges deficit discourse perspectives and approaches and “help scholars and practitioners learn from and not merely about (adult English language learners)” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76).

### **Poems in process**

Throughout the various stages of poetry creation, which included sharing experiences through small groups, co-drafting the poem with the teacher, and then individually working with technology, there was targeted, scaffolded, and oral interaction interspersed with engagement with the written word. The process took place over the course of a ten-week school term, taking into account student attendance, curriculum requirements, and assessment periods. Based on our text, “A New Life” by Withers (2015), a story of a refugee resettling in Australia, our classroom discussion topics throughout the term centred around our names, languages, and childhood memories. The students found the text highly relatable as they faced the same struggles settling in a new country. Students who were literate in their home language(s) welcomed the challenge of reading the text independently, while it was primarily used as a read-aloud for the LESLLA learners. Since the



complex nature of narratives contain too many elements that could be a barrier for learners with limited literacy skills, creating poems based on a model narrative text was a more manageable and accessible approach to developing their literacy skills.

Literacy workstations are a regular part of our class routine as they provide space for independent work and collaborative learning through pair work, small group, or one-on-one time with a volunteer tutor or teacher. Throughout the term, the model narrative text was used as a regular read aloud to the class, but students also exercised their autonomy to read or do extension activities with a volunteer tutor at the literacy workstations. Midway through the term, I introduced and read aloud a couple of poems in small groups and touched on the different format or structures of the texts we were reading in class. A student showed they understood the concept of poetry by using gestures as if reciting a poem aloud. We highlighted the rich details from the poem 'I cannot remember my mother' by Rabindranath Tagore and noticed the sensory language in 'The Doves of Damascus' by Ftoun Abou Kerech (in Miller, 2019). By deconstructing the poems and discussing the sensory language and imagery used in our model poems, we gained an understanding of how careful choice of words helps our listeners or readers place themselves in the locations they were describing. Translanguaging was a key strategy used by students who could discuss and clarify the terms and concepts in their language with other students. Translanguaging, or using students' full range of linguistic repertoire or resources for communication, facilitates the exploration and discussion of poetry and provides support for writing in the English learning classroom (Dutton & Rushton, 2021; García & Kleifgen, 2020).

Selecting texts that are culturally relevant and cognitively appropriate for LESLLA learners is not an easy task. The model narrative and poetry texts in this digital literacy project were chosen as they were based on familiar language and content highly relatable to the learners' lived experiences. The model narrative text especially explores the experiences of a refugee-background student who describes her challenges journeying, settling, and adapting to a new language and country. Thus, the poems I selected included phrases about remembering a special place. When we tried to explain to a Syrian student the stylistic choice of the phrases "I do not remember" or "I sometimes remember," she protested with, "But I remember everything!" While sharing memories about a particular place is challenging as

most refugee-background students may have traumatic experiences during their journey, a culturally competent teacher creates a safe and trusting learning environment where learners can share their lived experiences (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The process of writing poems was not designed to “solicit trauma stories” but to provide a welcoming space to “receive them when they arrive” (Montero & Al Zouhouiri, 2022, p. 86). Poetry enabled the students to talk about their hometowns, focusing on positive memories rather than trauma stories (Montero & Al Zouhouiri, 2022). The laughter and excitement of two Arabic speakers in the class was evident as they started reminiscing about their childhood experiences, remembering scents, tastes, and events (from what I could gather from gestures accompanying the exchange of stories).

Oral interaction was an integral part of the scaffolding in the poetry writing process (DeCapua & Marshall, 2022). With students assigned to literacy workstations as a regular part of our class routine, I used this dedicated time in the project to focus on individual students, checking their understanding, and drafting together their poems. Co-creating and reviewing the poems took approximately two weeks. One student, whom I was sure would need more guidance in this activity, in fact, reflected on many significant memories: a landmark, landscapes, everyday scenes and special occasions that filled her mind. The contrast of social identities demonstrates her critical engagement with our model narrative text.

I cannot remember how many years have gone  
Since I smelled *abebe* on the roads of Addis Ababa  
Sometimes I remember eating delicious roasted corn  
Any time of the day  
The crabs on the beach  
The smell of fish  
That I just caught and cooked  
I am sure I remember climbing the big rock  
As a child and I can see all of the city  
The whole country  
I can see farms and a lot of trees  
I can see the sunflowers

I hear the people singing and dancing in my aunty's  
wedding

Now I don't dance at all

After we worked on the draft together and I read this poem to her, the recognition in her eyes was unmistakable. "I remember," she says, "I remember my country." Although still developing her print literacy skills and proficiency in the dominant language, her poem represented distinctive knowledge and perspective to contribute to our learning community.

With a more purposeful reason for using digital tools, students engaged more deeply in our weekly technology sessions. Later in the term, strong writers independently drafted their poems while I transcribed the initial draft for students with emergent print literacy skills. The students then typed their final drafts onto an online book publishing application using the class tablets. BookCreator (<https://bookcreator.com/>) allows students to read, create and publish multimodal books with a basic free account. The program is accessible on networked computers, tablets, or smartphones, but due to limited digital skills, tutor support, and time, we focused on the main task of typing their poems using the class tablets. Interestingly, students' logins to the application involved using QR codes (<https://www.qr-code-generator.com/>), which inadvertently gave practice for the students to use this technology required at the time for contract tracing purposes. The anthology was then collated and distributed in print and email, as well as providing time for students to read their poems to the class in the final week of the term. Publishing their poems online (<https://tinyurl.com/5fate6za>) and contributing to the anthology extended their participation in digital spaces beyond the classroom.

The resulting poems were highly personal statements beyond the formulaic descriptions of their country of origin. Mundane daily activities came to life. Furthermore, the poems promoted intercultural understanding and dialogic exchange, allowing our class to discover and discuss the similarities and differences between their cultures and others. Learners were positioned as experts of a specific locality, rather than a broader region or country, thereby leading to a stronger contribution to the learning environment and a more inclusive classroom. For example, we discovered customs such as the prohibition of selling and eating beef in Nepal. We marvelled at being able to watch the sunrise or the evening sky from roof gardens in Iraq. We reflected

on the importance of relationships, such as the student who remembers her mother washing her hair by the river and then braiding it in Eritrean style. Another student from China remembers flying kites he made with his father. An excerpt from another poem reinforces the centrality of food in relationships (commensality) in many of our cultures:

Sometimes I remember  
The noodle soup my mother cooked  
The chocolate ice cream I bought for my children  
Coffee and smoking and talking with my husband.

We learned about the role of pets or animals in students' childhood years, such as "riding baba's camel" or being made to "sleep with the chickens when I don't listen to her (grandmother)". Another student's poem, surprisingly, revolved around the domestic animals inside her home, extending to wildlife outside the safe confines of her home. She also subtly reveals the centrality of a water source in everyday life:

I am sure I remember...  
The elephants drinking in the Blue Nile  
Everybody swims in the river  
But be careful  
Don't get eaten by the crocodiles or the snakes

An incidental digital learning activity also resulted from students wishing to locate their hometowns on Google Earth. The multimodal maps provided additional images and videos they could show their peers. The students further established a solid connection to these physical spaces by describing in their poems: "the smell of bread from the bakery on my street" or "the smell of the ground when it rains". With diverse digital tools and applications explored in the project, we gained a deeper understanding of how technology can strengthen our connections to our identity, others in our learning community, and beyond our local community.

While we extended our understanding of language and literacy through the project, there were also considerable limitations. School terms in Australia average around ten weeks, and our AMEP classes run for about five to six hours a day for three days. Instruction time is then divided between the teacher

and, in most cases, a different tutor. Early literacy instruction alongside an assessment-driven pedagogy and curriculum (Pentón Herrera, 2022) tends to be the priority in the classroom. Additionally, as I did not share many of the languages in the classroom, the students needed to rely on each other and the translation applications on their smartphones for some of the concepts we discussed. However, taking the local context and students in the classroom into consideration, there are many possibilities for extending the learning activities in this digital literacy project. With sufficient time and resources, teachers can use poetry as a valuable tool for developing language and digital literacy skills of LESLLA learners.

### **Implications and recommendations**

This digital literacy project has shown that literacy activities need to incorporate purposeful, integrated, and contextualised activities. For this project, students needed to combine the operational, cultural, and critical elements of developing digital literacy skills (Green & Beavis, 2012). The project allowed students to learn and familiarise themselves with diverse digital tools for various purposes such as meaningful online typing practice (typing.com), mastering log-in and manipulating basic tools in the online book publishing program, negotiating meaning through their language translation applications, and navigating online maps. The project also allowed the exploration of two text types: narratives and poems. Students demonstrated varying levels of interaction with language and (digital) literacy, from reading, to designing and producing text using paper and screen mediums. Poetry writing required students to learn and understand the structure and language used in poetry, such as sensory language, rhythm, and repetition. Poetry acted as a medium of possibilities rather than a gatekeeper, with students not limited by their English proficiency or (digital) literacy skills. In addition, poetry allowed the exploration of social identities not bound by place or time. By fostering collaboration between students, teachers and tutors and working within the constraints of instruction time, material and personnel resources, and learners' language and digital literacy skills, the exploration of digital tools and poetry enabled students' identities to be honoured and positioned as an expert of a specific location. Poetry writing challenged and extended the stereotypical classroom-assigned language learner identity of adult learners with emergent print literacy. Further research or digital literacy

projects in the classroom can examine more closely the importance of strengths-based approaches that draw on learners' languages, lived experiences, knowledge, and ways of knowing. Future research projects can also explore how poetry writing as a digital literacy project can foster belonging and community, build intercultural competence, and encourage the participation of adult English learners with limited education in social spaces.

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