

A Digital Platform for Adult Beginners in North American English

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Summary: Adults with limited literacy face barriers to learning to read in a new language. To address resource scarcity, a UK-European team designed an autonomous learning platform.

Keywords: adults with limited literacy, digital materials, autonomous learning, drag and drop

Introduction

Approximately 773 million adults worldwide lacked basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2023). Some of these adults had little or no formal schooling in their home or another language, and some migrated to highly literate postindustrial societies. They face the challenge of acquiring a new language and developing literacy skills for the first time in that language. In a large-scale U.S. study, Condelli et al. (2003) note that these adult immigrants take up to eight times longer than their literate peers to acquire language and literacy skills in a new language. Research suggests that adults do not lose the ability to learn to read for the first time in adulthood (e.g., Young-Scholten & Naeb, 2010). One reason for slow progress could be a lack of materials designed expressly for this learner group. In recognition of this situation, a team developed beginning reading materials in digital form. From 2013 to 2015, experts in the Netherlands (Radboud University and Firda College) led a team from the Universities of Jyväskylä in Finland, Leipzig in Germany, and Newcastle in the UK to design materials for Finnish, with its highly transparent (regular) orthography; English, with its highly opaque (irregular) orthography; and Dutch and German, which fall in between.

In this article, I describe the Digital Literacy Instructor (known as DigLin) reading materials, how the team developed them, and the learners who use them. I close with a description of the recently launched North American version, which is free until the end of 2026.

The Digital Literacy Instructor

The starting assumption was that the target users had no reading skills in any language and minimal oral proficiency

skills. The DigLin team acknowledges that the profiles of those who fit into the limited- or no-literacy category are highly variable. However, those with such limited skills and knowledge clearly have the greatest need for materials designed for them. Moreover, the nature of the platform means that users can select what best suits them, including the appropriate skill level.

The team followed learning principles relevant to the use of digital materials, including user agency and independence, based on the premise that users - even those with little education or literacy - can develop individual strategies. DigLin provides the user with access to all materials at once. That is, there is no built-in route for using the materials. Feedback and performance tracking are visual and immediate.

The team began by gathering facts about the phonology and orthography of each language and agreeing on selection criteria for a set of 300 words for the materials. A key criterion was phonological simplicity: word selection started with less marked vowels and consonants (that is, sounds occurring in all languages) and involved single consonants and vowels, as shown in Table 1. The team considered frequency but abandoned it as a criterion because there was little systematic research on the words most frequent in these adults' lives; instead, the team relied on its own and practitioners' intuitions. Words were mostly nouns so that the photos used could easily show meaning. Monosyllabic words were favored, although this was only straightforward in English and not in the other three languages. Finally, orthography needed to be regular, a criterion most challenging for English. The English DigLin team was guided by the pioneering work of Vainikka (2013).

Table 1
Phonological and Orthographic Criteria as Applied Across the Project Languages

Dutch	German	English	Finnish
<p, t, k, m, n, b, d, l, r, s, v>	<l, m, n, f, g, r, s, sch>	<p, t, k, m, n, d, f, h, l, r, v>	<p, t, k, m, n, l, s>
<a, ie, oo>	Long <a, e, o> and <au>	<a> = /æ/	<i, u> <a, i, u>

The DigLin team for English divided words into 15 sets for the exercises shown in Table 2. Photos were attached to all the words, and the exercises were recorded by members of the team. The entire team then tested the materials in each

language with learners and their teachers at local language instruction providers in each country.

Table 2
DigLin Exercises

Exercise Description	Aim
List of 20 words, with photos, audio, and a soundbar	Learning the words
Drag and drop letters to words	Grapheme-phoneme correspondences
Drag and drop words to photos	Recognizing whole words
Listen to individual sounds and drag the word to the sounds	Auditory synthesis
Flashcards with dragging words to photos	Automatization of word recognition
Bingo	Speed of recognition
Listen and type	Automatizing grapheme-phoneme correspondences

As noted above, the exercises are not designed to be worked through in any particular order. The materials lend themselves to individual, pair, and group work.

DigLin Users

The role of the teacher has long been a sensitive issue in learners' use of digital materials. The concern is that teachers could be superfluous. The following remarks, personal communications from teachers of Dutch, indicate that teachers are essential in supporting users who are capable of developing their own strategies but may need various types of help.

"I point out the exercise the student is looking for, I do a final check, I provide worksheets that support students with specific help questions."

"Nine times out of ten a student who comes to me for the final check turns out to have mastered everything sufficiently."

"Because of the amount of material in DigLin+, students are often unable to find a suitable additional exercise entirely on their own, but because of the way the program gives feedback, they usually know where they need help."

In response to the need for and effectiveness of these digital materials, I have worked with various organizations and individuals to expand the materials from the original 225 activities to those shown in Table 3. This work includes

adding exercise types (Bingo, dictionary use, and stories) as well as more words and sentences.

DigLin has received several forms of recognition. In 2015, for example, the Danish version was awarded the LærdanskABC European Language Prize for "creative and innovative projects in language learning and teaching." In 2021, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning included DigLin in its LitBase database of effective literacy and numeracy practices (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). The program was also featured in a 2022 UNESCO report on innovative technology in literacy and education for refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

North American English

This version of DigLin+ represents the North American variety of English, suitable for users in the United States and Canada and anywhere this variety is preferred. There are currently 5,827 activities in these exercise types: write the words, Bingo, drag the letters, listen and type, dictionaries, and stories.

I urge practitioners to try DigLin by exploring it in Dutch, a presumably unfamiliar language. Use tinyurl.com/ms889bxn to begin. If you would like to learn more Dutch (or German, Finnish, or Spanish, all for free), use the same link to subscribe.

Use of North American DigLin is free until the end of 2026. Practitioners and learners can register individually at nae.diglin.eu/login. The North American version is still be-

ing refined; please send feedback to martha.young-scholten@newcastle.ac.uk.

Table 3

Current DigLin and DigLin+ Materials

Language and Website	Access	Activities
British English en.diglin.eu	Free registration	2,500
North American English nae.diglin.eu	Free registration	5,827
Finnish app.fcsprint2.nl/menu/5	Free open access	225
German de.diglin.eu	Free registration	3,580
Dutch app.diglinplus.nl	Paid subscription (39 euros/year)	7,625
Danish	Municipal schools in Denmark only	1,036
Spanish app.fcsprint2.nl/menu/24	Free open access	170

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