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LESLLA Learner Perspectives on their Emergent Writing Practices in English

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Abstract

There exists a wealth of skills LESLLA learners must acquire towards gaining the ability to write autonomously, yet we still know very little about the steps involved in their development. Some researchers have attempted to put themselves in the seat of the student, such as Jill Sinclair Bell's notorious self-study as an English speaker learning Chinese print literacy; however as highly literate scholars it is likely impossible for us to truly understand the experience of developing first time print-literacy (in an L2!) in adulthood. While studies have been conducted which highlight LESLLA students' own perspectives on their acquisition of L2 language and print literacy, there are a lack of studies which explore students' thinking as they undergo this process. Addressing this gap, this study aimed to uncover LESLLA learners' cognitive processes during emergent writing activities. Via individual interviews with four adult learners, the researcher elicited both retrospective and concurrent think-aloud protocols to gain deeper student perspective.

Findings indicated that, while engaged in a *copying* activity, the students focused more aesthetics/visual value and quantity of the written words rather than spelling or meaning; while engaged in writing activities which required *independent spelling*, the students relied on a number of strategies, including recalling letter sequence or orthographic patterns, applying phonetic knowledge, as well as eliciting visual representations. Notably, the learners did not require a fully developed knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correlations to produce correctly spelled words. The results have implications for our understanding of the stages of emergent literacy acquisition in L2 adults.

Keywords: adult literacy, emergent writing, learner perspectives

Introduction

In the LESLLA classroom, adult immigrants and refugees not only learn a new language but often acquire first-time literacy. As we continue to grow LESLLA's body of research on first-time reading and writing development, some have foregrounded their work against pre-existing literature on emergent literacy, which is dominated by studies focused on children's L1 literacy acquisition. Admittedly, there are many differences between children learning to become literate in their L1 (a language they already have an oral command of) and adults acquiring first-time literacy in an L2, a language that might still be extremely novel or even unknown; as such this comparison must be viewed with caution (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Marrapodi, 2013). Nonetheless, the literature on L1 emergent literacy in children can still provide key frameworks and theories as a starting point, to see which elements resonate with the acquisition of literacy by LESLLA learners. Unfortunately, even when this literature is approached with a critical eye, there currently exists far more emergent literacy research devoted to children's development of L1 *reading* than L1 *writing*, creating a further dearth of resources for LESLLA researchers to borrow from.

Fortunately, there has been recent interest in emergent writing practices in the LESLLA classroom; a recent special edition of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* (Pettitt et al., 2021) showcased five studies which focus on L2 writing in a LESLLA context. The purpose of this study, then, is to further contribute to this growing knowledge base on L2 emergent writing on adults with LESLLA backgrounds. I will begin by highlighting key findings in children's L1 writing development, which then informs the most recent literature on LESLLA emergent writing.

Literature Review

Children's L1 Emergent Writing[1]

Children pass through a whole series of stages as they develop their L1 writing skills. To begin, children learn to scribble, draw, and engage in their own play writing long before they learn anything about phonemic decoding in their L1 (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Silva & Alves-Martins, 2002; Sulzby, 1992). Through this play the child refines their motor skills (Bloodgood, 1999), starting from whole arm movements and later developing the ability to control movements at the wrist and fingers (Huffman & Fortenberry, 2011). Beery et al. (2010) outline shape development in children, starting with their ability to legibly create horizontal lines shortly before age 3, and over time acquiring the ability to create legible circles, then X's, and later triangles (around age 5).

Some researchers have attempted to outline the various trajectories of L1 emergent writing in children. Puranik and Lonigan (2011) proposed a linear framework of children's acquisition of *orthographic* features, beginning with the acquisition *of universal writing features* (i.e., linearity, segmentation, use of simple units) and then *language-specific features* (i.e., directionality, letter names, grapheme-phoneme correspondences – the latter of which map onto their pre-existing L1 oral phonemic knowledge). They also distinguish between *conceptual knowledge* (understanding that words consist of sequential shapes, that writing serves a function, etc.), *procedural knowledge* (the ability to write letters and simple words upon prompting), and *generative knowledge* (autonomous writing) (Puranik & Lonigan, 2014); this is similar to an

[1] The literature presented is largely based on studies conducted on the literacy acquisition of phonetic languages.

earlier proposal stating children will first engage in a transcription phase (copying and spelling) prior to a text generative phase (Berninger, 2000) when learning to write in an L1.

While there exists a wealth of spelling development frameworks in the literature on children's L1 writing, there is no agreement as to which is the most relevant for any language or group of languages. As LESLLA learners represent a variety of L2s, I will present a sampling of frameworks which have been developed. To begin, Gentry (1982) provided an early framework of children's L1 spelling acquisition in English, entailing five stages: *precommunicative* (no phonetic correspondence), *semiphonetic* (cannot segment all sounds, grapheme-phoneme correspondences are often incorrect) *phonetic* (making direct grapheme-phoneme correspondences), *transitional* (no longer relying on phonemes but relying on visual memory of how the word is spelled), and *correct*. Others have since put forth models which include varying *syllabic* stages as distinguished from phonetic/alphabetic stages, such as writing 'O-O-O' for a 3 syllable word (in English) (Fox & Saracho, 1990), and then moving on to syllabic writing with pertinent letters, such as 'P-I-O' for '*perico*' (in Spanish) (Tolchinsky & Teberosky, 1998[2]; Vernon & Ferreiro, 1999[3]), prior to demonstrating a greater adherence to phonological criteria. Ravid and Tolchinsky's (2002) model further incorporated linguistic features into spelling development, including four knowledge dimensions: *phonology*, *orthographic conventions*, *morpho-phonology*, and *morphology*.

Stanovich and West (1989) referred to a child's ability to store and recall written representations of their L1 as *orthographic processing*, however others have emphasized the importance between *orthographic learning*, which is the child's ability to form orthographic representations, and *orthographic knowledge*, which reflects the child's existing repository of such representations (Deacon et al., 2018). The application of this knowledge can be distinct, as seen in children's often differentiated ability to decode versus spell the same words (Bradley & Bryant, 1979; Fletcher-Flinn et al., 2004; Rahbari, 2019). One possible explanation is that spelling, a productive skill, is also inherently multi-modal, encompassing "visual-perceptual, motor-kinesthetic and linguistic information" which requires more processing knowledge and time (Shahar-Yames & Share, 2008, p. 25). These visual-perceptual skills allow children to recall and make judgements about visual 'correctness', permitting them to choose correctly spelled words prior to their ability to correctly decode novel or pseudowords using phonological awareness (Deacon et al., 2018); children from non-phonetic languages such as Mandarin similarly rely on stored orthographic representations (McBride, 2016). These mental orthographic representations aid in the development of reading fluency, which in turn frees up one's cognitive load (Masterson & Apel, 2010). This may also explain why young children (and adults) spell better in written form than orally, because the written form provides an additional visual support (Treiman & Bourassa, 2000).

As writing systems vary across languages, proponents of connectionist models suggest children leverage a variety of acquired skills when engaging with text, depending on the structure and writing system of the target language (Harm & Seidenberg, 2004; Seidenberg, 2007; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989). For example, not all phonetic languages have a transparent grapheme-phoneme relationships, some languages have more than one graphemic representation per phoneme, and some phonological patterns produce varying results (i.e., in English, GIVE/LIVE vs. FIVE/HIVE – see Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989) thus requiring a far more nuanced acquisition of phonotactic and morphological patterns; moreover, languages that

[2] Study conducted with Spanish and Hebrew-speaking children.
[3] Study conducted with Spanish speaking children.

are based on a non-phonetic system would require an entirely different approach. During reading, children must then make connections between varying codes – orthographic, phonological, semantic, as well as other elements such as syntactic and pragmatic/contextual cues.

Adults' L2 Emergent Writing

For L2 learners acquiring a new script, attempting to create novel shapes and understand the structure of new writing systems can be incredibly cumbersome, even for those who are highly literate in their L1 (Cook & Bassetti, 2005). For adult LESLLA students with *emergent* literacy, relying on either a visual or acoustic/oral strategy may prove useful when their knowledge of both L2 oral language and script is still developing. To illustrate, such learners can recognize words via visually identifying orthographic patterns – like children, using 'sight word' strategies to recognize and recall lexical items (Kurvers & van de Craats, 2007; Smyser & Alt, 2018; Viise, 1996). This use of orthographic memory (versus phonetic strategy) when producing or recognizing text may be due to the novelty of the L2 sounds and script, combined with one's emergent ability to parse phonemes.

Studies on LESLLA *spelling* development have found that writing development largely mirrors stages of writing seen in children (semi-phonetic, phonetic, etc.). Kurvers and Ketelaars (2011) conducted a study on LESLLA students in the Netherlands, analyzing written test booklets as well as results from an oral dictation task. Results indicated the adults generally followed Gentry's (1982) stages of children's spelling development (*precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional*, and *correct*), although sometimes the stages were mixed; this was thought to be due to the magnitude of processing involved: new phonemes, new script, new language, and newly acquiring metalinguistic awareness of word parts and functions. Manjón-Cabeza Cruz & Sosiński (2021) similarly studied classroom writing tasks of LESLLA students in Spain, finding they adhered to stages of L1 literacy acquisition of Spanish children developed by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979) which begins with pre-phonetic stage followed by phonetic, syllabic, and finally alphabetic stage – but with the "absence of the pre-phonic stages and the syllabic sub-stage" (Manjón-Cabeza Cruz & Sosiński, 2021 ,p.1).

Adult LESLLA learners are not uniquely struggling with decoding and producing script. A study conducted on a dyslexic, English-speaking individual showcased their ability to map spoken spelled words (i.e., for the oral prompt 'C-A-T' the subject said "Cat") despite their inability to manually spell the same word (Schubert & McCloskey, 2015). Presumably, given the difficulty with interpreting visual script, this learner mastered aural/oral spelling but not visual spelling, underscoring the argument that learners may employ different processing systems for letter-name conversion (oral/acoustic system) versus letter-shape conversion (written system).

Leveraging Learner Perspectives

While the abovementioned studies shed incredible light on the processes of and elements involved in LESLLA learners attaining first-time writing skills, much can be learned from hearing the students' perspectives on this experience as well. Second language acquisition studies have long documented learners' perspectives and attitudes towards varying elements of learning (see Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002; Fadda, 2012; Janne et al., 2015; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). Think aloud protocols – where the learner articulated their thinking as they approach a task – have been used in L2 studies as well, to gain insight into second language processing strategies of reading (Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; Yoshida, 2008) and writing (Chien, 2012;

Cumming, 1989; Jessner, 1999); however such studies have been situated within a university context, and not with adult students with L2 emergent literacy. A number of studies have been conducted LESLLA learners' own perspectives on their success in learning language and print literacy; these include Gonzalves (2012) who highlighted the mismatch between what LESLLA learners deemed as success in literacy acquisition versus the state-level standards that were expected of them; Benseman (2014) similarly highlighted learners' desire to engage in everyday literacy tasks without requiring them to depend on someone else for help, such as paying one's bills. Others who have interviewed LESLLA learners have uncovered the emotional stress of literacy acquisition, such as the anxiety students feel in the classroom (Naif & Saad, 2017), or the "shame, uneasiness, embarrassment, and feelings of lack of self-confidence and self-esteem" which result from needing to rely on others for print literacy needs (Love & Kotai, 2015, p. 41). While all of these studies greatly contribute to our understanding of the student experience, none of these studies focus on students' own perspectives of their emergent *writing development*. LESLLA scholarship could indeed benefit from such learner-perspectives of print literacy development, such as asking students to describe how they are interacting with writing in a reflective way. The students' testimony can then act as a window into a learner's thinking, shedding light on how they interact with the multiple elements involved in the act of writing, and thus providing insight into the trajectory of their writing development. The purpose of this study, then, is to contribute to this knowledge base.

Leveraging a learner perspective, this study aimed to answer the following questions:
1. What can be said about LESLLA learners' cognitive processes as they engage in emergent writing practices?
2. What can then be understood about the developmental stages of emergent writing in adult LESLLA learners, as compared to the scholarship on children learning to write in an L1?

Methods

This study took place at a Northern California adult school, where I had worked for many years. Given my history with this school community, I had a long-established rapport with the students and in some cases their family members, which granted me a great level of trust.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with four female students, two of whom I was actively tutoring once per week and the other two having been my former students. The audio-recorded interviews occurred between November 2018 and January 2019, lasting 30 to 60 minutes each. The questions elicited detail about the types of writing the students engaged in during class, classroom socialization (how they knew what to write, when to write, etc.), orthographic norms (margins, return sweep, etc.), and what they were focusing on during writing production. Two interviews were conducted in the students' homes, where interpretation was provided by the students' adult children[4]. The other two interviews were conducted at the school; of these, one interview occurred in in English[5] and the other in Spanish. These four women were selected to be interviewed based on our positive rapport, their willingness to be interviewed, and

[4] It was a conscious decision to choose another student or family member to interpret as opposed to hiring a professional interpreter, for a number of reasons: 1) most professional interpreters of these languages in our area were men, and due to religious reasons the women often will not or cannot speak to another man, 2) there was a lack of professional interpreters in Pashto and Urdu, and 3) some of the women were incredibly shy around and/or mistrusting of strangers (including women).
[5] The student had declined any form of interpretation.

their representation of differentiated languages and schooling history. Their profiles are outlined in Table 1.

Name[6]	**Country**	**Years of school during childhood**	**Interview Location**	**Interpreter & Language**	**Enrolled ESL level**	**Emergent Literacy profile (in English)**[7]
Fakhira, 60	Pakistan	0 years	Her home	Her son; Pashto-English	Beginning ESL Literacy	Could decode individual phonemes, read basic sight words, quickly memorized spelling
Afia, 49	Afghanistan	4 years	Her home	Her two daughters; Urdu-English	Beginning ESL Literacy	Great oral speller, struggled to write beyond copying, could not decode novel words, struggled with sound-graph associations
Alonda, 35	Mexico	4 years in Mexico; 3-4 years in U.S.[8]	Adult school	The researcher; Spanish	ESL Beginning High	Struggled with oral English, did not know all letter names, struggled to decode novel words
Wazira, 33	Yemen	"*a few years*"	Adult School	The researcher; English	ESL Beginning High	Struggled to decode novel words, could write familiar from memory

Table 1. Student Participants.

This study primarily leveraged the use of think-aloud protocols during the student interviews. A prominent task utilized in cognitive science and psychology, think-aloud protocols require participants to orally state their thinking as they undergo any number of tasks, so that the researcher can get a glimpse into their thought processes. Think-aloud protocols have also been used to gain insight into L2 processing strategies during reading (Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; Yoshida, 2008) and writing (Chien, 2012; Cumming, 1989; Jessner, 1999). Analysis of think-

[6] All names are pseudonyms, each chosen by the individual learner for herself.
[7] Profiles established from observations by the researcher and the students' classroom teacher.
[8] Alonda immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 8. She attended school through 6th grade, though her schooling (in the U.S.) was heavily conducted in Spanish.

aloud protocols help identify what learners are paying attention to and grappling with when undertaking a task, as well as what they are *not* paying attention to, and any emotions that may be at play. Importantly, this discussion about language need not be technical to demonstrate understanding (Basturkmen et al., 2002; Berry, 2014), and therefore can be performed by beginning language learners (Young, 2016). However, it is critical to note such meta-dialogue about language is a culturally-constructed phenomenon, being highly influenced by the socialization patterns and modes of thinking expected in the western classroom (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Scribner & Cole, 1978); relatedly, some argue that adults developing initial literacy cannot (yet) adequately engage in introspective thinking about language/education, as such skills are generally attained during formal schooling/literacy education (Huettig & Mishra, 2014) and consequently may lack the expected discourse styles or 'school-based ways of thinking' (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). While it is true that L2 students with emergent literacy might have limited ability at introspection based on their educational history, this does not mean that it is not worth asking them their thoughts, as their utterances indeed reflect their current understanding of their language learning. Thus, while it was to be expected that the students in this study might not be able to demonstrate deep metalinguistic insight into their cognitive processing, for L2 learners, the thinking process itself can help to generate linguistic knowledge, even when their generalizations or assumptions about the language are still developing (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). As previous studies have shown the importance of including learning perspectives in research (Gonzalves, 2012; Milligan, 1997), it was decided to leverage using think-aloud protocols in this study as, despite their limitations, they can still provide us with their critical first person perspective, rather than relying on the researcher to infer what students are thinking or why they are making the mistakes that they do. There are two types of think-aloud protocols: *retrospective* and *concurrent*. In this study, during the *retrospective* protocols, students looked at a piece of writing they had already completed[9] and orally 'walked through' why they had written something the way they did (focusing on orthographic elements, spelling, etc.); in the *concurrent* protocols, the students engaged in a level-appropriate dictation task during the interview and were asked to say what they were thinking as they were performing the task. Dictation activities were chosen as it was a task familiar to both the ESL Beginning Literacy and the ESL Beginning High Students; additionally, the researcher wanted to decrease the cognitive load on the student by providing a task which only focused on spelling, as opposed to spelling *and* content (as would be the case if given them a writing prompt/asking them to create their own text). The dictation sentences varied between students based on a) their ESL level, and b) vocabulary words the researcher knew (from previous interactions) the individual students were highly familiar with. During the think-aloud protocols the students often needed further prompting, so it was necessary to ask guiding questions such as asking what they were focused on during the task and/or to elaborate upon their writing strategies. Given how little we know about the adult L2 emergent literacy, it was intentional to leverage both concurrent and retrospective think-aloud protocols as part of the methodology – the concurrent protocols to elicit actual thinking as the student undergoes the task and the retrospective protocols to elicit additional reflections on their writing, which may include

[9] As the 4 students in this study represented different ESL levels, the completed writing task varied by level. For example, for Fakhira and Afia, previously completed written work was primarily chosen from in-class copying activities (which were extremely common in their Level 1 class) or dictation sessions; for Alonda and Wazira, previously completed written work was primarily chosen from dictation sessions during small group tutoring sessions at the school (which they both attended together).

hindsight and/or broader perspectives on why students chose the strategies they did (Abdel Latif, 2019; Bowers & Snyder, 1990).

After transcribing the interviews, the data was openly coded multiple times to unveil varying themes among the student responses. Initial codes included issues surrounding quantity of writing, quality of writing, writing speed, orthographic norms, spelling strategies, home literacy practices and culturally specific issues. Interview responses were continually re-compiled per the abovementioned thematic areas which served as 'axis' categories (Strauss, 2003), to then look for any commonalities and contrasts among the responses within the theme. As these responses were then re-analyzed thematically overarching 'core' categories (Strauss, 2003) emerged, which were then used to organize the findings.

Findings

Cognitive Focus While Copying

When the students were engaged in a writing activity that was based on copying, one area of importance (as stated by the participants) was the *quality* of their production. Fakhira mentioned that when she copied, she first thought about what the word meant, then focused on copying it "carefully" so that her letters looked beautiful. Additionally, both Afia and Fakhira stated the importance of having all the content fit on one line of the binder paper. Afia stated this was important so that the writing looked "clean." Similarly, Fakhira mentioned that she wrote in such a way as to ensure that all words fit before reaching the "holes" on the binder paper; conversely, Afia wrote across the holes to fit everything across the entirety of a single line. When asked as to why they skip a line on the binder paper when writing (something that was not explicitly taught in class), both Afia and Fakhira once again talked about the importance of aesthetics: Afia stated that by skipping a line the writing looked "cleaner"; Fakhira stated that by skipping a line you can see the words better, thereby being clearer and easier to understand. Finally, both Wazira and Fakhira mentioned their writing was compromised when hurried or rushed, resulting in sloppier penmanship.

The students also alluded to the importance of the *quantity* of their writing when engaged in a copying-based event. Three students specifically mentioned their intention to write everything down exactly as their teacher writes on the board. Both Fakhira and Afia, enrolled in the Beginning ESL Literacy class, mentioned that sometimes they did not write something if the teacher indicated it was not important or that they did not need to copy it; otherwise, they believed they did copy everything of importance. However, Fakhira mentioned that oftentimes she could not finish copying everything she wanted because her writing was too "slow." She stated that if the content was familiar then she could write faster, but that her speed slowed down when the material was unfamiliar.

Cognitive Focus While Spelling

When engaged in spelling activities (such as dictation), the focus of the students' attention was markedly different than while copying. Additionally, all four women utilized different strategies when figuring out the spelling of the word(s) at hand.

When spelling independently, Fakhira did not sound out the words, but rather would attempt to recall the sequence of letters. During the interview I asked her to write, 'I like chicken and rice.' She quickly wrote 'I like' from memory, correctly and automatically. However, when she got to the word 'chicken' she paused and began to spell the word aloud in the form of a question,

"C. H. I. N?"[10] I continued to repeat the word for her, breaking it up into syllabic parts, whereupon she would respond with another proposed letter: When I said, "chick-", she responded with, "N?" "C?" During this back and forth, her only strategy was to try and guess the next letter in the sequence. As she was choosing letters which did appear in the word, it is unclear whether she was mapping my verbal articulation of the sounds to the corresponding letter (a phonetic strategy) or if she was simply trying to recall the sequence of the letters in the word (or if she was focused on something different altogether).

Alonda stated that when she wrote a word, she mostly relied on her memory to recall the spelling. She stated she thought about the letters, but not necessarily about the sound; rather, it seems she attempted to recall the visual orthography of the word. During the interview, I asked her to write the city where our school was located. As she wrote, she said she thought there was a letter 'N' in the word (which there was not) but that she could not remember where it went. After she wrote the word with the 'N' she realized it did not look right, so she took it out. When I asked her why she took out the 'N' she said, "Porque no iba, la 'N' allí *[because the N didn't go there]",* when I asked her how she knew that, she responded, "No mas porque lei bien dije no, no va la 'N'… *[Just because I read it well and I said no, the 'n' doesn't go there…]."* The conversation continued:

> Alonda: Vino a la mente la 'N' dije, déjame ponerlo aquí… [*The 'N' came to my mind and I said let me put it here…]*
> Lisa: Para ver *[to see]*.
> A: Así es asi *[Yes that's right]*.

After she indicated she used a visual strategy, I then clarified that she was not using a phonetic strategy :

> L: Entonces no tenia nada que ver de (sic) como sonaba *[So it had nothing to do with the way it sounded]*.
> A: No *[No]*.

In other words, Alonda used a visual strategy to judge whether her spelled word looked right or not; after determining it visually did not look right, she took out the 'N' to correct the spelling.

In another example during the interview, I asked Alonda to write the sentence, 'I like to read and write English' from memory. She then wrote, 'I live to read and read E-', then paused after writing 'E'. When I asked what she was thinking, all she could repeat was that she was "wrong" ("Estoy mal") and that she "wasn't writing good" ("*Que no estoy escribiendo bien*"); in other words, instead of explaining her strategy, she focused on her emotions – in this case, how she was relating to the writing task. As we went back and reviewed her sentence, she did not have an explanation of why she wrote 'live' instead of 'like.' Notably, she orally said the word 'like' aloud as she wrote the word 'live'. In our conversation we discovered that the day before, in her ESL class, they had done extensive interviews with their classmates using the word 'live', so perhaps she was recalling that spelling pattern from the previous day. Also of note is that, while she wrote the words 'I', 'to', 'read,' and 'and' correctly and with automaticity, she also wrote the word 'read' twice, writing it the second time in lieu of the target word, 'write,' which was incorrect.

[10] In this paper, use of periods after each letter indicates that the student is orally spelling the word aloud, letter by letter.

Wazira appeared to have more diversity of strategies when figuring out how to spell a word. During our interview, I asked her to spell the word 'yesterday.' Upon prompting, she repeated the word a few times, then began to spell it out loud:

Lisa: Okay. I want you to write… um… um… um, yesterday I cooked and cleaned.
Wazira: Wow…yesterday.
L: Yesterday. How do you spell yesterday?
W: S…
L: Yesterday.
W: Oh, yest…
L: Yesterday. How do you spell yesterday?
W: Yesterday. Yesterday. S. T. E?
L: I don't know. Try.
W: I don't know…(laughing).
L: Yesterday I cooked and cleaned.
W: (Laughing)
L: Do you… can you remember how to spell yesterday?
W: Yesterday.
L: Think about it.
W: Um. Y? Yeah. Y. E. Yesterday. S. Yesterday. Yesterday. Y. E, Y. E. S. T? I don't know.

In the above example, Wazira attempted to recall the letters in the word and/or their sequence but did not employ a phonetic nor a visual strategy to aid her attempt.

Later in the interview, I asked her to write the sentence, 'I like to learn English on the computer.' She wrote the first seven words of the sentence correctly and with automaticity. When she arrived at the word 'computer,' she made some attempts to both remember the forthcoming letter in the sequence as well as sound out the word, but gave up after the first few letters:

Lisa: (repeating sentence) I like to learn English on the computer.
Wazira: On?
L: Ah-huh. The. Computer.
W: Not this one. (speaking Arabic to herself) Computer. [kʌ, kʌ] C. O?
L: Ah-huh.
W: P.
L: Computer.
W: I don't know. Computer. (mumbling: Computer, Co- pu-ter. Computer) P? Computer? (Laughing)
L: Computer. What are you thinking about? What are you thinking?
W: (sighs) It's no easy teacher.

When asked what she was thinking about, instead of talking about what strategies she was employing to figure out how to spell the word, she (like Alonda) instead focused on her emotion – an important learner perspective reflecting how she is personally engaging with emergent writing.

During the interview, Afia stated that while she felt fine when engaging in a copying-based activity, spelling activities prompted extreme nerves and anxiety. She attested that sometimes

while spelling in class her brain just "stopped." During those moments of anxiety, Afia could not write anything. She emphasized that while she "could not do" spelling, that copying was more comfortable for her. Specifically, she stated that if she did not know the spelling of a word, she was not going to write it; in other words, either she knew the spelling and would write it or would refrain from trying altogether.

During the interview I asked her write 'Monday.' After speaking in Urdu with her daughters, they informed me that she was not able to write the word. Anecdotally, during my previous experience with her I noted her great ability to spell words orally, recalling the pattern or sequences with great precision. As such, I then switched the focus of the task from written to oral spelling:

Lisa: Afia, how do you spell Monday?
Afia: M. O. N. E. Day.
L: Hold on. Wait. (Writing her letters for her) M. O. N.
A: E.
L: E. No. No.
A: A. A.
L: M. O. N. Monday.
A: D. A. Y.

In this dialogue, it was clear that she knew how to spell Monday, albeit in two chunks; nonetheless, she had successfully memorized the syllabic sequences of letters.

Implications

While the data from the interviews cannot possibly reveal a learner's entire trajectory of emergent writing acquisition, we can gain perspective into the orthographic features of the word focused upon by the learners, as well as the types of strategies they leveraged to write.

Students' Writing Ideologies and Strategies

The data emerging from the writing tasks in which the participants engaged reveal which language-specific elements the students were attuned to, and which went by the wayside. For example, both Fakhira and Afia mentioned their focus on the aesthetics of their copying or transcription tasks, such as having the words fit or ensuring that their print was clean; similarly, Fakhira and Wazira mentioned needing enough time to complete the writing lest their copied text be sloppy. Resonating with Blommaert's (2004) work on orthographic standards, their testimonies reveal that sometimes they placed more importance on *visual-value* rather than *function-value* (i.e., ensuring that they had copied the word correctly in terms of spelling – inclusion of all letters in the correct sequence). While there are certainly culturally (and socially) embedded conventions for 'good' orthography, Fakhira and Afia's teacher had not promoted such ideologies regarding visual precision nor accurate spelling. Perhaps their personal standard reflected a personal (visual) pleasure gained from this process or was part of their ethos of what it meant to be a 'good' student or was reflective of other aesthetically-related criteria prominent in their lives. Nonetheless, this learner-perspective of their aesthetic preference is insightful to instructors, who may then wish to ensure students have adequate time to copy words neatly (and be understanding if they are copying slow and carefully so as to satisfactorily produce pleasing orthography).

During the interviews, the women demonstrated little attunement to grapheme-phoneme correspondences when writing. We saw instances where Fakhira, instead, verbally called out letters questioningly, searching for the next letter in the sequence. While Wazira also engaged in this type of oral searching, she was also the only student who made an obvious attempt to sound out a word while spelling. If the women *were* using a phonetic strategy based on oral word/sentence prompt, it was not obvious from the observed data.

Alonda clearly indicated she relied on a visual strategy, writing a word to see if it looked correct. As seen in the literature on children's L1 literacy acquisition, she had formed mental orthographic representations of the words, and used a process of comparing her written form with this visual representation to check for visual correctness. Still, even when the visual cue indicated to her there was a problem in the orthographic pattern, she continued to rely on her visual memory, focusing on the graphemes and their position. Alonda also suffered from interference in her visual memory, as was seen with her writing of 'live' as 'like', which was less likely a phonetic mistake and more likely either due to having interacted with the word 'like' with high frequency the day before, causing her to retrieve the incorrect (albeit very similar) string of letters and/or having lexically mis-mapped one word for the other. Relatedly, she also incorrectly wrote 'read' as 'write,' here, mis-indexing the orthographic form with the wrong (but similar) semantic item.

Afia stated that if she did not know how to spell something, she would not try to write it. Unlike children acquiring L1 literacy, she did not attempt to sound out words *nor* did she rely on a visual cue to recall spelling. Instead, Afia relied on an *oral* cue, spelling the word orally to gain the correct sequence of letters, a task she often could not equally perform in a written mode. Her strategy to memorize word spellings, then, was more reliant on oral letter-name recall than written letter-shape recall, a strategy seen by Schubert & McCloskey (\2015) in a student with dyslexia. Thus, her inability to write words was <u>not</u> indicative of her inability to spell. She intelligently relied on patterns, which were usually sequences of letters. However, we did see her utilize either syllabic and/or morphological knowledge, showcased when Afia spelled Monday as "M. O. N. E. Day," demonstrating in the first syllable her attunement to the oral sequence of letters, and in the second syllable that she could isolate the suffix 'day' as a single unit at the end of the word.

The women's varying spelling strategies are summarized in Table 2.

Student	**ESL Level**	**Spelling strategies seen**
Fakhira	ESL Beginning Literacy	Automatic; Sequential recall
Afia	ESL Beginning Literacy	Oral ability to spell (without matching written ability to spell)
Alonda	ESL Beginning High	Automatic; Visual strategy
Wazira	ESL Beginning High	Automatic; Sequential recall; Phonetic strategy

Table 2. Students' spelling strategies.

Given that this was not a longitudinal study, the data cannot indicate whether the women were passing through the same sequence of stages as presented in the literature on children's L1 literacy acquisition. However, what can be seen is that they are simultaneously leveraging a variety of spelling strategies represented in the frameworks for children's spelling development. For example, Alonda demonstrated writing some words with automaticity (presumably, words she had frequent exposure to and experience writing), and with other words she leveraged a more

visual strategy. Wazira also demonstrated writing some words with automaticity, but with words she struggled with, she utilized a phonetic strategy as well as a strategy of sequential recall; Fakhira, while at a far more pre-emergent stage of literacy than Alonda and Wazira, also demonstrated automaticity with some words and use of a sequential recall methodology for other words. This 'mixing' of spelling strategies is in line with Kurvers and Ketelaars (2011) work with L2 Dutch LESLLA learners and was, perhaps, as they indicated, due to the magnitude of processing involved. Presumably, as L2 learners are always at various stages of language (and literacy) acquisition with each and every word, it is no surprise that the students had reached the 'correct' spelling stage with words they interacted with frequently in the classroom and demonstrated 'earlier' spelling strategies with words they had yet to develop that same automaticity. Afia was the only outlier in that she leveraged a strategy not typical in children's L1 writing development, per her ability to orally spell words that she could not equally spell in writing. Thus, it may be helpful in our classroom to distinguish between two modalities of spelling – oral spelling and written spelling – as the ability spell in one modality does not preclude the ability to spell in the other modality. We may even wish to employ more oral spelling in the LESLLA classroom to see if this is a platform for students struggling with written spelling to excel.

All four of the women were able to spell some words correctly and with automaticity (in either modality), however the limited data does not tell us *how* they reached automaticity. Did they pass through the same stages as presented in any of the children's literature, or did they take a different route? Could it be that Afia, who orally spelled words in a rote fashion despite her inability to write the same word, had bypassed the visual and phonetic stages altogether? And for Alonda who claimed to never use a phonetic strategy yet had attained automaticity in spelling some words – did she skip the phonetic stage as well? If indeed the women were not (solely) reliant on a phonetic strategy to spell (a stage prominent in nearly every framework in the children's literature), this would possibly imply that phonetic decoding is *not* a *necessary step* to spell familiar words independently.

Accordingly, researchers have suggested that orthographic processing, learning, and knowledge are far more complex than phonetic understanding. To highlight, the women's reliance on orthographic patterns as a developmental strategy of writing acquisition is in line with connectionist models suggesting that learners rely on a wealth of acquired knowledge – phonetic, orthographic, syllabic, phonological, morphological, lexical, and semantic – when engaging with text. This would help explain the students' ability to spell words without phonetic knowledge, such as Alonda's reliance on visual correctness, or Afia's reliance on morphemes/syllables, or Wazira and Fakhira's focus on sequence. These examples cause us to question at what point (or even if) certain elements of phonemic knowledge are essential to a LESLLA learner's initial print literacy development.

Conclusion

While limited in scope, the findings from the women's testimonies shed light onto some of the developmental elements involved in the production of first-time writing in LESLLA learners, and the cognitive processes underlying these skills and strategies. Yet, we are still left with many questions as to the developmental steps and sequences performed by the women, and whether certain developmental steps/sequences which are prevalent in the research on children's initial acquisition of L1 writing (such as using a phonetic strategy) were omitted. Moreover, if

these same developmental steps demonstrated by children were indeed omitted, why? Was it because L2 phonemes were still novel? Was it their lack of fluency in making phoneme-grapheme correspondences, as these are highly abstract concepts? Was recalling sequences and/or using visual representations more natural/easier for these adults? Answering these questions will help to inform our pedagogical practices in the LESLLA classroom, and the strategies we teach our students to employ when writing L2 text. These insights may also aid in transitioning students from the copying and spelling tasks presented here to more communicative, student-generated texts that we also employ in the classroom (and beyond). More research, including more studies situated from a learner perspective, is critical, then, if we are to comprehend and validate LESLLA learners' strengths and needs, and align our teaching strategies accordingly.

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