

# Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition

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Edwidge C. Bryant  
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*Editorial Assistants*

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## Message from the Editor

Adults with limited or no prior literacy skills in their native language experience linguistic challenges after migrating to countries where they possess no knowledge of the new spoken or written language. These newcomers often lack formal education due to poverty and/or political upheavals experienced in their native countries which impeded their ability to attend school and receive formal education. Driven by a need and desire for formal education, they often enroll in English as a second language (ESL) classes. Progression to a second language is often difficult, as students must be taught the functions of written language and their connections to oral language within the context of their native language. The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual conference, which was held at Flagler College, in historic downtown St. Augustine, Florida addressed these issues related to LESLLA (Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) learners. The theme of the conference was: Moving forward- Empowering through literacy. Researchers presented their work on the many ways in which research, policy, and practice can empower learners through literacy.

The present volume consists of chapters that are organized into three sections: *Interrupted Schooling*, *Digital Tools and Literacy Teaching and Learning*. *Interrupted Schooling* - Nicole Pettitt, Ashely Ekers, Heike Williams and Abi Yober present readers with three reflective narratives of learners who have experienced interrupted schooling. The authors challenge readers to reflect on issues experienced by these women on race, gender and power. Nan Fryalnd present readers with a model of instruction, Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®, that focuses on the needs of LESLLA learners and those with interrupted schooling. These learners come from collectivist cultures and subsequently, experience obstacles with Western-style formal education. The chapter discusses the implementation of MALP® at a community-based organization in a New York City suburb.

*Digital Tools and Literacy Teaching* -Martha Bigelow, Kendall King Jennifer Vanek and Nimo Abil present information on how a critical literacy curriculum unit, which used Facebook as a tool for interaction and publishing student work, served as context for native language and English literacy development. Lea Gabay discusses *self-authoring* development, which is a process of taking control of one's life, to teach a female learner in Afghanistan through the interplay of language development and a digital tool called VoiceThread. Trudie Aberdeen's chapter provide instructors with information on how LESLLA students can make use of Chromebooks to assist them in English as a Second Language classrooms.

*Literacy Teaching and Learning* section, Jennifer Ouellette-Schramm discusses the use of Kegan's Constructive Developmental Theory (CDT), which derives from Western psychology but has been implemented cross-culturally. This research highlights the academic literacy learning experiences of one LESLLA learner in the context of a larger qualitative case study. Shelley Hale Lee and Jaime Newsome Irvan, presents a summary of current research in ESL literacy instruction. In addition, the authors open their classrooms to readers and discuss their guiding principles and describe in detail some of the teaching techniques they have used when teaching LESLLA learners. The authors also provide suggestions on lessons that can be used in classes composed of LESLLA learners or in combined classes.

In conclusion, the information provided in these proceedings will deepen a reader's knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding LESLLA learners, the purpose of LESLLA and the many roles researchers, practitioners, and policy makers play in improving the lives of LESLLA learners.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# Narratives of Race, Gender, and Power in Family Literacy Classrooms for Refugee Women With Interrupted Formal Schooling

Nicole Pettitt, Youngstown State University

Ashley Ekers, Auburn Global

Heike Williams, Auburn Global

Abi Yoder, Pioneers International

## Abstract

In this paper, we seek to open up, for public reflection, some questions we have encountered surrounding race, gender, and power in classrooms for adults learning additional languages in contexts of migration. These learners are emergent readers, who are women, who have experienced interruptions in school-based learning. Through three reflective narratives of teaching in U.S.-based adult English family literacy classrooms for students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), we hope to lay open some of our current questions and dilemmas, as well as inspire broader discussions surrounding these critical issues in SIFE teaching and learning contexts.

## Introduction

As colleagues and friends teaching and researching in English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) family literacy programs for refugee women (who were also students with interrupted formal education [SIFE]) during the 2014-2015 U.S. school year, our conversations pivoted around common topics: effective teaching methods and curricula, learner struggles, and educational policies that impact learners and programs, amongst others. We also wondered about the ways we, as White women born in the U.S., can support SIFE women of color in their ongoing identity negotiations as language learners who may be experiencing gender and race in new ways in the U.S. (Bigelow, 2010; Gordon, 2004, 2009; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Norton, 2012). We frequently came away from our conversations with more questions than answers.

The critical incidents we share in the narratives below reflect some of our ongoing uncertainties. Our narratives also attempt to “see” our students and ourselves more holistically, and as embedded within historical and social contexts. As Delpit (1995) writes, “When we teach across the boundaries of race, class, and gender—indeed when we teach at all—we must recognize and overcome the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other” (p. 134). We extend Delpit’s list of barriers to minimally include: age, ability/ies, nationality/ies, language(s), levels and types of prior education, and political statuses (e.g., citizen, refugee, and “undocumented”).

As teachers and researchers, we feel this reflective work is important for at least two reasons. First, the narratives below took place in a family literacy program for speakers of English as an additional language. Such programs have been criticized in scholarly literature since the late 1980s for operating from deficit paradigms (e.g., Auerbach, 1989, 1995; Hannon, 2000; Rogers, 2003). Auerbach (1995) describes interventionist family literacy programs as assuming that “parents and other adult family members do not adequately use or value literacy, thus perpetuating a cycle of undereducation which is at the root of America’s social and economic problems” (p. 644). According to this perspective, then, parents with diverse literacy practices are at the root of some, if not many, of a country’s problems. Along with Auerbach (1995), we find this stance highly problematic. If we are to actively teach and research against deficit perspectives—instead privileging culturally-relevant and plurilingual approaches that draw on learner, family, and community funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992)—we find we must reflect on issues of language and power, and our own positionalities within these, as first steps toward transforming our own pedagogical and research practices (Farrell, 2007; Norton & Early, 2011).

Second, we resonate with the work of language learning scholars such as Bigelow (2007, 2010), Block (2005, 2009), Menard-Warwick (2005a, 2005b, 2009), Norton (1995, 2000, 2012), and others whose work

illustrates some of the diverse and contingent ways that migration, and concomitant “learning (of) a new language or taking on new literacy practices in a certain social context” (Menard-Warwick, 2009, p. 26), may entail complex identity negotiations. We understand adult and family literacy English-as-an-Additional-Language (EAL) classrooms as important sites for newcomers to negotiate and claim new identities for themselves (Pavlenko, 2004). As teachers and researchers, then, we find ourselves asking, “What are our roles in learners’ ongoing identity negotiations? How might our own identities and blind spots (Bigelow, 2016) aid or constrain us?” And, importantly, “What is specific to doing this work with SIFE women of color?” These are a few of the overarching questions we hope to bring to the fore in this paper.

## **The Teaching Context**

The reflective teacher narratives below took place at an EAL family literacy program for refugee women in Clarkston, a renowned refugee resettlement hub on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. As of 2014, over 53 percent of Clarkston’s population of 7,717 was born outside of the U.S., over 40 countries were represented in the town’s 1.5 square kilometers, and nearly 60 percent of the population over age five spoke a language(s) other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The EAL family literacy program’s demographics mirrored those of Clarkston, with women from Burma, Bhutan, Afghanistan, the Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Liberia, and more.

The program was part of a faith-based non-profit organization, enrolling refugee women and their children aged birth to five. About 150 women and their children were enrolled, and each woman brought from one to three children. The program’s main goals were to prepare children for kindergarten, and to remove the barrier of childcare for women who desired to attend EAL classes. For the first two hours, women and children attended classes separately; for the last 30 minutes, mothers and children joined for family literacy activities. Once a week, the mothers’ classes came together for an educational assembly, an event that figures in Eker’s reflection below.

Most of the women had experienced interruptions in formal schooling, and many were emergent readers and writers, though some had high speaking proficiency in English, which was a second language for some, but a third, fourth, or more language for others. Each level at the school was taught by only one teacher; this provided teachers with much freedom in choosing or making their own materials, and even in determining what should be taught at their level. However, all were encouraged to include some form of civics instruction, which figures in both Williams’s and Yoder’s reflections below.

## **Terminology, Time, and Place**

These narratives also unfolded at a particular place and time, specifically, the Southeastern United States during the 2014-2015 U.S. school year. During that time, social unrest was building in the U.S., surrounding decades of violence and injustices against African-American individuals and communities; we found that these events spilled over into our thinking about classroom incidents. For example, in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, and the ways Officer Wilson’s trial was handled, set off major protests around the U.S. and in the city where we resided: Atlanta, Georgia, a city that serves as a touchstone for U.S. civil rights, as reflected in Yoder’s narrative below. Unsurprisingly, the Black Lives Matter movement, which had begun the previous year, gained significant momentum in our city and nationwide.

We recognize that the historical, political, and social events that shaped our conversations and classrooms that year may be similar to, and different from, what teachers, administrators, and researchers have experienced in their own regions and countries. We also want to acknowledge the local nature of the terminology we have used in this paper surrounding racial and ethnic identifications. Our language is, of course, shaped by current U.S.- and Atlanta-based discourses surrounding these questions, and terms such as “White,” “African-American,” or “brown skin,” may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for some readers. In fact, we authors were not always comfortable with one another’s terms; what is written here is the product of compromise.

**Enya**  
**(Abi Yoder)**

“Does anyone know what is special about today?” I asked my adult female students, seeking to position the day in the framework of the broader calendar year and connect to current events. It was Martin Luther King (MLK) Day, a U.S. holiday to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr., the Atlanta-born activist who received a Nobel Peace Prize and became a world figure for his civil rights work representing Black Americans in the U.S., “Do you know anything about MLK?” Calendar time that morning sparked a four-month unit on the 1950s and 1960s-era U.S. Civil Rights Movement, completed by a field trip to the MLK Center in downtown Atlanta, just minutes from where my class was conducted. I felt pretty proud myself, even connecting civil rights in the U.S. with events in my students’ home countries. The ladies seemed to really enjoy knowing that the city where they lived was significant in history.

However, I started to wonder about my own ability to teach this history. I had also just finished a master’s-level course advocating for reflective teaching practices (Richards & Farrell, 2011). Therefore, I started reflecting. I’m a White woman that grew up in a predominantly White community with schools that had White-centered curricula. Thus, growing up I had tragically never really learned much about the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. I decided I needed to, so I headed to the library after teaching. As I read, I kept wondering how a person with brown or black skin would view the history in the books I was reading. What were the biases I was missing? Why did there still seem to be so much tension over race right around me? Maybe I could just ignore these questions.

Then “Enya” showed up. She was a university-level service-learning student curious about learning to teach SIFE, and she had brown skin. I assumed she identified as African-American (and not, for example, as an international student or recent immigrant to the U.S.) since she used a variety of English that is common in Atlanta; I was suddenly frightened that my super-White background would be exposed and reveal me as an imposter attempting to teach this sensitive subject. What if I was teaching in a way that made Enya feel disrespected? What if I was teaching the students about civil rights in such a simplified way that they assumed that “all was good” across the whole of the country? How would the women refugees in my classroom reconcile school narratives (i.e., “You are safe in the U.S.”) with state-sanctioned violence against people of color, as demonstrated by daily news coverage of the Michael Brown case and the Black Lives Matter Movement? Were the women in my class experiencing racialized identities, as the Somali youth in Bigelow’s (2010) work did? Could I teach any of this to a class made up of students from seven different countries with seven different languages of which I could barely speak one?

Even though my students were at beginning levels of English, I still wanted to communicate all the ideas I had surrounding mutual respect and equity. But, Enya’s presence made me wonder: Did I even really know how to respectfully speak of my country’s Civil Rights Movement? And did I know how to prepare my students for situations in which they may be unfairly and incorrectly judged for the color of their skin?

I saw I had entered a crisis. There was so much I wanted to communicate: People are people. Everyone should be respected. Every person is equally important. I want my students to feel welcomed and valued in the U.S. and to value others. So, I was left with several questions. Is it possible to teach such nuanced concepts to very beginning English learners? Should I even have delved into these deep waters without being confident that I understood the current and historical injustices surrounding race in our country? Is it even possible to completely understand these things? Should I have asked a cultural informant to assist me in navigating these questions (Kinloch & Medge, 2014)?

One of my professional values is to be constantly developing and reflecting in ways that can help me grow. I’m thankful for the tension I’ve felt because it has caused me to stop and evaluate my core beliefs behind my teaching. I don’t have all the answers, but I wonder how the class might have been different if I had asked someone to help me navigate these waters. Growing as a teacher is about becoming more aware and informed about myself, my students, pedagogy, and the world around me. I know this takes time, so I will give myself grace, but not excuses. Delpit (1995) reminds me that I have the responsibility to examine and attempt to overcome stereotypes and the barriers that prevent me from seeing others clearly. How can I do this? Maybe I could have a discussion where students share what it means for them to be who they identify as. Perhaps I



could try to find new ways and spaces for my very diverse church to include racially educating one another as part of the ethos of the church. Maybe I can read more about Whiteness, as well as study and learn what anti-racist pedagogies are and how I might take them up. I don't want to stay where I am. I must keep growing. I owe it to myself and my students.

### **A Paradox of Shifting Identities (Heike Williams)**

My story of how events unfolded that day in class don't actually begin in class. Rather, my story begins by sharing that I grew up for the first thirteen years of my life in the Southeastern United States, and Atlanta, Georgia, specifically. Atlanta prides itself on many things, including a booming business sector, its prominent position in the 1950s and 60s era U.S. civil rights movement, being the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and being a very racially and ethnically diverse international city, which is partially reflected in its status as a refugee resettlement hub. To me, being from Atlanta means that I constantly have opportunities to learn and grow as I live in this diverse city, which challenges me to question my perspectives and broaden my world views.

My story also begins with sharing that for the past three years, I have been attending a very transcultural church. We have a heart for racial reconciliation and to see people from all over worshipping Jesus together.

My story also begins with me being White. My Whiteness was never something I thought about until I moved to Asia after graduating from university to teach English for two years, and I looked different than almost everyone else. I was given privileges my national friends did not receive (e.g., jumping the line, being invited to banquets), and I was prevented from doing other things (e.g., not standing out in a crowd, buying things as cheaply as nationals). Now back in the U.S., I finally realize what was right under my nose my entire life: being White obviously entails privileges here, too. Of course, the privileges and power I experience in the U.S. are far too numerous and complex to name in this short reflection -- but in EAL classrooms, I am seen as an authority and a representative of U.S. teachers, amongst other things (some of which I may not even know). I'm still learning what it means to be White and how Whiteness influences the ways I think, act, and understand the world around me. As I do this, I am attempting to uncover some of the barriers that prevent me from seeing my students and myself as Delpit (1995) advocates for.

My story also begins with the fact that I was born an American citizen, as were my parents and grandparents. Many families in the U.S. have migrated more recently than my ancestors did; I have never had to reconcile more than one national identity. So, my history, heritage, and identities influenced the ways I responded to the events of class on the day in question.

The women in my class were sitting on metal folding chairs behind a long wooden table facing the whiteboard smudged grey with traces of past lessons; they carefully copied what I'd been writing on the board: nationalities and languages, the purpose of that day's Civics lesson surrounding President Obama. Our walls were dotted with pictures of former and current students, vocabulary words, Language Experience Approach (Taylor, 1992) stories on poster paper, and the lyrics of children's songs for parent and child time. "I am from Burma, I am Burmese, and I speak Burmese/Karen/Karenni," my students wrote, and we practiced saying. Since President Obama's mother is from the United States, he is American. His father is from Africa (Kenya, therefore he might also identify as African or Kenyan.

My dear student from Togo leaned over to my student from the Congo and said, "You are from Africa and when you become a citizen, you will be African-American!" The two women laughed at the word play and creativity they had accomplished in their new language. My mind immediately sounded an alarm, and I thought silently, "No you won't be."

I was struck with the paradox, the dilemma. Yes, when you pass the citizenship test you will be an American citizen, and yes, you're African. But no, you're not African-American. Or is she? For a moment I had a flicker of, "Yes? Becoming a U.S. citizen would mean becoming African-American?" My internal thoughts came out in a muddled disarray, as I tried to help my student find the language she wanted to describe her continually shifting identity positions, while also navigating the complex historical waters of race labels in the United States, which, as a new arrival to the U.S., I assumed were unfamiliar to her. "No, you are not African-American," I said after a second or two, "... you could be an American who is from Africa..." My student gave me a strange look. I don't think it clarified things for her.

I moved on. I did not know how to respond or teach to the situation without delving into history and politics, and I feared losing the students very quickly. Honestly, I am still not even sure if it was my place to respond in that situation. Later I realized that I want my student to be proud of her heritage and the richness and depth she brings to her new home. I had been simultaneously concerned that the term African-American might obscure her Congolese-ness in everyday speech, and that, in using this term to self-identify, she might unwittingly wade into deep and complicated political and historical waters. Without realizing it, I was trying to protect her.

Today, my response would be different. Instead of telling her she “can’t” use a specific term to self-identify, I might suggest she consider how she feels about the term “Congolese American.” I might try to explain that the term “African-American” is complicated because some people disagree about what this term conveys or should convey. Some argue (although not uncontroversially) it should be reserved only for those Americans who are descendants of the U.S. slave trade, and not more recent African immigrants such as my Congolese student (e.g., Dickerson, 2005). I wondered if maybe someone who had migrated from the Congo to the U.S. could speak with more authority and complexity regarding the ways some members of the local Congolese community choose to self-identify. Of course, regardless of what others have chosen, no one (including me) can decide for my student what language reflects the way she self-identifies. This is a language she will have to come to and negotiate on her own, and within her various communities.

As I reflect on the three seconds in which these events unfolded, I see that, for me, there was a convergence of head-knowledge, teaching knowledge, background knowledge, and a desire for clarity. Will others label my student and her family as African-American without their consent or knowledge? How will her life be affected by others’ perceptions of her heritage? How will her experience of her skin color be different here than in the Congo?

This situation, while it unfolded in only three seconds, has me wondering. As discussed in the introduction to our paper, learning an additional language is an identity shifting experience (Norton, 2012). After this experience, I now question more than ever: As a teacher, what is my role in the classroom when it comes to identity and race? Because of my background – my history, hometown, church, Whiteness, awarenesses – what classroom situations should I lean into and which are best left for others to tackle? Mostly I am left with questions.

### **Negotiating Power and Distance: Discussions of Motherhood Across Cultures (Ashley Ekers)**

I have never been married and I have no children. This created a little discomfort in me when I started teaching in an EAL family literacy program whose mission included supporting refugee women in their roles as mothers. As a supplement to language instruction, the program held weekly topical assemblies on subjects such as family nutrition, the importance of reading to children, dental hygiene, birth control, and engaging babies with dialogue. During assemblies, I noticed the women in our classes were mainly *receiving* information, with much of the content aimed at familiarizing them with the attitudes toward gender and motherhood that the White, middle-class “native” English-speaking presenters, including me, had grown up with. Sometimes this was explicitly stated, as in sessions about “appropriate” child discipline; at other times it was implied. While the women always appeared appreciative, frequently expressing thanks for the opportunity to learn things they said they didn’t know before, I often wondered how they felt about the assemblies. In a classroom environment like this there are variables of race, gender, and class that both the teachers and students find their own ways to negotiate (Delpit, 1995). Were my students finding these ideas of motherhood encouraging and helpful, or were they possibly confusing, or clashing with their own thoughts about their roles in their families? What power differentials and cultural gaps were going unacknowledged during these sessions?

I wanted to explore how I could uncover these with my students but knew it could be particularly challenging to sustain these conversations with emergent readers and adults with interrupted schooling. Often the ways in which experiences can be readily shared between students of various language backgrounds require higher levels in the language(s) being learned than were present in my beginning level English classroom. I was genuinely interested in my students’ experiences and finding a way to create a collaborative classroom culture, but I also knew I was motivated by my own insecurities as an educator. I felt unable to connect with my students

over their roles as wives and mothers, so another goal was to turn this into an opportunity to put the students into the roles of experts and informants for a portion of a class. I wanted to do this in a way that would strengthen the classroom community without placing any unwanted informant burden on them.

I modified questions related to motherhood across countries and cultures from a report made by journalist Olga Khazan (2015), with an eye toward my class time constraints and students' language levels. My first prompt was a seemingly simple question, "What is a mother?" I was unsurprised when the women's answers mirrored what they had heard during our school assemblies which, in turn, replicate common motherhood discourses in the U.S.; for example, "Mothers are their children's primary teachers" (Hendrix, 1999; Smythe, 2006; Rogers, 2003; Smythe & Isserlis, 2004).

One group of women huddled around their paper crafting their collective answer, and I noticed their adjectives orbited around a theme as the mother as a powerful figure. The next question asked them to share beliefs or traditions about pregnancy and motherhood from their home countries. Some women laughed as they told me about fathers who prayed for male children and others shared rumors, they'd heard of some women being able to transfer their labor pains to their partners. The mood was sometimes light and sometimes serious, but the dialogue was active, and my students were engaged.

My final question asked how they felt being a mother in the United States was different from in their home countries, and what they felt was most difficult about being a mother here. The students answered so passionately and quickly that I wondered if they'd previously had this discussion outside of the classroom. Some of the women talked about the contrast between keeping their children in their apartments versus the freedom they had in their previous communities when they knew and trusted all their neighbors. Another student, who was a little older than the others, talked about the selfishness of mothers in the United States and their propensity for divorce. I wondered what would have happened if this student had shared her feelings during an assembly time, with mothers from the United States around to hear her perspective. It appeared to me that her impressions of mothers in the U.S. bothered her, and I wondered if any of her English teachers had been able to help her process her perspectives or had thought to ask what they were.

Reflecting on the activity after class, I realized I had been treating motherhood as a foreign concept. My relationship to the stories of motherhood I've heard from family and friends was through relational proximity, not because I had lived them, and in this way, I saw a potential connection between some of my students' experiences and my own. Someday I may try to reconcile the myths of motherhood with its reality, and currently, my students were trying to reconcile the realities of their lives in Atlanta and the U.S. with things they had heard before coming, photos they had seen, the expectations they had built up. I realized that in admitting to my students my feelings of being an outsider to motherhood that the classroom had begun to feel more equalized *for me*. It seemed my students enjoyed the discussion and responded positively to acting as informants, but I don't know for certain. I do know that the process of attempting to expose and discuss power differentials in my class led to an interruption of my normal class activities, and to realizing the ways I had been unintentionally placing barriers between myself and my students with my assumption that I could not connect with them in their roles as mothers (Delpit, 1995). In inviting my class to potentially see me in a different role than they usually do (learner vs. educator) I was able to see them in a more holistic way as well. As a teacher I think it will be important to find more ways to integrate my students' language learning into the disruption of my assumptions of distance within the classroom.

### **A Colleague's Summative Reflections (Nicole Pettitt)**

Each of the above narratives reflects a teacher's work to understand her own positionality and power in supporting learners' identity negotiations or sense-making surrounding questions of race or gender. Each teacher showed us a moment in which she began to "recognize...the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other" (Delpit, 1995, p. 134). While Delpit argues we must not only recognize but also "overcome" (p. 134) these obstacles, my co-authors' reflections cause me to wonder if such overcoming is possible, and what it entails.

For instance, for Williams and Yoder, a primary concern centered on their roles as White teachers encountering questions of race in classrooms for SIFE women of color in the United States. Some of their words and phrases gave me pause; "Frightened," "exposed," and "not sure if it was my place," underscored for

me Williams's and Yoder's uncertainty about their roles and paths forward, reflecting a depth of professional vulnerability that I consider to be a gift. For Williams and Yoder, questioning whether to remain silent on issues of race and racial labeling in their classrooms did not appear to be a form of resistance or denial, but rather as an earnest desire to learn more before speaking. As we wrote and worked through the difficult content in this paper, we agreed that, "any system of domination can be seen most clearly from the subject positions of those oppressed by it" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 5). In order to understand such systems at work, then, it is necessary to make space for and listen to voices that have historically been silenced—while recognizing that "the very decision to 'move over' or retreat can occur only from a position of privilege"; the choices to decenter one's perspective (or not) is "an extension or application of privilege, not an abdication of it" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 24-25). With Alcoff's cautions in mind, Williams and Yoder incite me to wonder: How might keeping silent in order to listen work toward "overcom(ing) power differentials" (Delpit, 1995, p. 134) or not?

Ekers added another layer to these questions. She purposely attempted to decenter her teacher position, instead taking up the position of learner (of motherhood) and felt this began to equalize power between herself and students. Certainly, the learners were newly positioned as teachers, and they could take up or reject this position (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). As the classroom teacher, however, Ekers set the direction for class that day—a common action for teachers, yet some might consider antithetical to the project of equalizing power. So, I wonder, in what ways might social positioning like that which took place in Ekers's classroom also serve to "overcome power differential(s)" (Delpit, 1995, p. 134) or not? Additionally, how might such social positioning be helpful or a hindrance when working with those SIFE who hold firm views on "appropriate" teacher-student hierarchies?

With this paper, we have sought to lay open some of our ongoing questions surrounding the possibilities of teachers working against systemic injustices surrounding race and gender that permeate EAL classrooms at all levels. We have wondered if these questions may be particularly challenging to address in classes with beginning level learners, and those whose educational needs center on the most basic literacy practices, such as understanding conventions of print. As stated in our Introduction, we invite public reflection on these questions, and hope this paper will incite further discussion.

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# Transforming Classrooms with the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®

Nan Frydland, Neighbors Link, Mt. Kisco

## Abstract

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®); is a model of instruction that addresses the needs of learners who come from collectivist cultures (especially LESLLA learners and those with limited or interrupted formal education) and encounter obstacles with Western-style formal education based on their different cultural expectations, values, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001; Lurhmann, 2014; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). This paper reports on the implementation of MALP® at a community-based organization in a New York City suburb. During the course of this project, cultural dissonance was reduced, learners developed literacy skills, created a learning community, engaged in academic tasks, and became more actively involved in taking responsibility for their own learning. Additional examples of MALP® practices in other settings illustrate how this model can be incorporated within curricula to transform classrooms and produce successful outcomes for learners.

**Keywords:** LESLLA learners; SLIFE; MALP®; refugees; curriculum framework; project-based learning; classroom practices; critical thinking

## Introduction

An issue that has long plagued programs in the adult education sector is the lack of preparation by both instructors and administrators for incorporating LESLLA learners and Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) into their ESL programs. Experienced, educated teachers often work in programs run by administrators with little understanding of the pedagogy underlying teaching adult immigrants, and even less concerning the teaching of low-literate adults who are unfamiliar with Western-style education. In 2003, I was one of those ill-prepared teachers hired without formal education in the field. Like many adult learners, I relied on independent study and online searches for the knowledge and materials to prepare me for a career change. With four weeks to prepare for my first teaching job as an adjunct instructor in an Intensive English Program, I chose Marianne Celce-Murcia's *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (2001) and *Fifty Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners* (Herrell, 2000) from my online search. Celce-Murcia's book led me to study the work of John Fanselow (the power of observation), Paulo Freire (liberation pedagogy), David Nunan (learner-centered curriculum), and Bonny Norton (identity politics), toss out irrelevant textbooks, co-create curricula with students, incorporate projects and portfolios into my teaching, and encourage critical thinking and social activism in my classrooms. Herrell's book helped me draft lesson plans and infuse them with activities and objectives based on theory and research I had yet to understand.

But, after moving to a New York City suburb, I discovered that three years of teaching experience and two college degrees in English were deemed inadequate to teach in a college ESL program. A master's degree in TESOL was a new requirement for these positions. While I was considering a return to school for this purpose, a neighbor recommended volunteering at a local community center serving a population of Central American day-laborers. Unfamiliar with ESL instruction in this environment, I obtained permission from the director to observe classes with the intention of becoming a volunteer teacher.

Many of the ESL instructors I observed at the community-based organization, Neighbors Link were freshly-minted and sent from the local community college with the directive "English only" in the classroom. They used traditional teacher-centered techniques such as standing in front of the room and pointing to pictures in a textbook, engaging few learners. Most of the men in the classroom sat on the periphery, wearing earbuds connected to cellphones. The teacher handed out worksheets that students, bent over and silent, struggled to finish. There were no notebooks, no textbooks other than the one the teacher displayed. It struck me that most of these teachers probably lacked the instruction they needed to understand how to engage these learners. When I completed my observations, I imagined delivering a course focused on speaking skills relevant to learners' lives, such as getting a job and following instructions. I imagined real tools in the classroom that

would form the basis for students engaging with each other as well as the teacher. Finally, I realized it would be useful to revive my high school Spanish for use in the classroom. I called the course *English for Work*, and after approval from the Center's director, I started teaching a three-hour Saturday morning class in September.

On the first day of *English for Work*, several clients from the Center helped me unpack renovation and landscaping tools from my car. I opened toolboxes, distributed drills, paintbrushes, saws, and the like, on plastic tables in the classroom, and motioned to the men to pick up the tools. Slowly, the men stood up and came to the tables with somewhat bewildered expressions. I told them, first in my beginner Spanish, and then in English, that if they didn't get a job that morning, I would be their teacher, and I asked them what they wanted to talk about. The men picked up the tools and spoke to each other, and then to me. Although I was unaware of it at the time, I was already implementing some of the principles of an innovative approach to reaching LESLLA learners, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, or MALP®.

### **MALP® Foundation: the Intercultural Communication Framework**

MALP® finds its basis in the underlying cultural differences in ways of learning between LESLLA learners and other ESL students. Most of these learners come from collectivistic cultures and have little or no experience with formal education. They are sometimes referred to in the literature as SLIFE when discussing programs for adolescent learners with this background. Learners from collectivist cultures, such as LESLLA learners and SLIFE<sup>1</sup>, often experience cultural dissonance as they encounter unfamiliar Western-style ways of learning like those presented in formal education settings in the United States (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). According to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) traditions promoted by Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1994), teachers must examine their own cultural assumptions and beliefs and see how they influence their educational practices (Fanselow, 1992), and also understand students' cultural assumptions and beliefs, in order to bridge the gap between them (Nieto, 2010). Without this cultural competence, teachers will be unable to understand the nature of the dissonance and reach struggling students.

Grounded in CRT, the Intercultural Communication Framework (ICF), created by Helaine W. Marshall out of her own teaching experiences (1994), provides a way of examining cultures, identifying and accommodating differences in order to transition learners to a new culture. The ICF is based on three overarching principles: “(1) Establish and maintain an ongoing two-way relationship; (2) identify and accommodate priorities in both cultures; and (3) make associations between the familiar and the unfamiliar” (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013, p. 14). How is this accomplished? The first principle requires appreciating that students from oral or collectivist cultures have much closer relationships with teachers than those in the industrial West and the need for these relationships intensifies when learners suffer culture shock in classrooms. Infusing interpersonal information in lesson plans creates the two-way communication that learners are accustomed to.

In the first meeting of a class, for instance, teachers can show photos of their families on their phones and ask students to share theirs. The act of modeling a task becomes an opportunity for teachers to volunteer information about themselves. When language is a barrier between teacher and learner, securing a “cultural broker,” an individual who can be an informant and bridge between cultures may be necessary (Jezewski & Sotnick, 2001). In this way, Moll's “funds of knowledge” can be transmitted (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) so that learners' expertise and knowledge can be shared and valued.

Cultural brokers can also aid in transmitting information about learners' priorities, the second principle in the ICF, but teachers are responsible for their own cultural competence (Nieto, 2010). Students from collectivist or oral cultures prefer their own familiar ways of learning and communicating, which is through oral transmission rather than literacy, and to work together, rather than independently. Instructors' willingness to accommodate these learner preferences and priorities must be balanced with the goal to transition students to academic ways of learning. In this way instructors are moving toward a *mutually adaptive* approach to learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education and LESLLA students encounter similar obstacles in educational settings, but the terms are not interchangeable. Unlike LESLLA learners, SLIFE may have developed literacy or oral skills, but struggle because they're new to the U.S. (Marshall & DeCapua, 2011, 2013).

The third principle of the ICF involves cultural scaffolding. This means that teachers need to make connections between what students are familiar with in their informal ways of learning and the world, and the ways of Western-style education and literacy. The most effective way to do this is by combining unfamiliar information with material and concepts familiar to students. For instance, using photographs of vegetables being harvested in students' home countries as well as photographs from harvests in the United States provides the basis for an exercise in compare and contrast. Students are encouraged to share their experiences and knowledge from their own cultures as well as their experience in their new country. The teacher can draw a chart using information from the students that shows what months vegetables are harvested in students' countries and in the U.S. This forms an introduction to academic ways of thinking and organizing data and it can be used as the part of a lesson unit that could involve critical thinking about farmers' rights, Community Supported Agriculture, or world hunger.

### **The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®)**

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®) is an approach to learning and teaching that addresses the needs of struggling language learners by understanding and responding to students' cultural backgrounds. The differences between the learning paradigms of Western-style education and that of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) from collectivist cultures create cognitive dissonance for millions of immigrants in ESL classrooms (Auerbach 1996; Bigelow, 2010; Hofstede 2001; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). In collectivist cultures, learning is typically orally based, immediately relevant, conducted in informal contexts, shared among participants, and concerned with pragmatic tasks (Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). By contrast, in individualist countries such as the U.S., learners are expected to be ready to engage in academic thinking and decontextualized tasks; they are being trained for future rewards (such as careers); and they will compete with each other in a print-based, formal classroom (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Triandis, 1995). MALP® bridges the gap between low-literate collectivist learners and traditional instruction in U.S. classrooms, by (1) accepting students' conditions for learning in order to overcome cultural dissonance; (2) combining individualist and collectivist processes for learning, (i.e., individual accountability and oral transmission, respectively), and (3) focusing on new activities for learning using familiar language and content, to transition to academic tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). The Teacher Planning Checklist (see Appendix) is a useful tool for mapping out lesson plans to ensure they meet the model's criteria and it can also be used at the conclusion of lessons for teachers to see how well their intentions were implemented.

As a graduate student I decided to be trained by Helaine Marshall as a MALP® instructor because I believed that through the MALP® framework I would be able to incorporate and practice ideas about learning and teaching that were important to me, notably John Dewey, Bonny Norton, Sonia Nieto, Jill Watson, Frank Smith, and L.S. Vygotsky. Shortly after I earned my master's degree, I was invited by administrators of the community center where I had volunteered to return and replace their morning ESL program with instruction based on my *English for Work* model.

### **Implementation site**

The setting for implementation was a local community-based organization (CBO) located thirty-five miles northeast of New York City, called Neighbors Link of Northern Westchester (the Center). Neighbors Link currently has a staff of 14 and 300 volunteers providing ESL instruction and support services to 2,400 immigrants primarily from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru. The CBO serves as a work center connecting hundreds of day-laborers with homeowners who offer jobs in landscaping, gardening, construction, plumbing, painting, housecleaning, demolition, and yard cleanup. It offers employment training and parenting services. Volunteers and teachers from the local community college supply ESL instruction and tutoring mornings, evenings, and weekends. Babysitting services are sometimes provided for ESL students. A recreation room with pool tables and a small café where non-alcoholic drinks and snacks are sold for profit provides income to the Center. ESL instruction is conducted in a large room also used for meetings, celebrations, and community gatherings. The Center is open from 7 a.m. to midnight, offering ESL activities



from three to five hours a day. Neighbors Link recently celebrated its fifteenth anniversary and continues to use the strategies “Educate, Empower, and Employ” to successfully integrate new and long-term immigrant families into the community.



**Figure 1:** *Neighbors Link learners collaborating in classroom with real tools, picture dictionaries, books about tools, and looseleaf binders for class handouts and notes.*

## **Classroom**

The community center is located at the edge of town in an industrial area. Upon entering the community center, one is immediately in a large space that encompasses a job site and an ESL classroom. It is necessary to walk through the classroom in order to access all other rooms in the Center, including the recreation room and café, the administrative offices, and the family learning room. The learners are familiar with the Center and with each other. When classes are not in session, the room is used for board games and watching television. Three-hour morning classes were held three times a week for twelve weeks. The class is open entry/open exit. Ten to eighteen students signed in to each session, although there was always a dozen or so men who sat on the periphery of the class, sometimes watching, sometimes plugged into their cellphones. Nearly all of the participants were day laborers (landscapers, painters, construction workers, carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers and demolition workers) from Guatemala, Honduras, Columbia, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, and El Salvador. They ranged in age from 35-70 and the typical length of time of U.S. residency was six to seventeen years. Most learners had three to eight years of formal education in their home countries, but little instruction in the U.S. Only three had attended classes regularly at the Center, and their literacy levels were the best in the class.

## **MALP® Classroom Preparation**

Many of us teach in spaces that depart from conventional classrooms, as noted above. Warehouse spaces, supply closets, and even office conference rooms, may be all that some programs can supply. It is most important for teachers of LESLLA learners and SLIFE students to establish physical spaces conducive to a positive learning environment. While establishing separate spaces or “learner centers” where materials and

reading chairs can define and enhance learning experiences may not be possible, there are other ways to “create fertile spaces” for learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015), conducive to the MALP® approach. Students should be seated to maximize their ability to work together, rather than facing a board at the front of the class. Ideally, there is no “front” of the class, but rather tables where students work and the teacher circulates. Until the students create their own posters to display on the walls, flags from their home countries could be displayed, or posters with positive sayings or pictures. Picture dictionaries, supplies such as pencils, paper, erasers, and pencil sharpeners, should be accessible to students in order to facilitate independence and less reliance on the teacher.

Recognizing and respecting students’ first languages and encouraging learners to use their native languages is another element that furthers the relationships students create with each other and contributes to the overall interconnectedness in the classroom.

### **MALP® and the Scroll-based Curriculum**

The MALP® approach, as discussed above, is an approach that addresses struggling LESLLA learners’ cognitive dissonance, values students’ funds of knowledge, experiences, ways of learning and ways of being in the world and incorporates those parts of students’ lives into the learning process. At the same time, teachers transition students to Western-style education, including ways of thinking and learning, in order for them to be successful learners beyond the ESL classroom.

Because it is an overall approach to teaching and learning, MALP® can find its way into many different classroom settings and can be implemented using a wide range of techniques. The one I have developed over a two-year period is the scroll-based curriculum. Rather than use a commercial textbook that assumes a level of literacy skills beyond those of many students, the scroll-based curriculum is custom-designed for every classroom, it is economical, and it is functional. Using scrolls, teachers are immediately introducing academic graphic organizers and ways of thinking, beginning the process of developing decontextualized tasks for students, and co-constructing a curriculum, processes and goals often absent from conventional textbooks. Starting with rolls of butcher paper, painter’s tape and markers, MALP® instruction is consistent with the model’s principles as well as a practical measure. Much of the language that will be written on these “scrolls” will be dictated from students (as teachers accept their preferred learning method as oral transmission) and will become the texts that form the basis for learning activities. Typed up and distributed to students, the texts form the basis of lesson plans. The students “own” the language in these texts; they learn how to file the papers in looseleaf binders; and they take them home to study and share. Teachers can use the texts, input on computer, to create a variety of learning materials, such as worksheets, booklets, reports, and portfolios.

A teacher might begin the first class by drawing a chart on butcher paper taped to a white board or wall with headings such as: Name, Home Country, Languages, Work at Home, Work in U.S., Family, Dream, creating a row for each student. The teacher models the task by filling in her own data, and by doing so shares material that is immediately relevant and that also begins to develop interconnectedness. Teacher and learners ask each other questions about the information that goes up on the scroll. This first scroll can be used to teach academic language like title, headings, column, and row, to teach compare and contrast, or to begin instruction in analyzing data. Below is an example, not from the first day, but later on in the course, when learners were able to describe job tasks. It is rich with literacy task possibilities and speaking and listening activities. Eventually, it can be used to form sentence frames.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Job in U.S.</u>	<u>Activities/Actions</u>
Sara Juan	waitress waiter	take orders give orders to the cook set the tables serve food refill water glasses
Jose Hiro Edwin Jose Luis	landscapers	mow the lawn rake the leaves blow the leaves weed the garden
Tony Oscar Santos	painter - outside  painter - inside	wash houses sand decks scrape old paint  spackle, sand, prime paint walls, ceilings, doors, trim

**Figure 2:** *Workers scroll.*

### Pocket Guide for Work

Jobs/Occupations	Activities/Actions	Tools and Things	Materials and Stuff
landscaper	mow the lawn rake the leaves blow the leaves weed the garden	lawn mower rake leaf blower trowel shovel buckets bag wheelbarrow	gas rags oil mulch fertilizer water
painter outside/ exterior	wash houses sand decks scrape old paint	power washer scraper brushes rollers	paint spackle varnish primer
painter inside/interior	paint walls, ceilings, trim, doors sand and spackle	buckets gloves	paint thinner  protective glasses

**Figure 3:** *Typed version of student scroll used by learners to study outside of the classroom.*

For the first two months of classes, learners were eager to learn the names of tools and the jobs they were used for. They drew pictures on one side of a large piece of construction paper and wrote the word on the other side. We played Bingo games with the cards. Students practiced matching the name on the card to the real tool on the table. The next step was to make sentences using the newly learned vocabulary. Students dictated instructions they heard from employers: "Prime those walls." "Bring the paint here." Finally, students began to dictate questions and answers necessary for job negotiations: "Can you paint for ten dollars an hour?" "No, I can't. I'm experienced. I work for fourteen dollars an hour." With the questions and answers written on construction paper, the students organized in logical sequence the sentence strips that contained the language they would hear and use in their lives as day laborers. Teams played against each other to see who would be first to organize their questions and answers correctly.

Other materials, especially realia, are appropriate in conjunction with scrolls. Local maps, news articles, shopping brochures, train and bus schedules, for instance, can be incorporated into meaningful literacy tasks that are immediately relevant to students' lives.

### **Implementation: Coming to the U.S.A**

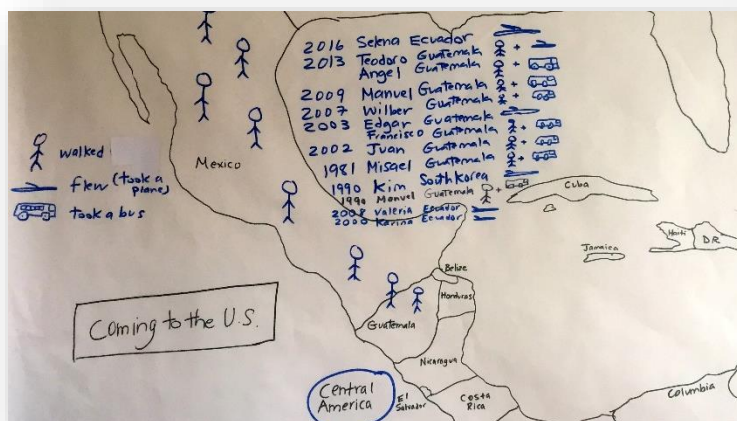
Implementing MALP means designing projects, often as they emerge from students' interests and experiences. Normally adult education centers on freestanding lessons. MALP goes a different route. Here there is a description of each of the elements of MALP and how this project exemplifies the approach.

(1) Help learners overcome cultural dissonance by establishing interconnectedness and creating immediate relevance (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Every class begins with a scroll and some form of chart or question. For this project, I drew a map of the United States and Central America. I asked learners to name the Central American countries and wrote them on the board. Then I shared some information about my own family's immigration to the United States. On a second scroll, I drew a map of the United States and Europe and named the countries my family came from and I drew lines to the states they landed in. I wrote the following questions on the board: What's your name? Where are you from? How old are you? What year did you come? How did you come? One fairly literate student asked me in Spanish: "By land, by sea, or by air?" I wrote that on the board. Then he began to talk about Columbus coming to the U.S. and to South America and killing indigenous people. Others joined the conversation in English and Spanish. Another student said that his own Guatemalan government waged war against indigenous people in the mountains. The students got very excited, comparing the similarities of the genocide that was committed by the Spanish in their own countries and in the U.S. This is exactly what a teacher dreams of: students spontaneously sharing their funds of knowledge and their own experiences.

(2) Utilize shared responsibility and oral transmission as students' familiar learning processes (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

As students turned to the questions on the board and gave me answers, I wrote them on the board. As they began to tell me how they came, I drew symbols for plane, bus, and walking. When all the students had participated and the map was full of their data, I explained that this was the beginning of a project about journeys to the U.S. and everyone had a choice about their level of participation. I asked them to think about whether they would like to draw a picture or tell a story about their immigration to the United States.



**Figure 4:** Coming to the U.S.

scroll-map with data from students dictated to teacher depicting when and how learners made their way from their home countries to the U.S.

(3) Engage learners at all levels of literacy with projects that will form the foundation for acquiring academic tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

In the next class, I presented typed sentence frames culled from the information on the scroll-map. We used it for choral practice, individual and pair readings. Again I asked students to think about whether they wanted to share their stories. I handed out charts with headings and blank spaces where learners practiced writing in the data from the text we had read. They paired up and asked each other the same questions I'd asked and wrote answers. Then I asked them to fill in a blank chart on the scroll in front of class. Below are one group's answers.

name	country	age	year	how
Selena	Ecuador	18	2016	she took a plane
Kim	Korea	60	1990	she took a plane
Francisco	Guatemala	67	2003	by land
Juan	Guatemala	43	2002	walking

by land  
by air  
by sea

**Figure 5:** The results of a student survey that students created using the Coming to the U.S. scroll-map as well as a written questionnaire that students administered in class.

The next phase involved scaffolding a paragraph for students to share something about leaving their home countries. I wrote on the board some sentence frames and provided print copies for students to fill in and read to each other.

Why did you leave? I left \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

I \_\_\_\_\_ expected \_\_\_\_\_.

Life in the United States is \_\_\_\_\_.

Finally, for students who were able and willing, I asked them to write a paragraph about coming to the United States. Only four out of twelve students had the literacy skills at this time to perform this task. One student explained that his experience was so difficult he did not want to remember it. In the future, I hope that more learners will be able and willing to share their narratives. Eventually, the culminating project would be to make a booklet of drawings, narratives, and handouts, and to publish the booklet so that it could be used as a text for current and future students at the Center.

Coming to the U.S.A. is a MALP® project that could be adapted for use in many classroom environments. During the course of this project, LESLLA learners and SLIFE students developed a meaningful context for literacy (Auerbach, 1996; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003); co-created their own curriculum working with their teacher; developed a sense of learning community; reduced cultural dissonance; and acquired literacy, oral, and academic skills useful in their lives and in transitioning to other educational contexts. This project could be used as is or adapted for use in many learning environments and the materials used in it could easily be made available to other instructors. I invite other like-minded MALP® practitioners to consider a collaboration.

## Conclusion

The MALP® approach to teaching LESLLA learners and SLIFE is innovative and effective. It is based on the principle that learners' values, expectations and priorities are different than those in Western-style education, and as a result, students experience a cultural dissonance that interferes with learning, and it addresses this conflict by respecting learners' and teachers' educational paradigms. It replaces timeworn and unsuccessful methods of teaching that fail to recognize the value of adult low-literate learners' experiences, knowledge, expectations, and priorities. Instead, it requires first that teachers understand the differences between the educational paradigms of students' home countries and the model presented in Western-style education. Then, it outlines a process of mutual adaptation, which begins with teachers creating an interconnectedness in the classroom that is different from what they are accustomed to and making learning immediately relevant to students. MALP® engages struggling students by allowing collaboration and oral interaction as well as incorporating individual responsibility in the classroom. And finally, MALP® focuses on decontextualized tasks that require academic ways of thinking in order to transition students to successful learning beyond the ESL classroom.

Because MALP® is an approach to learning and teaching that is highly adaptable in adult education environments, it has been used successfully in community center programs as well as college Intensive English Programs. It is compatible with project-based learning, the Language Experience Approach, Competency-Based-Education, and the communicative approach. Educators and administrators responsible for incorporating LESLLA learners and SLIFE into their ESL programs would be well-advised to consider this approach.



## MALP® Websites:

<http://malpeducation.com>

<http://malp.pbworks.com>

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Appendix

<b>MALP® Teacher Planning Checklist</b>	
<b>A. Accept Conditions for Learning</b>	
<b>A1. I am making this lesson/project immediately relevant to my students.</b>	
<b>A2. I am helping students develop and maintain interconnectedness.</b>	
<b>B. Combine Processes for Learning</b>	
<b>B1. I am incorporating both shared responsibility and individual accountability.</b>	
<b>B2. I am scaffolding the written word through oral interaction.</b>	
<b>C. Focus on New Activities for Learning</b>	
<b>C1. I am focusing on tasks requiring academic ways of thinking.</b>	
<b>C2. I am making these tasks accessible with familiar language and content.</b>	

# **Literacy as social (media) practice: Refugee youth and native language literacy at school**

Martha Bigelow, University of Minnesota

Kendall King, University of Minnesota

Jenifer Vanek, University of Minnesota

Nimo Abdi, University of Minnesota

## **Abstract**

Teachers often struggle to find ways to use their refugee students' native languages in ways that encourage the development of the native language as well as academic language and literacy in the new language. This project examined how a critical literacy curriculum unit, which used Facebook as a tool for interaction and publishing student work, served as a context for native language and English literacy development. Participants were adolescent newcomers from the Horn of Africa with limited or interrupted formal schooling experiences. As transnationals, most used social media to interact with others locally and globally, in multiple languages, oral and written. Findings illustrate the various ways that native languages are used across social and academic purposes in the classroom, and the ways in which culture is delimited in the instruction and by youth. Implications for educators include discussion of in-class use of social media analysis to achieve multilingual and (critical) literacy learning aims.

A wide and deep body of research indicates that students' native languages can promote additional language learning, the development of content knowledge and skills, and literacy acquisition (e.g., Cummins 2000). The maintenance and development of two or more languages over time is associated with multiple academic, linguistic, and cognitive advantages for individuals (Bialystok, 2007). Numerous, large-scale studies indicate that students who have the opportunity to develop and maintain their native languages outperform their peers in monolingual programs on measures of both English language literacy and content knowledge (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002; Krashen & McField, 2005).

For adolescent students with interrupted/limited formal schooling, the value of native language instruction is potentially even greater. One of the few large-scale analyses of adolescent and adult refugee learners found that use of students' native languages in instruction was associated with faster growth in English reading comprehension and oral communication skills (Condelli, Spruck Wrigley & Yoon, 2008). Overall, the literature on adult second language reading indicates that instruction that strengthens native language reading skills positively impacts the development of second language reading skills (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1996).

## **Policy and Informed Pedagogy**

In light of the empirical evidence supporting the use of students' native language, the U.S. state of Minnesota recently passed the Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act (H.F. 2397). This 2014 law frames multilingualism as an asset for all Minnesota students and sets a high bar for native language support for English language learners. The legislation challenges educators to use the students' native languages as a resource in English language and literacy development, and to use culturally and linguistically relevant teaching to inspire learning. During the same legislative session, Section 37 of Minnesota Statutes 2012 (Section 124D.59) was amended to include and define a new category of English learner: Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE).

While many educators of multilingual students embrace the idea that students' native languages are assets, it is often challenging to incorporate students' native languages into their instruction (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). A common first step is for teachers to establish linguistically 'open' learning spaces in which students are encouraged to use all of their languages to engage with curricular content, for instance, by summarizing a reading with a partner in their native language (see Herrmann, 2016 for more suggestions). Many of these

strategies, however, are limited to oral modes of communication and restricted to out-of-school or after-school spaces. Relatively little is known about how teachers might encourage students to grow and develop their native language literacy skills in highly multilingual contexts and within a wider community with varied experiences with formal education.

### **Research-Informed Curriculum**

In light of these broad challenges, our objective was to teach using English and students' native languages, across modalities, and examine these practices. To do so, we designed a curriculum unit that utilized social media, specifically Facebook. We created a whole-class Facebook group, using the "secret group" function to control membership and to prevent posts in the secret group from appearing on students' personal pages. Then, we introduced smaller monolingual secret groups in which transnational youth could use social media to engage with academic learning while at the same time creating a socially supported, visually rich context for native language literacy use.

### **Digital Literacy and Refugee Youth**

We chose Facebook because almost all of the students had their own Facebook page, or had previously used one, so were familiar with the tool. This should come as little surprise because for many refugees, connectivity is vital: "smartphones and mobile access are now essential tools for the hundreds of thousands of refugees" (Byrne & Solomon, 2015), particularly during times of mobility and resettlement. Using social media in formal schooling makes it possible for youth to build on existing strengths afforded by mediated interaction (Leurs, 2014), and gives a context to use visual and print-based literacies, given that native language oral use is possible face-to-face in class.

### **Critical Media Analysis, Culture as Content, and Remix**

This work was rooted in our belief that it is possible and productive to engage refugee youth new to schooling in meaningful, youth-focused digital media literacy learning in order to develop skills in the many dimensions of academic literacy. The standards-based curriculum that we developed was designed to engage youth in multilingual language interaction and inspire them to produce and discuss texts critically in order to explore and possibly upset status quo representations of their cultures. The essential questions that framed the curricular unit included:

1. What are the ways in which we understand native language culture through representations on the web?
2. How do we use social media to express, create, and understand ourselves?
3. How does using my native language make it easier to write about my cultural identity?
4. How does writing in my native language first help me write in English?
5. How does participation in content creation on the web impact second language (L2) learning?

Our academic objective was for students to produce written and oral analyses throughout the unit. We wanted students to engage in critical analyses of texts (including visual images) and contribute to the body of artifacts online that could represent their perspectives about their culture. We designed instruction to encourage the youth to use all their digital and linguistic resources throughout the process and in final products. The culminating project, done alone or in groups, was an individual or co-created digital text and an oral presentation that represented some aspect of the students' culture. The project emphasized strong literacy instruction as a social and intellectual phenomenon grounded in cultural and linguistic assets (Cummins & Early, 2011; Celic & Seltzer, 2012;).

As in the work of Cummins and Early (2011), we led our multilingual students in instructional activities that expanded the notion of literacy beyond print-based reading and writing, and affirmed and built on any of the language and literacy skills that the students brought to the academic tasks, including native language and

cultural knowledge. Hence, the products that resulted from the work are constitutive of their identity, not just displays of language of schooling and second language proficiency. Cummins and Early (2011) call the products of such work ‘identity text’ and argue that creating identity texts allows students to craft a ‘counter-discourse’ to “the implicit devaluation of students’ abilities, languages, cultures, and identities that occurs in classrooms where students’ preferred way of meaning making and home languages are ignored or treated with ‘benign neglect’” (p. 4).

Contributions of such work posted online are a key element of digital inclusion in a time when authorship is broadly distributed, and the tools of media production are available in many settings. A key construct here is ‘remix,’ which requires an author to appropriate elements of published media and recombine them in a new creative blend (Lessig, 2005). Supporting youth as they create their own remixed representations of their culture provided them the opportunity to gain skills curating, evaluating, and contributing to collective knowledge. Together, remix and native language use give youth an opportunity to talk back to and participate in the construction of knowledge online.

## Research Questions

Informed by the work reviewed above, we created our curriculum with a commitment to a sort of literacy instruction that affirmed students’ identities, was grounded in the classroom, and excited students using social media typically reserved for out-of-school use. Our research questions were the following:

1. How do students respond to efforts to promote peer-to-peer native language communication?
2. How does native language use promote opportunities to learn academic content, skills, and language?

## Methodology

To address these questions, we focused in particular on students’ language use while participating in the classroom activities (see Bigelow, Vanek, King & Abdi [in press] for expanded discussion of project). Project data included a downloaded copy of the class Facebook pages (22 pages, produced over 11 days) and video recordings of students’ presentations (approximately 3 hours of recordings). We analyzed how the students used multiple languages, images, and interaction in the Facebook groups in an effort to understand how they expressed meaning, created community, and represented themselves. We strove for a high degree of analytical quality and rigor through a number of means. For instance, we built *credibility* through the deep expertise of our research team. Our analyses created *dependability* and *confirmability* through collaboration among authors, including a multilingual Somali-speaking author (Abdi), and peer debriefing between the authors who were also instructors (Bigelow and Vanek).

## Context

Minnesota is home to a large East African population. U.S. Census data estimated that there were 44,000 East Africans living in Minnesota in 2012, home to the largest Somali-born population (21,000) in the United States, although this number is widely believed to be inaccurately low. The majority of the foreign-born individuals from Somalia in the US are refugees or asylees (82% in 2010), and 40% of the Somali-born residents have less than a high school education (Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). In Minnesota public schools, in academic year 2014-2015, district data indicate that there were 19,126 Somali-speaking children and 1,517 Oromo-speaking children.

This project was carried out in a secondary school (grades 9- 12) with an all-immigrant and majority East African student body. “Kennedy” enrolls about 150 students every year and employs 10 teachers. The ESL teacher allowed us to guest teach the unit during a summer school English as a second language (ESL) class. We delivered the instruction over five days, which spanned a period of three weeks during summer school. We borrowed a class set of iPads from our University for in-class use after installing Facebook and PicCollage on

each device. The authors, the regular ESL teacher, and an Oromo and Somali-speaking Kennedy staff member from the school were in all of the Facebook groups.

## Participants

The summer class was made up of 19 students, 14 from East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Djibuti, Ethiopia) and five from Ecuador. In this analysis, we focus on the 14 participants in the Somali secret Facebook group, which included all of the Somali speaking students as well as the two students who identified as Oromo and also spoke Somali. All of these students experienced limited or interrupted access to native language literacy and formal schooling and they all had refugee experiences, including displacement, residence in refugee camps, and separation from family members (Abdi, 2007). The guest instructors (Bigelow and Vanek) positioned themselves as teachers. They used English in their instruction but facilitated native language use among students throughout the unit.

## Findings

We found that students participated with high levels of engagement and enthusiasm throughout the project. This was particularly true of the Somali students. As the class was acclimating to using Facebook together, the participants introduced themselves, linked their Facebook name to their real name or how they are known in the actual classroom (“This is xxxx how is everyone”), or posted a basic, friendly welcomes (“Heeeeeeeey you guys”) to classmates they already know.

## Posts in the Somali-language Facebook group

Participation in the Somali-language Facebook group was highly multilingual. Table 1 illustrates how many students (all pseudonyms, except the instructors) authored posts and which languages were used. Most of the activity on this Facebook page occurred over seven days, and overlapped with three of the five days of face-to-face instruction. What is apparent in this overview is the fact that the participants used many of their languages, not just Somali, in the Somali-only Facebook group.

**Table 1. Overview of number of posts and languages used by participants**

Facebook Pseudonym/Gender	Total Posts	Languages Used
Safia Abdi (F)	2	1 English; 1 French & Somali
مرحباً بكم (M)	2	1 Somali; 1 English & Somali
Mohamed Ahmed (M)	6	4 English; 1 English & Somali; 1 English & Spanish
Jaceyl Mooge (M)	5	1 English; 4 English & Somali
Sahara Haji (F)	3	1 Somali; 2 English & Somali
Maryam Hasan (F)	2	2 Somali
Ayan Ali (F)	4	2 English; 1 Somali; 1 English & Somali
Xasiloon LX Ahmed (F)	2	1 English; 1 English & Somali
Moos Ballon Dorka (M)	1	1 English & Somali
Quruxley Farhiya (F)	2	2 English

Maymun Jama (F)	2	2 English
Jen Vanek (F)	3	3 English
Martha Bigelow (F)	3	2 English & Somali; 1 Somali

### Peer-to-Peer Multilingual Language Use

From the outset, participants used their multiple languages in multiple ways in the Somali-only Facebook group. For example, in the following excerpt, the participant began with a greeting in Somali (*Wallalaha*), switched to English (*Kennedy international high school welcome to high like me if like. or help us comments OK please*) and then switched back to Somali (*fadlan kqsooqayb gala schoolkan ooy waxbarashadiisu aad iyo aad usarayso*), which roughly translates to “please, participate this school, which has high academic standards.” (July 11, 2015, Sahara Haji)

This mix of Somali and English encouraged peers to “like” the post and participate in the school. The post affirms the quality of the high school, thus legitimizing both activities. The use of multiple languages can also be seen in the following excerpts (Figures 1-3) as the students introduced themselves and welcomed each other to the group.

An example of such a post in the Somali Facebook group can be seen in Figure 1, below.



Figure 1. Self-translated introduction, July 9, 2015

This post demonstrates the inclusive practice some of the youth employed of self-translating from Somali into English. Table 2, below, shows how much overlap there is between the Somali and the English text.

**Table 2. Translation of excerpt 2**

<i>Somali (and English) original</i>	<i>English translation</i>
--------------------------------------	----------------------------

Magaceygo wa a مرحباً بكم mahad waxaan ka imid Somali waxaan jecelahay qof kasta welalayaasha qaaliga ah	My name is مرحباً بكم and I am from Somali love to all of my revered brothers (gender inclusive)
and I say my name is مرحباً بكم and la m from Somali and I love everybody and you all my brother aand sisters and iamsaying thank you for make this conversation	
walaalayaal waa Odin jecelahay	I love you all, dear brothers (gender inclusive)

Like the previous post, this one is positive and inviting in English and Somali. Peers affirm the post by reading it: “Seen by 15”, with three “likes” and four comments.

After the introductory posts, the Somali Facebook group served as an open space for peers to share emerging content for their culture projects, and practice creating media representing their culture and writing about their ideas. In Figure 2, we see that a female student writes about the cultural practice of henna tattoos, particularly for special events (e.g., weddings) and holidays (e.g., Eid). This participant initiated other posts about food and Hijab fashion in English, and also responded to Somali or translingual posts in English.



Figure 2. Somali henna, July 11, 2015

As the workshop unfolded, the complexity of the topics increased, moving from introductions to affirmations to posts such as this photograph of a bus in Somalia (Figure 3). This image begins to approach topics related to culture that are more complicated than food and fashion. Facebook reports that nine people saw the photo, but nobody commented on it. One reason may be that that this content is more difficult to discuss.



Figure 3. Everyday culture, July 14, 2015

The students' multilingual Facebook posts have many possible explanations. First, many multilingual youth are accustomed to communicating with other multilingual youth, who leverage all of their linguistic skills for a wide range of communicative purposes, including humor and evoking religion. This is evident, in the multiple ways youth used language in the Somali secret group. For instance, the names they chose often carried deeper meaning in Somali. One male student's name signals "flying," which speaks to experiences of travel. In addition, the youth used a variety of pictures to accompany their text. The students were extremely aware of their audience and making their posts comprehensible to all, while fronting particular linguistic and cultural identities. Furthermore, their language and visual choices are informed not as much by the goals set out by the instructors, but often by interactions that occurred among students.

### Process Writing and Content Engagement

The second part of our analysis focuses on how the students used their languages as well as technologies to engage in critical media analysis and to create their final projects. We found that students used the iPads to find images for their collages, look up multiple and multimodal versions of Somali folktales, and to compose and share text, often collaboratively and always using their native languages orally as they worked together. For



example, one student opted to use a hard copy of a bilingually written Somali folktale to compose her own version of the text while another found a narrated version on YouTube. During the composing process, students worked side-by-side on their own projects while consulting each other frequently or composing text together. Throughout the writing process, we encouraged students to use all their languages to create their projects to be posted on the Facebook page, as well as presented orally.

In addition to scaffolding the production of the text through a multilingual writing process, we also scaffolded the content of the projects, which focused on the topic of how cultures are represented in the media and online. Our first discussion about culture was done in English; we led the youth through an activity where they used a graphic organizer to take notes about different aspects of their native culture(s) including concrete things such as food and dress. We tried to model critique of popular images of culture by sharing negative images in the media of our own cultures to the students (e.g., everyone eats fast food), and counter-discourse to the way the media portrays our own lives and communities. This did not seem to inform any of the early representations of culture posted by the students in the Facebook group until a student posted a picture of a dwelling in a refugee camp (Figure 4). This post emerged among a number of posts of Somali and Ethiopian houses, including a screenshot with a Google search term “Somalia homes”, showing how one student was finding images.



Figure 4: This is not a Somali house, July 13, 2015

This image, with the student produced text “Mansh allaha guriyhii Somalia Africa” (*English: God bless the Somali houses in Africa*), triggered an intense and lively discussion among Somali speakers:

Students: [much overlapping discussion among students in Somali]

Instructor: Maryam? Where's Maryam? [The instructor was trying to find the author of the post using her Facebook name.]

Student: That is not culture.

Instructor: Come on up. You don't wanna talk about this one?

Student: Fadeexa waaye (*English: It's embarrassing/outing*)

[loud, excited, inaudible cross talk]

Martha: Yeah, ok, so where is this? Where is this picture? [inaudible cross-talk]

Student: Naa naga tag (*English: Get lost*) [this comment is made to another female]

Martha: Ok, ok, let's go one person at a time. Sadio do you have a comment?

Student: It is written here that is Somalia

Student: Somali people are not like that

This moment in the instruction was a critical rupture in how the students understood their task to create cultural representations of their own. Maryam clearly understood the task and posted an image of how her culture is portrayed in the media, as homeless, as refugees, as desperate. She wished to trouble this, and offer a counter-discourse to this very simplistic and inaccurate depiction of Somali culture. The loud claim from a peer, "That is not culture," worked to solidify a new way of thinking about culture. After this critical incident, the whole class began to produce more sophisticated collages and writing about their collages.

### From Process to Product

The collaborative work students did appear multilingually in the Somali group, in the whole-class secret group, and even on one student's Facebook wall. Students produced collages on topics of their choice and wrote text to accompany their images. Then, each group did an oral presentation in English while projecting their Facebook post onto a screen in front of the room.

Three students (2 ethnically Somali and 1 ethnically Oromo) produced a Facebook post collaboratively, but with one student typing the text in English. Figure 7 shows the youth presenting together.



Figure 5. Somali/Oromo presentation

The written text of the Facebook post says:

*These picture is show as somali and oromo culture together all around the world has different cultures but somali and oromo culture is close is the same*

The images on the post include depictions of shared aspects of the two cultures: traditional clothing, agricultural practices, holiday celebrations, community gatherings and religious practices.

Segments of the transcription of the 4 minute, 37 second oral presentation, the class discussion that followed, and the students' Facebook posts made in response to the collage show how the projects supported multiple types of academic literacy, and the result of extensive work in the students' native languages, in ways that seemed to enhance the presentations in English. To illustrate, one of the students, Mohamed, begins the group presentation quite formally, as represented in the following excerpts:

*First of all we're starting here today to presentation our culture. Oromo culture. Somali culture together. and we're working to show us exactly what Somali culture is and we're trying to know what everybody culture is. our classmates...*

In this excerpt, the student is setting the stage for the presentation and establishing that there are many commonalities between Oromo and Somali cultures with the pictures. Then Amin takes over, and refers to the text on the screen and says: *"This is say here, the culture of Somali and Oromo we are close speaking language and writing also speaking."* While Mohamed is able to speak extemporaneously and present using a formal register, Amin reads text from the screen as he points to individual words. Amin then turns the floor over to Ahmed, the Oromo speaker, with a formal gesture. Ahmed begins by addressing the class and reinforces the previously argued thesis restating many similarities found between Oromo and Somali culture, religion, and language.

After the presentation, Ahmed was asked about the picture of the tree. He said: *"Just I said I explained. When people celebrate culture holiday they go, a long time ago, they go near the tree and they celebrate together. And they talk together and they eat some food in here."* We notice that Amin says less than his peers during the presentation except for when someone from the audience asks him about a photograph. He says, *"I don't know what to call it [hesitates/looks to partners] from the skin of the animals we put like this one in the house [points to the same picture that Mohamed referred to, showing the wedding and house].* Because Amin seems to flounder, an exchange occurs, allowing for all to learn the word "beehive", "the home of honey ah ah the home of bee". At this point, the class is chatting multilingually about the photograph after which the class asks a few more questions and applauds the group.

We believe that the culturally relevant, multilingual and translingual processes which came before the presentation contributed to a highly engaging, comprehensible presentation. The students' emphasis on the similarity between Somali and Oromo culture is in direct opposition to the post about the refugee home. Conversely, in their presentation they discuss the significance of rituals, household items, and climate condition in producing the culture of everyday living. By building on and speaking back to the knowledge that is produced by their peers, the youth demonstrated academic ways of engaging with content. They were active participants in negotiating issues of representation and voice with regard to cultural production. As illustrated here, the use of native languages in the Facebook project created the needed spaces for these youth to bring all of their languages together while at the same time engaging the work of literacy development through intellectually and culturally relevant ways.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This study examined student response to efforts to promote peer-to-peer native language communication, and concomitantly, how these efforts are linked with opportunities for student learning of curriculum and academic content. With respect to the first objective, we found that despite our efforts to create a monolingual, native language workspace for students, their participation was characterized by multilingual, highly inclusive posts. With respect to the second objective of the study, our data suggests that use of the native language provided multimodal opportunities for engagement with course curriculum and activities. Students, for instance, were able to move on to more complex and nuanced discussions of culture in the second part of the course, in part through their translingual and native language work.

## **Pervasive Monoglossic Perspective**

Reflecting on these findings in the local context of our work, we suggest that new legislation promoting students' native languages in Minnesota schools is certainly a welcome advance, and one that is in line with substantial empirical work indicating the benefits of such an approach. However, one important finding of this project is that these policies are out of step with the ways that transnational youth use language translingually. As Menken (2013) observes, even the more innovative bilingual approaches, policies and their attendant

rationales operate “from a monoglossic perspective” which “addresses each of a bilingual’s languages separately, without acknowledging the possibility that the minds of bilinguals work differently in ways that involve dynamic languaging, and that therefore demand new pedagogies and classroom practices” (Menken, 2013, p. 465). This monolingual perspective is evident, for instance, in the Minnesota legislation’s delineation of English language development and native language development as separate objectives, with instructional planning and assessment measures viewed as independent. This monoglossic bias was also at work in our own assumptions that framed this project, such as our attempts to establish monolingual (Somali, Oromo, or Spanish) writing groups.

## **Translanguaging**

More recent work, led by Ofelia García and her colleagues, in contrast, has emphasized the translangual nature of language competence and use. For García and Wei (2014), translanguaging is the dynamic process whereby multilingual language users mediate complex social and cognitive activities through strategic employment of multiple semiotic resources to act, to know and to be. Translanguaging is the understanding of the linguistic proficiencies of multilinguals as a unified system, not separate monolingual entities (García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging is a particularly useful construct for understanding the language use of migrants in a transnational and highly technological world because, although it can incorporate code-switching as a description of linguistic repertoire, it moves beyond it to fluidly include all discursive practices.

Applying translanguaging in the classroom means adopting a translanguaging framework that “ensures that students’ different native language practices are not only validated, but also used and leveraged for academic purposes - to think critically and creatively, to produce authentic work, to analyze language use, to better understand what are traditionally known as students’ own bidialectal and bilingual practices” (García & Hesson, 2015, p. 221). This reconceptualization of multilingual language use challenges monolingual and even bilingual assumptions that permeate current language education policy and instead, treats translangual discourse as the norm. Our data show that we need to move toward practices which “support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality” (Paris, 2012, p. 95) that youth already possess and use, and that these assets can even be leveraged for the development of native language literacies.

## **Impact of Social Media and Remix**

Encouraging youth to employ remixing and translanguaging together in support of their learning, especially when using social media as an instructional tool, is synergistic. Social media, by definition, is participatory, and requires viewing literacy as a social practice and an opportunity to express a “critical reading of reality” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 36). Affording learners the opportunities to draw on all literacy and linguistic resources in support of their participation can help them develop awareness of their ability to “contribute to collective intelligence” ... and recognize how an individual “shapes the web environment through our digital networks, whether they exist on social networking, social sharing or microblogging sites” (Pegrum, 2011, p. 9). Through this project, we saw the potential for pedagogies involving social media to foster the sort of engagement that permits refugee and immigrant youth to use their linguistic and cultural resources to create content not only for their peers locally, in class, but for global audiences.

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# **I raise my voice: Promoting *self-authoring* among female students in Afghanistan through an online-based curriculum**

Lea Gabay, San Francisco State University

## **Abstract**

The Internet has given rise to opportunities to teach English outside of the classroom and reach a wider range of learners. This is particularly true for learners who come from areas where access to education is limited. This article will discuss a study that examines *self-authoring* development, a process of taking control of one's life to teach a female learner in Afghanistan through the interplay of language development and a digital tool called VoiceThread.

Keywords: self-authoring, digital tool, online learning, Learners' Lives as Curriculum, Afghanistan, critical thinking, intellectual sponsors

## **Introduction**

*"I learned if I stand, everyone will stand, other women in my country will stand."* When I read these words from Roya, an aspiring female writer in Afghanistan, who writes for a mentorship program called the Afghan Women's Writing Project ([www.awwp.org](http://www.awwp.org)), I am reminded of my role as a teacher: I seek to plant a small seed in the mind of my students in the hope that they will one day gain awareness of their abilities as powerful agents of change. Roya's desire to raise her voice is exactly what I wish for all my students who find themselves in environments where their voices are suppressed based on their race, gender, ethnicity, creed, or sexual orientation. More substantially, I believe in my students' capacity to make their own decisions and seek out opportunities for themselves.

Further, I choose to reach out to students whose beliefs (i.e., religious beliefs) and worldview may be significantly different from mine to foster dialog through exposure to a variety of perspectives. That is one of the reasons why I have involved myself in teaching students from other faiths, predominantly the Muslim faith. Indeed, as a teacher, I deem it important to learn about my students' faiths while sharing my own religious identity with them. Thus, my aim is to encourage reflection on both their beliefs and worldview, and by extension, to build mutual understanding and acceptance.

I began teaching female students in Afghanistan four years ago when I volunteered to provide English lessons online via Skype through a US-based non-profit organization called AIWR (Alliance for International Women's Rights) ([www.aiwr.org](http://www.aiwr.org)). AIWR's mission is to support women's rights and promote female empowerment through English language learning in areas where women's access to education is limited. To this end, AIWR partners with a vocational training center known as KIMS (Kandahar Institute for Modern Studies) ([www.theafghanschool.org](http://www.theafghanschool.org)) located in Kandahar, Afghanistan, to offer English classes online to male and female students at this center.

In this article, I will describe a study on the use of a CMC tool called VoiceThread ([www.voicethread.com](http://www.voicethread.com)) to promote self-authoring, a term coined by Hernandez-Zamora (2010) to refer to critical thinking skills development and the acquisition of language resources to take charge of one's life, within the context of an online class with a female student in Afghanistan. Key to this project was examining ways of cultivating self-authoring through a self-designed online ESL curriculum, and VoiceThread, a digital tool which enables users to record their voices, upload their recordings onto the VoiceThread website, add pictures or videos, and receive oral or written comments from other users. In effect, the primary goal of this curriculum is to provide learners with an awareness of their place in the world, as well as opportunities to make their own decisions and play a more active role in their learning process.

In the following, I present a brief contemporary history of Afghanistan, along with an overview of women's access to education in the country. Then, drawing on a body of literature that examines the interplay

between language development and digital tools, I investigate whether they can also contribute to self-authoring development. I describe the teaching context in which I piloted the project and provide a rationale for the topics included in the online curriculum. I finally discuss some limitations and recommendations based on the results of this project.

## **Background**

Afghanistan's contemporary history has been beset by the Anglo-Afghan war lasting from 1839 to 1842, a full-scale invasion launched by the Soviet Army in 1979, and the United-States' involvement in overthrowing Soviet forces in the 1980s. Between 1989 and 1992, Afghanistan experienced a civil war which resulted in its Soviet-controlled government being toppled and replaced by a group of US-backed guerilla fighters known as the Mujahideen. Yet another civil war ensued between 1992 and 1996 during which the Mujahideen ceded their power to insurgents called the Taliban. Upon ceasing control, the Taliban imposed over the following four years a brutal and repressive regime. During that period, the Afghan population was confronted with extreme hardship; women especially were subjected to inhumane treatment (BBC, 2014). While the US-led invasion ejected the Taliban from power and replaced with an interim government in 2001 under the guise of restoring peace and stability, to this day, Afghanistan is still plagued by ongoing violence (BBC, 2014). According to a survey conducted by the Asian Foundation (2012), three of the main issues that continue to ravage Afghanistan are: insecurity (e.g., attacks, terrorism), unemployment, and corruption.

In addition, the issue of women's rights has been slowly gaining traction in Afghan society. Although the country is still steeped in strong cultural traditions which dictate gender roles according to the patriarchal system, the advent of the internet has increased women's contact with the rest of the world, giving rise to a growing awareness of gender norms and alternative discourses about women's role in society in other countries (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013; Manganaro, & Alozie, 2011). Spurred on by women's movements from other countries that address the plight of women worldwide, an increasing number of Afghan women have begun to contemplate ways of transferring those alternative perspectives to their own culture to demand greater equality and involvement in decision-making at a local and national level (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013). Nevertheless, the notion of emancipation and self-determination prescribed by Western ideology does not sit well with certain Afghan women who disavow it, preferring to adhere to traditionally-ascribed gender roles (Manganaro, & Alozie, 2011).

Further, changes relating to alternative perspectives about women and women's greater access to jobs in the field of business, education, and politics notwithstanding, religious, ethnic, and historical forces continue to exert an influence on gender attitudes, thereby deterring progress towards the endowing of more rights to women (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013). To compound the problem, a great majority of women are faced with a multitude of violations to their basic rights which include forced marriage, rape, or child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Domestic violence in Afghanistan is pervasive: According to a survey by Global Rights (Clifton, 2012), more than 85% of women have been victim of domestic violence. Interestingly, a UNICEF report about Afghan women's perception of domestic violence revealed that 92% of the women surveyed justified a husband beating his wife (as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 12).

## **Literature review**

Integration of digital technology into the language classroom has recently become more commonplace. Indeed, a growing number of studies have focused on digital storytelling as a tool for enhancing language learning (Lambert, 2007; Ohler, 2008). Results indicate that learners involved in reflective thinking to evaluate and interpret the content of stories, made use of various types of literacies (e.g. multimodal forms of communication), improved their problem-solving skills, and established a community of practice (Ohler, 2008; Sadik, 2008; Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

One digital tool used in digital storytelling tasks is VoiceThread. This particular CMC tool has been considered effective for fostering collaborative learning, motivation, language development, and active participation (Huot, 2014). Lee (2014) examined how the use of VoiceThread in creating digital news stories in Spanish increased Spanish learners' oral skills and content knowledge. Data showed that the use of VoiceThread



to discuss the news empowered the learners to express themselves, exchange information, and establish a sense of community (p. 338). However, as a limitation, Lee (2014) noted a lack of critical thinking skills development, inasmuch as not enough attention was paid to encouraging learners to challenge each other's opinions and ask thought-provoking questions. Thus, one can question what purpose this tool serves in the language classroom and how it can be used in a more meaningful way.

One of the primary goals of using digital tools such as VideoThread is to develop *self-authoring*, (i.e., critical thinking skills development) and acquisition of the necessary linguistic resources in order to free oneself from the burden of sociohistorical circumstances, to be able to speak for oneself and make one's own decisions (Hernandez Zamora, 2010). That voice can only come into being once individuals, who have been marginalized and have experienced feelings of self-inferiorization, are equipped with the necessary discursive practices (Freire, 2001; Hernandez Zamora, 2010). The purpose would be to become self-authors who are independent thinkers, unburdened by the beliefs and ideologies of institutions that perpetuate discriminatory practices. Thus, it may be worth exploring the choice of topics within a classroom setting and providing opportunities for individuals as language learners to express themselves on the topic and reach a level of awareness of their own place in the world.

## **The project**

### **Classroom context**

I piloted this project within the context of a one-to-one online English class which I taught to a female student named Mahida<sup>2</sup> using Skype under the auspices of a US-based non-profit organization called AIWR (Alliance for International Women's Rights) ([www.aiwr.org](http://www.aiwr.org)). AIWR's mission is to support women's rights and promote female empowerment through English language learning in areas where women's access to education is limited. To this end, AIWR partners with a vocational training center known as KIMS (Kandahar Institute for Modern Studies) ([www.theafghanschool.org](http://www.theafghanschool.org)) located in Kandahar, Afghanistan, to offer English classes online to male and female learners at this center. At the time of the study, Mahida had been studying English for about two years and her level of English was low-intermediate. Her goals were to improve her speaking and listening skills to be able to communicate more fluently in English and study abroad in the future. Our classes were held on Sunday and Monday morning from 7 AM to 7: 50 AM, local time in Afghanistan.

Mahida is part of a group of learners who were selected to study through AIWR and KIMS's joint online English program. The other learners in the program are either university students, homemakers, or young professionals. Their level of English ranges from Pre-Intermediate to Upper-Intermediate. The classes are taught remotely by volunteer English teachers from all over the world via Skype. In addition, they are held on two consecutive days for 50 minutes at set times either early in the morning, at 7 AM, or in the afternoon between 1 PM and 4 PM. Classes last for three months with a possibility of extending their duration. In order for learners to access their lessons online, they go to a computer room at KIMS where they are assigned a specific computer and given a headset. Because of the low bandwidth, learners and teachers are not recommended to use a webcam to communicate. They, therefore, have to resort to the chat box or the microphone.

Finally, once teachers submit their availabilities, the AIWR Volunteer Coordinator matches them with a learner and sends them an introductory email with a short profile of the learner. She includes guidelines about the learner's initial language assessment and the way to complete a monthly report on the student's skills and the topics discussed. There is also information about completing a three-month report detailing the student's progress in all four skills and a summary of the topics.

### **Rationale for the online curriculum**

My goal for the online curriculum was to incorporate topics that could foster self-authoring development and provide an opportunity for learners to share and record their opinions with the help of VoiceThread. To this

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end, I referred to Weinstein and Cloud's (2007) curriculum entitled *Lives Unfolding* which focuses on learners' identities as a means of exploring their place in the world and developing agency. Based on this format, I started with two units to assess Mahida's response, which would give me feedback on ways to improve it in regard to her language level and the relevance of the topics to her life.

In my first unit, I centered on the topic of identity as a means of underscoring learners' name as an expression of uniqueness. By identifying and reflecting on the meaning of their name, they would potentially begin to recognize that it reflects their cultural heritage and histories.

In the following lessons, I focused on raising learners' awareness of their place in the world by highlighting who they are as individual. The topic entitled "Who am I?" has two parts: The first part addresses identity by having learners listen to my recording through VoiceThread of a poem (see Appendix A) and notice the various adjectives. Throughout the poem, the pronoun "I" is omnipresent to embrace the expression of self, thereby serving as a jumping off point for learners to express their identity and relationship to the world. By using the pronoun "I" and selecting their own adjectives, they make a choice about the kind of attributes to give themselves. I therefore wanted to examine a possible transition from reliance on culturally ascribed characteristics to self-authoring tendencies whereby learners would construct their identities of their own volition.

The second part of the topic introduces a poem titled "Who are you?" (see Appendix B) to help learners become aware of the way in which their worldview is influenced by the sociocultural groups (i.e., communities) to which they belong. Through its many questions, the poem is meant to incite reflection on the meaning of life, death, compassion, and the pursuit of happiness. Those questions are then discussed after learners and teachers read the poem to encourage learners to share their opinions on it and explore other perspectives. Subsequently, they create and record their own poem on VoiceThread basing themselves on the original.

In the next lessons, there is a transition from the self to learners' communities. My goal was to shed further light on the impact that a community has on their values, attitudes, beliefs, and the way in which it shapes their worldview. In order for learners to notice the effect of culturally entrenched behaviors on their thinking processes, I incorporated a text that discusses the concept of community from another culture. As a result, they begin to discern different viewpoints, thereby causing them to reexamine perceptions that they had initially upheld as true and those of themselves in relation to that community.

The penultimate lessons serve to redirect learners' focus on themselves and their way of describing themselves in the present moment. Integral to these lessons is to trigger mindfulness by enabling learners to be present with their feelings and their surroundings through the use of pictures and language (i.e., use of the present simple and continuous).

The unit concludes with a topic about a specific person or *intellectual sponsor* (i.e., mentor) who was influential in the learners' life and to some extent, has shaped their views of themselves and the world. In those lessons, learners recount with language to describe past events (i.e. past simple and progressive) an example of a mentor who had a positive impact on them: The goal is for them to highlight how he or she instilled confidence in them and played a role in helping them to pursue their goals. By acknowledging their intellectual sponsor and their support, learners can begin to value themselves and their opinions, thus moving towards becoming self-authors.

The second unit centers on happiness, a topic which can promote positive thinking and feelings of self-worth. When learners are provided with an opportunity to discuss moments of happiness in their lives, they can be more amenable to thinking positively about themselves and directing their attention to areas in their life that are emotionally fulfilling and hopeful; more importantly, they can be more receptive to hearing and interacting with other perspectives, which in turn, can facilitate the emergence of self-authoring. As a result, they gain awareness of their place in the world, resulting in learners believing in their ability to make their own decisions (Freire, 2001).

This particular unit is divided into three parts: In the first part, the lesson addresses aspects in learners' lives that make them happy to put forward their sources of happiness and wishes for a better world. To this end, learners can articulate with positive-sounding adjectives what they believe happiness to be.

The objective of the next part is to think of strategies to develop a state of well-being by integrating activities which engage mind and body through kinesthetic movement (i.e., basic physical exercises) and basic

instructions in the imperative mood. Therefore, learners can move from expressing feelings of happiness to actively carrying out actions that reinforce positive thinking and are favorable to self-authoring development.

In the third part, learners can begin to share ideas and solutions about ways of spreading happiness in their community. As such, the topics discussed in previous lessons are meant to guide learners through gradually recognizing their ability to take responsibility over their actions and become agents of change. The use of the modal of advice “should” serves to emphasize that learners can impart suggestions to their community about ways of experiencing and sustaining feelings of happiness. In the final part, learners are increasingly stepping into their role as self-authors by conceiving of future goals using the future tense “going to” to further pursue happiness in their life and in their community. Consequently, they become more apt to consider ways of improving their community and effecting change.

This section has detailed the reasons for creating a curriculum by describing the various topics and the ways in which they can be instrumental in developing self-authoring. The next section presents the content of the online curriculum.

### Online curriculum content

I structured the lessons according to a set format that reflects the key tenets of self-authoring development:

- Schema-building activity with picture (i.e, *code*)
- Pre-listening task: prediction of content
- Listening: VoiceThread recording
- Post-listening: comprehension and problem-posing questions
- Focus on form
- Controlled practice
- Student’s own VoiceThread recording using target language and incorporating topics to reflect view of the world

### Unit Plan

Unit 1: Identity	<p>a) Meaning of the name Discussion about the meaning of one’s name to foster reflection about one’s place in the world</p> <p>b) Who am I? Focus on parts of speech and question formation to describe one’s self in relation to one’s environment Analysis of a poem entitled “Who are you?” (see Appendix A) to encourage opinions on life, death, compassion, the pursuit of happiness</p> <p>c) Community Discussion about the meaning of “community” and common activities within the learner’s community. Focus on use of present simple and adverbs of frequency. Analysis of what a community is and the way in which it can shape one’s worldview, beliefs, and values</p> <p>d) A mentor Identification of a person who has had an influential role in the learner’s life</p>
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	Use of past tenses (i.e., past simple and continuous) to narrate a time in the learner's life when a mentor or <i>intellectual sponsor</i> impacted his/her life
Unit 2: Happiness	<p>a) What makes you happy? Use of fixed phrase: _____ makes me happy and a poem: "What makes me happy" to bring forward aspects in the learner's life that makes him or her happy</p> <p>b) Staying healthy Promoting happiness to engage the mind and body through kinesthetic movement (i.e. basic physical exercises) and basic instructions in the imperative mood</p> <p>c) My happiness plan Creating goals in the form of a plan, using the future form "be going to", to sustain the student's happiness and conceiving of ways of spreading happiness in his or her community</p>

### Limitations

Piloting this project proved very challenging, mainly due to significant connectivity issues: The weak internet connection severely affected the amount of class time: In some instances, the class had to be cancelled or was reduced to thirty minutes. In addition, Mahida's microphone did not always work, rendering communication with her very strenuous. Another salient issue concerned the use of VoiceThread: Owing to a weak bandwidth, Mahida was very rarely able to record her voice on VoiceThread, which made it difficult to investigate the effects of using a CMC tool on promoting self-authoring.

Thus, this experience brings to the fore the struggles of teaching under duress in an environment in which limited resources can interfere with learning and deter teachers from experimenting with digital technology to promote voice and agency. As such, it is crucial to be armed with boundless patience and flexibility. The next section will discuss teaching implications from this experience, coupled with recommendations for teaching in this kind of context.

### Teaching implications and recommendations

Findings from this pilot revealed the realities of teaching and learning under extreme conditions. Consequently, it has also caused me to think of alternatives to using digital tools in the lessons, my approach to assessing and recognizing self-authoring, and my role as a teacher vis-à-vis types of ideas introduced in my lessons.

For ESL/EFL teachers who teach online via Skype or through other computer software programs and would like to incorporate CMC tools such as VoiceThread into their lessons to teach learners in areas with low internet connectivity, one option is to have instructions for using VoiceThread already available and written in simple language (e.g. using imperatives and short sentences) along with a visual to copy and send. In so doing, learners are able to set up an account and make their recordings on their own time. More importantly, this can save time during the lesson and it enables teachers to focus more in-depth on key topics. In the event that the internet connection is too slow, they can send the lesson via email and tell learners to prepare the lesson, answer questions from the lesson, and then, return them. They will discuss the answers and check them together in the following lesson. Teachers can also expand on the topic by asking learners more opinion-based questions on the topic or questions about their experience recording their text and receiving responses from other users. To some extent, this kind of teaching condition lends itself to greater responsibility and autonomy on the part of the learner, which is one of the goals of self-authoring development.

If it is too difficult to use VoiceThread, it may be possible to replace VoiceThread with recording sessions on Skype. Teachers and learners can subsequently listen to an excerpt and discuss the student's answers. Similarly, if the student possesses a phone, the teacher can request that she record herself. Teachers could then create a blog or website through a site such as WordPress where learners could upload her recordings and

engage in a discussion with the teacher about the topic. There are myriad possibilities as long as that they can guarantee the preservation of the student's privacy.

However, in the event that teachers experience significant difficulties in implementing digital tools in their lessons, it is strongly advisable to forgo their use. In some instances, it may serve as a hindrance rather than an asset to language development and to teachers' ability to focus on their learners' progress. From this vantage point, teachers could set that plan aside and devote time to addressing topics that are particularly pertinent to learners' lives. While this means deviating from the original goal of the curriculum, these discussions can spawn a lesson that is far more compelling, personal, and in many cases relevant to learners' direct language needs. In so doing, teachers can truly build rapport with learners and demonstrate a genuine interest in helping them to develop their language skills and become self-authors.

Finally, this experience has taught me to be mindful of the type of content that I can integrate into the curriculum. Indeed, before piloting my project, I was strongly advised to modify the content of my curriculum to adhere to cultural guidelines provided by AIWR. As a rationale, it was pointed out to me that female students are part of extremely conservative families who are already making significant allowances by letting their daughters study English at this center. Further, the families are suspicious of their learning English, for they fear that their daughters will be inculcated with "Western ideas", thereby tarnishing their reputation. Because I did not want to put Mahida at risk, I consented to change the content to make it more "neutral". Therefore, I learned that before implementing any kind of curriculum, I need to take into consideration local mores and customs and present topics that while not controversial in nature can still generate discussion and promote self-authoring.

## Conclusion

In spite of the many unanticipated pitfalls throughout this piloting stage, I consider this experience to be extremely enriching; enriching because I was able to connect with a very brave young woman who took a tremendous risk in participating in this program to learn English. Moreover, I learned about the many hurdles of living in a conflict-ridden zone where educational opportunities for women are limited and where local traditions continue to dictate gender roles and women's status in Afghan society. While I may never truly grasp the experience of being a woman in Afghanistan, this project taught me to listen and allow space for Mahida to talk about her situation with an open mind.

As a concluding remark regarding the purpose of my project, I would like to mention that it enabled me to realize that self-authoring is a process that requires time and may not be so overt in its manifestation. There may have been moments when Mahida showed self-authoring tendencies that may not have been interpreted as such. The key to noticing them when they happen is being observant of learners' interactions with their teachers and the language content. However, the onus is truly on the learners to acknowledge their evolution over time and their journey to becoming self-authors of their lives.

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The student's name was changed for security and confidentiality purposes.

## Appendix A

### Poem: Who are you?

Are you a person or are you an animal? Are you an object or a person full of life who feels **free as a bird** or scared of your own **shadow**?

Are you a human being with feelings or are you **as cold as ice**? Do you only care about yourself or do you think of others?

Are you a shining star or are you **darkness**? Do you hate or love the person that you are?

Do you wake up and feel good or do you wake up and **wonder** why the sun rises? Are you glad to be alive or do you wish you were dead?

What do you believe in? Do you care what other people think about you when you ask yourself "Who Am I?" Do you know the answer or is your mind empty?

Ask yourself who you are and if you don't know, it doesn't mean that you are **lost**, it just means you have to go **deeper** to find the answer because we all have it inside us. We just have to try.

Edited from <https://www.worldpulse.com/en/community/users/smothyzy/posts/5734> with permission from the author Claudia Asha

## Appendix B

### My original text:

*I am.....*

*I am French-American.*

*I am a woman.*

*I am a teacher.*

*I am Jewish.*

*I am a daughter and a sister and a niece.*

*I am reliable.*

*I am compassionate.*

*I am an elephant that stands tall and strong.*

*I am me.*

# Teaching LESLLA Learners How to Use Chromebooks: Challenges and Possibilities

Trudie Aberdeen, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

## Abstract

This paper is an exploration of how Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) learners can make the best use of Chromebooks in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom and move from emergent to building users of technology. First, I argue that many of the challenges that prevent instructors from using this technology happen at the commencement of the program, and, with proper preparation, these issues can be avoided. Next, I demonstrate how on-going instruction can be scaffolded for LESLLA learners. Finally, I maintain that motivation and empowerment are experienced by the learners which makes this instruction timely and personally-relevant. To conduct this 20-week project, I used Action Research and used a variety of data: work samples, lesson plans, researcher notes, and class discussions and evaluations. This paper outlines key considerations for classroom instructors or program leaders who plan on implementing technology programs for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners with low print literacy in any language.

**Key words:** Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) learners, Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (LIFE) learners, Canadian Language Benchmarks-Adult Literacy Learners (CLB-ALL), Chromebooks, technology

## Introduction

In the Canadian context, permanent residents and refugees are eligible to take federally-funded English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. For LESLLA learners, special classes are designed to meet their particular needs, and a curriculum document called *CLB for Adult Literacy Learners (ALL)* was created for Canadian instructors to “describe the needs and abilities of adult ESL Literacy learners, and support instructors in meeting their learning needs” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks). Students interested in taking ESL classes begin by having their learning needs assessed at a testing centre and then choose among programs that best suit their particular needs. Many LESLLA students choose classes at my institution since a) there is a LESLLA stream, b) classes are part-time, and c) childcare options are available.

This project is the result of a series of fortunate events. In what I believe is an atypical fashion to most program coordinators, ours believed that new technology should go to the classes with the lowest English proficiency instead of those with the highest. And with an unexpected surplus in our program’s technology budget, our coordinator purchased Chromebooks for morning, afternoon, and evening classes. Once purchased, I immediately began a search of relevant literature related to LESLLA learners and Chromebooks and found a paucity of published research. As a then doctoral candidate who was teaching part-time, I took advantage of this opportunity and conducted an action research study on how my CLB 1 class, the majority of whom were LESLLA learners, adapted to daily use of Chromebooks.

## Literature Review of LESLLA learners

**LESLLA learners.** LESLLA learners are traditionally an understudied population (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Young-Scholten, 2013). Challenges to conducting research with this population include ethical considerations such as informed consent (Aberdeen 2015; Bigelow & Tarone, 2005; Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009; Vinogradov, Pettitt, & Bigelow, 2013), participant mobility (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Juffs & Rodriguez, 2008), differences and variability among learners (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004), and achievements which are difficult to measure with normed, standardized assessments (Allemano, 2013; Juffs, 2006).

## LESLLA learners and literacy

Adult language learners vary in the ESL world in many different ways (aptitude, self-regulation, strategy use, and motivation) and these variances can impact the speed and success of the language learner (Dornyei & Skehan, 2003). More recently, literacy and previous schooling are also considered important variables in the rate in which adults learn a second language. A subpopulation of ESL learners has no or limited literacy in *any* language (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). An international research body ([www.leslla.org](http://www.leslla.org)) is devoted to understanding how learners with no or little formal education approach learning a second language. These learners are known by a range of different terms; however, these are the most common: literacy learners (Bell & Burnaby, 1984), emergent readers (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011), and Low-educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) learners (van de Craats, Kurvers, Young, Scholten, 2005).

Bigelow and Vinogradov describe the required learning conditions for emergent ESL readers, “Instruction for emergent adult/adolescent readers must fulfill two needs: Adults need contextualized, meaningful instruction that is age and level appropriate, and this instruction needs to be explicit and systematic, focusing in phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition” (p. 123). In other words, approaches which favor direct instruction in the mechanics of language, and not global, top-down approaches, are best suited to these learners. Furthermore, these learners require materials specifically designed for their needs, and not those designed for native-speaking children. Kurvers and Ketelaars (2010) found that LESLLA learners progressed through similar, but not exactly the same, steps as children learning to write in their first language. In particular, they noted how LESLLA learners develop a relationship between speech and writing over time, how learners develop in their ability to understand shapes and differentiate letters, how they orient their letters, and how they develop in spelling. Unlike learners with first language literacy, adult emergent readers must learn fine motor skills, visual memory skills, letter recognition, and the alphabetic principle. They must also learn that the words they say can be transcribed into a written form that has meaning for another, and reciprocally what others say can be put into written form and that the message can be deduced by them.

### **LESLLA learners and technology**

Being able to use computers or Chromebooks requires that learners have fine motor skills, visual memory skills, and letter recognition, skills which emergent readers have not yet fully developed. Reder, Vanek, and Wrigley (2013) explain that providing digital literacy instruction for LESLLA learners at the earliest stages of literacy acquisition is challenging. They state, “Lack of literacy remains a barrier for LESLLA learners at the lowest levels and puts real limits to the possibilities for learning and interacting through technology. But for those learners who possess some print literacy, tutor facilitated models with bilingual options can open the door to a new world of digital literacy” (63-64). Studies about LESLLA learners and technology use have tended to be about the creation of specific software applications designed to meet beginner LESLLA learners’ needs (Cucchiari et al., 2015; Olshtain et al., 2015; Sokolowsky, 2015; van de Craats & Scholten, 2013) which has mostly been developed to teach literacy or spelling. Other programs have specifically examined how LESLLA learners go about using the internet or about how websites can be designed with LESLLA learners’ abilities in mind (Kennedy, 2015; Reder, Vanek, & Wrigley, 2013; Vaske, 2015). While these studies which address literacy instruction through technology, software development and digital literacy are important for practical and theory-development purposes, they do not address how LESLLA learners can learn the basics of technology in tandem with emergent literacy skills so that they can move towards using the software. To my knowledge, research has not yet made it explicit to instructors how learners are supposed to be able to move forward with limited literacy and limited technology skills to LESLLA learners who can use technology independently to meet their own learning or personal needs. Yet, the ability to use technology would allow LESLLA learners to study outside of class, to find essential information regarding their daily lives (the weather, bus schedules, their children’s report cards), and to communicate with family in other parts of the world.

In the document which guides instruction for LESLLA learners, *CLB for Adult Literacy Learners (ALL)*, the authors list six guiding strategies for technology use with LESLLA learners. These are 1. Build on learners’ strengths, 2. Model use of digital technologies, 3. Recycle and practice extensively, 4. Increase technology skills through thematic instruction, 5. Encourage experimentation and celebrate success, and 6. Expect learners’ technology use to vary within literacy levels (Kayed, Dionne, Johansson, 2015, p. 25). The authors are stating



that technology instruction, much like literacy instruction for LESLLA in general, needs to be planned and practiced.

To further describe how LESLLA learners might progress in technology usage, the authors list a continuum of “familiarity with digital technologies” (p. 26-29). At the *emerging* stage of learning technology, LESLLA students are expected to name computer parts, operate a computer with assistance, use a mouse, switch a computer on and off, locate the keys on the keyboard, log into an already created account, and shut down programs. Without going into too much detail, LESLLA learners at the *building* stage learn to use a keyboard correctly, ask for help when needed, and log in and out of programs independently. LESLLA learners at the *expanding* stage are more or less able to use a computer independently, type with multiple fingers, and create personal accounts. While the terms emerging, building, and expanding are helpful in describing learners’ abilities with technology, they do not describe how to move from one category to the next.

The *CLB for ALL* is structured to include three developmentally-appropriate sample reading and writing tasks in each of the four CLB Competency Areas (Interacting with others, Comprehending/Reproducing information, Getting things done, Comprehending/sharing information) so that teachers comprehend how lessons might be developed. To better understand how technology use was envisioned in the *CLB for ALL*, I created *Table 1* to highlight the sample tasks which demonstrated technology use. As the reader can see, these tasks were not designed to teach learners technology specifically, but rather were intended to teach through context. I counted 14 sample tasks which used technology from among 96 possibilities (12 reading and 12 writing tasks at levels Foundations through CLB 3L). Tasks which describe technology use or instruction are listed in *Table 1*.

Table 1

*Sample tasks from the document Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for ALL*

CLB Level	Reading	Writing
<b>Foundation</b>	None	None
<b>CLB 1L</b>	-Learners take digital photos on a field trip (p. 44)	None
<b>CLB 2L</b>	-Read and answer questions about an email (p. 50). * As shown in the document, learners do not have to actually use technology to complete this task. -Turn on the computer and enter a password (p. 51). -Roleplay using a self-checkout scanner (p. 51). -Find one’s postal code on the Canada Post website (p. 52) -Fill in a job application form on-line (p. 52)	-Send an email message to a company which includes one’s address and phone number (p. 85) -Send an email message to an employer about an absence (p.85) -Copy a text message about being absent from a sentence strip and send it (p. 85) -Fill out an employment benefits card on-line (p. 87)
<b>CLB 3L</b>	-Answer questions based on an e-mail (p. 57) -Read a poster about rules of working in the computer lab (p. 58) *As both of these tasks are shown in the document, learners do not have to use actual technology to complete them.	-Create a cover letter for a job (Presumably the cover letter is typed although the task does not specify that it is). (p. 94) -Create a photo story (p. 95).

As shown in *Table 1*, technology tasks are not described for learners with the lowest levels of English or literacy proficiency. Furthermore, these tasks do not demonstrate the *emerging* stage of technology use with the

possible exception of using a digital camera (CLB 1) or logging on to a computer (CLB 2). While the strategies for technology instruction and the familiarity with digital technologies continuum in the document are helpful for instructors to understand *what* processes learners might go through, they offer little guidance in *how* or *when* one should instruct LESLLA learners in using technology or in what challenges teachers and learners can reasonably expect to face. The strategies and continuum are also not specifically linked with expectations to be achieved at any particular level, thus leaving instructors the option of self-selecting which skills they wish to teach. Furthermore, teachers can avoid teaching technology skills, leaving literacy learners further behind their literate classmates.

## **Methodology**

Participants in this study were 11 women and 1 man enrolled in an afternoon ESL CLB1 course. Two of these women had only participated in ESL courses in Canada. Nine had limited formal education, and one had completed high school. One student had cerebral palsy. Data collected throughout this 20-week study included student work and emails, lesson plans, field notes of observations, and class evaluations. These data provided examples of how learners moved from emerging to building users of technology. The convergence of these data sources, coupled with previous literature, lead to what Craig's (2009) definition of triangulation which "occurs when multiple forms of data—when analyzed—show similar results, thereby confirming the researcher's findings" (p. 121). Ethics approval was granted by the school. Students were asked to sign a consent form and then were asked throughout the process for their continuing consent (Aberdeen, 2016).

## **Getting ready for Chromebooks: Moving from emerging technology users to building technology users**

As the *Canadian Language Benchmarks, ESL for Adult Literacy Learners (ALL)* document claims, learners at the emerging technology level need certain skills in order to advance to the next stage of technology skills. In particular, this paper examines four skills: naming the parts of the computer, keyboarding skills and password challenges, logging on and off, and locating programs. In each of these areas, I discuss challenges experienced and I make suggestions for overcoming these challenges. Classroom layout considerations and institutional constraints are also covered.

## **Naming the parts of the computer**

At no point throughout this project did I provide direct instruction in naming the parts of the computer. All words were used repeatedly in context and the learners were able to follow instruction. As expected, learners improved over time. When a particular learner could not follow, another student usually came to his or her aid. However, Elsie Johnson, (personal communication, October 28, 2014) a colleague who taught Foundations level, created a slide presentation linking concepts previously known to her learners such as pencil and paper, letters and mail, and books and matched them with technology-concepts such as Microsoft Word, Gmail, and the internet. She pointed out similarities such as home address, email address, and telephone numbers as ways for others to make contact. She reported that learners found this presentation useful. She also used screenshots to demonstrate to learners where they needed to look at the screen on their own Chromebooks. It is also important to note that when the task is approached in this manner, parallels can be drawn with the sample task for Reading Foundations Level: Sample Task II-Comprehending Instructions-Study:

Use a photo representing an instructional verb to carry out a classroom action (e.g., locate an image of scissors on a worksheet to understand that something needs to be cut on the page). (p. 37).

## **Keyboarding skills and password challenges**

A noticeable difference between a Chromebook and a more traditional QWERTY keyboard is that keys on the Chromebook are lowercase. For many LESLLA learners, keyboarding is a challenge for that very reason, they struggle to match upper- and lower-case letters. To clarify, one types a capital "A" on the keyboard, and a small

letter “a” appears on the screen. Furthermore, to get the computer to produce a capital letter “A” as it appears on the keyboard, the learner has to type two keys simultaneously, a task which requires 1) knowing which two keys to punch, and 2) coordinating them to be punched at the same time. Yet, being able to correctly type a password is a first step to using technology independently.

As described above, letter knowledge is essential in early keyboard use. One major on-going challenge for learners was for learners to be able to distinguish, not only between upper- and lower-case letters, but also from a range of confounding symbols. Easily confused symbols are shown in the *Table 2*. Keyboarding appears to require more visual discrimination, but less fine motor control than pencil and paper tasks. In my class, I had one student with cerebral palsy and with practice, she was able to type faster than she could write by hand although she had frequent errors.

Future research is needed to determine whether upper case (typical QWERTY keyboards) or lower case (Chromebook-style) keyboards are more appropriate for LESLLA learners, especially at the earliest stages of literacy acquisition. While I believe that the lower-case keyboard is ultimately better for LESLLA learners, further empirical research will test this assumption and illuminate this issue.

Table 2

*Frequently confused letters and symbols on a Chromebook keyboard*

i	!	1	L	I		J	j	/
o	O	0	D	P	Q			
g	9	Q	p	a	8	y	s	
f	t	L	1	J				
r	n	H	v	y	u			
,	.	“	‘	:	:			

Learners at the earliest stages of literacy need to learn how to recognize the letters of the alphabet, match upper and lower case, discriminate shapes, and distinguish between what is the same and what is different (Kayed, Dionne, & Johansson, 2015, p. 34). Keyboarding, as shown with Table 2, seems to require these same skills that emergent readers are in the process of acquiring. In terms of writing skills; however, LESLLA learners at the earliest stages of writing development learn how to form letters, place them on the lines, and develop spelling skills (Kurvers & Ketelaars, 2010). By using a keyboard in place of pencil, two of these writing challenges are eliminated. While literacy learners do not have to form letters or put them on a line, they still must select the appropriate letter. Further research is needed to see if typing, which seems to require more visual discrimination skills, or handwriting, which seems to require more fine-motor control, ultimately leads to better reading and writing outcomes.

### **Creating accounts, logging on and logging off**

At the start of this project, it was the intention that each student would create a personal email account. In order to make this happen, I had a one-to-four teacher-student ratio. Each student created an account according to the following formula [school'snameyearstudent'sname@gmail.com](mailto:school'snameyearstudent'sname@gmail.com). As a password, I required that students use their country of origin and the year of immigration. With assistance in the computer lab, we were able to create the accounts. Two students went ahead and typed in passwords independently. The students and I only learned that the country names were misspelled when we returned to class and attempted to reenter the passwords into their Chromebook. Every variation of misspelling was attempted; none was successful. In the end, both students had to create new accounts which ruined the formulaic pattern.

Google required a telephone or email for authentication. When the other instructors and I came across these prompts, we began using our personal cell phone numbers. It was through experience that we learned that one can only enter a cell phone number a limited amount of times before Google rejects it. We later began to enter other students' numbers. In our scurry to create accounts, we never thought to document which cell numbers we connected with which accounts. This became especially problematic when learners entered passwords incorrectly too many times and needed to enter a phone number to receive a verification code. Because of these errors, we also had to create new accounts for several learners.

Chromebooks are ideal for school usage since they can be prepared for multiple users. Each student was assigned a specific, numbered Chromebook. Since the Chromebooks were shared, each class also chose a symbol to represent it. My class selected the "coffee cup" icon. This meant that if the learner had the correctly numbered Chromebook and selected the coffee cup icon, then he/she could enter the correct password, and log on. Although this happened less with experience, learners would select the wrong Chromebook and attempt to enter their password only to find they would not work. As a result of this very real-world task, some learners became aware of the importance of selecting an identical object according to a number, returning an object in the correct place according to the same number, and verifying someone else had not made a mistake. This error happened less frequently when learners removed the coffee cup symbol and added personal photos. Still, we had one learner refuse to take a photo, stating that her husband did not approve. In fact, I learned how to add learner photos to the Gmail accounts on the Chromebooks from a fellow Foundations instructor, Santosh Kushal, who did this with her students after she learned an unfortunate lesson: just because a learner cannot enter his or her password independently does not mean that he or she cannot manage to delete someone else's account.

In addition to verification codes, logging onto accounts provided learners with two major obstacles. First, learners needed to enter passwords which involved multiple steps including memorizing their passwords (in this case their country's name + year of arrival); and being able to type it into the Chromebook without looking. Even though the learners had some technology experience using a computer lab, none of them had experience logging onto a computer before. Challenges arose when entering passwords since letters typed are replaced by dots. As a result, learners could not match a password written on a slip of paper with what appeared on screen. The only solution I found to this was asking students to type their password repeatedly in a word document until they could do so without looking. Over time, all learners improved with the exception of my student with cerebral palsy. Her coping strategy was to ask a friend to enter her password for her and she completed the rest of the tasks on her own.

The second major obstacle encountered with logging onto accounts stemmed from CAPTCHAs (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart). CAPTCHAs are words or numbers that are obscured by the computer which the user must reenter correctly. By their very nature, CAPTCHAs are designed to be confusing. For LESLLA learners who struggle to differentiate between letters, numbers, and symbols on the keyboard, reading CAPTCHAs is an impossibility. These seemed to occur indiscriminately. I never asked learners to try to guess what they were. As learners got more proficient with using the Chromebooks, I had more time to type these in for students.

Creating an account with step-by-step assistance is considered a building technology skill. I attempted to do this with my class at the beginning of the project when learners were still at the emerging technology stage. While I was ultimately successful, I would not recommend creating personal accounts for each student without a great deal of support, and most likely would not recommend at all. To accomplish this, I first used a computer lab and projector, and had a one-to-four teacher-student ratio. Even with this ratio, creating accounts for an entire class was complex. Much later the school adopted the Google Apps for Education system in which the teacher could control accounts and passwords. Under the new Google Apps system, literacy learners still benefitted from an email account that used their names, and they created a meaningful password. If the students forgot their password or made too many mistakes, the instructor had the power to reset it. Other challenges such as entering phone numbers and recreating accounts when passwords were forgotten were avoided under the Google Apps for Education system.

## **Locating programs**

A beneficial tool in teaching emergent readers to use Chromebooks was the use of a digital projector. Our program had one attached to a notebook computer. Since their screens did not match mine, learners had difficulty following. Eventually, our program coordinator was able to locate an adapter so that we could connect the Chromebook to the projector. Once they could match, they learned to follow instructions very quickly. Learners quickly had to learn the symbols for the programs since Gmail, Google docs, Google Slides, and other programs were often located in slightly different positions depending on who used the Chromebook last. These tasks of locating programs are similar to the following task presented for Reading-Pre-benchmark B- II. Comprehending instructions:

Use a photo representing an instructional verb to carry out a classroom action (e.g. locates an image of scissors on a worksheet to understand that something needs to be cut on that page). (p. 37)

## **Classroom layout and institutional constraints**

The Chromebooks were stored in a large locked cabinet designed for charging the machines. To keep the machines safe, we placed the cabinet along the wall farthest from the heaters. Unfortunately, the outlet was located quite a distance from the actual cabinet. This was not an issue until one day the Chromebooks were all uncharged. Someone had unplugged the cabinet to charge their cell phone. Needless to say, that particular day's lesson plans needed to be rapidly changed. A similar event occurred when a student unplugged the school's router to charge his cell phone and disrupted the internet for the entire building. After this incident the router was relocated.

While it is possible that any language learner at any level could have unplugged the power source, taken someone else's computer by mistake, deleted someone else's account or forgot his/her cell phone number, these types of mistakes seem more frequent in the LESLLA class.

Another issue that was frequently experienced was directly related to the building's bandwidth. Since our building is older, we were limited in what internet services we could receive. With two class sets of Chromebooks, a school lab, and multiple employees, bandwidth was often stretched beyond capacity, resulting in a quick change of lesson plans. These issues highlight that 1. LESLLA technology instructors need to be armed with a back-up plan for a worst-case scenario when it comes to technology instruction, and 2. technological considerations should be made before embarking on a project.

Over time students began to find and sign on to their own Chromebook without assistance. Their typing improved when they began to associate the red squiggly lines with errors. They learned that the exact symbol would prevent the line from occurring. Rather than first coming to me to help them locate errors, the learners began to first ask each other.

## **Observing learner motivation and empowerment: Noticing daily usage of technology in LESLLA learners' lives**

One day in class, as a result of a brief discussion about the word "step-sister," we began to discuss the story of Cinderella. Since the class had already taken a diversion from my scheduled lesson plan, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity and have the students copy/type the story of Cinderella. As I kept writing, the students kept copying. Finally, I insisted that they take a break and I left the room. When I returned 15 minutes later, I was surprised to find that my students had opened their web browser, found YouTube, and were watching the cartoon. These were the very same students who, only two months ago, struggled to type in their computer passwords.

Over the course of the instruction in Chromebooks, I became aware of both the technology that learners used in their daily lives as well as the technology that they wished to be able to use. Students in my class mentioned that they communicated with their families through technology, often citing Viber and WhatsApp. One student informed me that she chose her particular brand of telephone because it would support a Tigrinya-English dictionary while another phone would not. She was disappointed to learn that the school would not permit her to use the school's wi-fi due to limited bandwidth. Upon sharing my phone number, students began

to text me when they were going to be late or absent. In fact, my very first text from a student read only the word “EMERGENCY” all in capital letters. The next day in class I learned that she had taken her daughter to the doctor and copied the word from a sign above the door at the Mediacenter (a form of drop-in clinic). Another student who was a vegetarian texted me a picture of a “sacrificial” sheep made out of cauliflower for Eid. Many expressed a desire to use Facebook.

## Conclusions

This study chronicles my experiences which have shaped my view of technology instruction. First, adjustments and simplifications can be made at the emerging stages of language instruction which normally prevent instructors from embracing technology in their classrooms later on. Some of these issues were related to literacy learners such as remembering passwords and phone numbers, reading CAPTCHAs, and deciphering a new keyboard. However, these issues could have been avoided or minimized with proper planning and preparation. Outlets that are used for powering technology could be marked, Google Apps for Education could be used, and PowerPoint presentations could be prepared to highlight where to find programs and keys on a keyboard.

Second, teachers can scaffold instruction so that learners are still meeting the requirements of the Canadian Language Benchmarks. With practice, the learners were able to type all of their classwork and store it online. For many, typing became less taxing than printing which requires finer hand-eye coordination.

And third, learners report that they find this instruction motivating, empowering, and tied to their personal needs. The learners knew what they wanted to achieve with technology beyond social media. They informed me that their children’s teachers sent them emails and that they needed technology to access report cards which now only appeared on-line. They wanted to apply for jobs, many of which required on-line applications. They said they needed to create résumés and cover letters. They needed to be able to access telephone numbers and addresses.

My findings were similar to Vaske (2015) who found, “Lower educated adults are often already active on mobile platforms and social media. They use Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp; they text, and they play games” (p. 350). I would argue that these examples demonstrate Reder’s (2015) conceptualization of adult literacy practices as “busy intersections,” and they are as great of an indicator of program success as any test score. To paraphrase Reder, these examples show how literacy has been brought to the people, how what has been learned in class has served as a resource, and how learners increased in literacy engagement as a result of the program.

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# **The Academic Language Learning Experiences of One LESLLA Learner: A Constructive Developmental Study**

Jennifer Ouellette-Schramm, Minnesota Literacy Council & Hamline University

## **Abstract**

Academic literacy is a challenging yet increasingly essential skill for Adult Basic Education (ABE) English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) learners. Related to academic language learning is an adult's developmental perspective. Developmental perspectives vary in adulthood and shape qualitatively distinct ways of reasoning and learning experiences. Using Kegan's Constructive Developmental Theory (CDT), which derives from Western psychology but has been implemented cross-culturally, this research highlights the academic literacy learning experiences of one LESLLA learner in the context of a larger qualitative case study. The data include two semi-structured qualitative interviews per participant and class observations. Analysis includes the dual lenses of grounded theory and CDT. Findings suggest that developmental perspectives made a qualitative difference in how learners experience academic literacy learning. The LESLLA participant, from her "instrumental" perspective, describes what looks like struggle in learning to summarize, but from her developmental perspective, represents a logical pathway toward success.

## **Introduction**

Academic language skills are increasingly important for Adult Basic Education (ABE) English Language Learners (ELLs). Academic language objectives feature prominently in the new federal College and Career Readiness Standards (Pimentel, 2013), and as of 2014, passing the Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) test requires the ability to write logical, cohesive arguments with claims supported by evidence (GED Testing Service, 2013). As more ABE learners aspire to post-secondary education, academic language preparation is also vital to minimizing or avoiding remedial reading or writing classes (Pimentel, 2013).

While the stakes for developing academic language skills are high for some ABE ELLs, diverse factors complicate this learning journey. Academic language skills, distinguished as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiencies (CALP) (Cummins, 1979), are cognitively and linguistically complex, taking longer for ELLs to acquire than everyday Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1979; Zwiers, 2008). Combined with ABE learners' relatively high situational barriers to persistence (Mellard et al., 2013), this can mean prohibitively long pathways. Also impacting academic language learning and experiences are English proficiency level (National Institute for Literacy, 2010), impact of first language (Gholamain & Geva, 1999), culture, cultural traditions of academic writing, (McKinley, 2015), and age (Bigelow & Watson, 2014).

Another, more "hidden" diversity found to shape literacy learning experiences is that of adult development. Research in developmental psychology over the past 40 years has found that adults do not stop growing after adolescence but can continue developing toward increasingly complex ways of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). While child developmental stages correspond roughly to age, adults develop in response to the challenges and supports in their lives, or their "holding environments," and not according to any one factor such as age, education or IQ (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Developmental diversity, therefore, exists in adulthood, and has been found to shape qualitatively different learning experiences, including among ABE/English Language Learners (ELLs) (Kegan et al, 2001). A large-scale study of ABE/ELL learning experiences found that depending on developmental perspective, "the very same curriculum, classroom activities, or teaching behaviours can leave some learners feeling satisfied and well attended while others feel frustrated or lost" (Drago-Severson 2004, p. 15) depending on the "match" between learners' developmental perspectives and the nature of the supports and challenges in the classroom.

The "match" between developmental perspective and classroom supports and challenges may be particularly important for academic language learning, because development has also been found to impact the reasoning employed in academic language learning (Kegan 1982, 1994). Reasoning during summarizing, a



baseline requirement of post-secondary writing and the genre focused on in this study, includes constructing logical relationships between abstract ideas (Jitendra & Gajria, 2011) and recognizing how primary and subordinate ideas are organized (Leki, 1998; Zwiers, 2008). These abstract ways of reasoning are described in Kegan's (1982, 1994) Constructive-developmental theory (CDT) as developmental capacities. Kegan (1982) suggests that depending on developmental complexity, some learners will understand summarizing as relating one event after the next, rather than abstracting individual incidents into an overarching theme.

While CDT has proven helpful in understanding learning experiences among culturally diverse adults (Bridwell, 2013; Kegan et al, 2001; Lindsley, 2011; Villegas-Reimers, 1996), some scholars have noted the potential risk of investigating adult learners, particularly those who have been economically or educationally disadvantaged, through a developmental lens, which may favor growth and higher stages of development often afforded by resource-rich environments and access to privileges such as formal education and time for reflection (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Popp and Boes (2001) point out that a danger of a constructive-developmental lens for understanding competence is that it can be interpreted as a deficit model, as if it were "focusing on what the adult *cannot* do" (p. 627). It is important to note that both non-Western and educationally disadvantaged adults have been found at higher stages of development in CDT research (Kegan et al., 2001; Lindsley, 2011). Perhaps more importantly, this study is concerned not with what learners can *do*, but how they *experience* learning, through their own logically coherent developmental perspectives, and what their experiences can teach educators about how to help them reach their academic language learning goals.

The purpose of this qualitative case study, therefore, was to understand the academic language learning experiences of ABE/ELLs, in light of their constructive-developmental perspectives, to help educators more effectively reach developmentally diverse learners building academic language skills. Among the learners in this case study, one LESLLA learner emerged. This paper presents her experiences in the context of the larger study.

## **ABE/ESOL Academic Language Learning**

Written language extends from oral language; therefore, as Rubin (1987) states, "no one is a native speaker of writing" (p. 3). Even more, no one is a native speaker of academic writing, which makes distinct linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural demands.

Linguistically, academic text contains distinct characteristics (Cummins, 1979; Kucer 2014; Schleppegrell, 2004) that reflect its primary function, to understand and communicate abstraction (Fang, 2008, 2012; Zwiers, 2008). Academic text contains distinct features on the levels of vocabulary, syntax, and text organization (Derewianka, 2011). In addition to technical, discipline-specific vocabulary (Fang, 2008), academic texts rely heavily on "often untaught, yet integral words that hold complex ideas together" (Zwiers, 2008, p. 22), including text connectives, pronouns, and prepositions, cross-disciplinary words, and potentially confusing figures of speech such as *boils down to* (Zwiers, 2008). Common features of academic syntax include long sentences with multiple clauses; passive voice, and *nominalizations*, or condensing sometimes lengthy adjective and verb phrases into a single abstract noun (Schleppegrell, 2004; Zwiers, 2008). While narrative writing is temporal, or time-ordered, much expository writing is based on presenting a main point and supporting it with evidence, requiring the ability to analyze, explain, and show relationships between abstract concepts (Zwiers, 2008).

Cummins (1979) describes the linguistic complexities of CALP, as "strongly related to overall cognitive and academic skills" (p. 198) and argues that learners proficient in CALP in their first language (L1) can more quickly and successfully acquire CALP in a second language (L2). While cognitive load can prevent higher functions of the writing process from being initially accessible at full capacity for L2 writers (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Leki, 1996), Cumming (1989) found that after an intermediate English level, L2 language did not impact L2 writers' ability to engage in effective writing process strategies (Cumming, 1989). Leki (1996) similarly argues that use of cognitive strategies during academic writing is not impeded by lower English levels, and that struggling writers do not gain access to more complex writing strategies by virtue of greater English proficiency alone.

Some sociolinguists caution against interpreting ELLs' failure to comprehend linguistic complexity as cognitive in nature (Gee, 1990; Schleppegrell, 2004). When diverse learners, including ELLs, enter academic discourse communities, where valued patterns of language use reflect discourse patterns of the majority culture,

they are often unprepared for the literacy demands they will encounter (Kucer, 2014). Sociolinguists emphasize that learners who acquired literacy use patterns outside of the majority culture, including ESOL learners, need to explicitly learn the rules of academic discourse communities in order to succeed in them (Gee, 1990; Schlepppegrell, 2004).

### **LESLLA Academic Language Learning**

Of all ELLs, LESLLA learners may be the most removed from academic discourse communities' values and expectations. With low or interrupted formal educational backgrounds, LESLLA learners are also unlikely to be familiar with academic language conventions in their first languages (L1), making it harder to develop CALP the L2 (Cummins, 1979; Zwiers, 2008).

Bigelow and Watson (2014) suggest that limited L1 literacy and formal education have not only linguistic but cognitive implications, arguing that adults with significantly limited educational and literacy backgrounds may not have had the necessary experiences to stimulate the levels of cognitive stage development characteristic of highly literate societies, concluding that "it may be instructionally useful to consider the extent to which non-literate people may be lodged in preoperational or early concrete operational thought" (p. 469).

### **Adult Constructive-Development**

Kegan's CDT, which informs this study, belongs to a family of theoretical models including Kohlberg's (1981) and Gilligan's (1982) models of moral development; Loevinger's (1976) theory of ego development; Perry's (1970) stages of ethical and intellectual development in the college years; and Belenky's (1986) stages of women's development. Each of these theories extend through adulthood the principles of Jean Piaget's (1952) childhood developmental stages and is based on empirical, longitudinal research. Kegan's CDT takes the constructivist view that we actively *construct*, rather than merely passively receive, meaning from our experiences, and that the ways in which we construct meaning *develop* in the direction of greater complexity over time. While CDT derives from western psychology, it has been tested for cross-cultural validity (Villegas-Reimers, 1996) and has been used successfully in research with non-Western populations, including ABE/ELLs (Kegan et al., 2001; Lindsley, 2011; Villegas-Reimers, 1996).

In Kegan's (1982, 1994) CDT, a concrete, or *instrumental* thinker makes meaning with the same black-and-white logic that characterizes Piaget's concrete operational thought. At this stage, the world is seen in black and white, and adults orient toward concrete rules and consequences. The epistemological structure of instrumentalism is *categorical*. That is, instrumental learners think through one concrete category at a time, cannot yet cross-reference categories, and therefore are "not capable of abstract thinking or making generalizations" (Drago-Severson 2004, p. 25). Instrumental learners have been found to orient to concrete aspects of learning and to equate learning with "doing" (Kegan et al., 2001). From this developmental perspective, knowledge is seen as a possession to be acquired, or "given" by authorities (Kegan et al., 2001). One instrumental ABE ELL described his preference for writing about concrete topics, explaining that while writing about abstract concepts like "openness" is difficult, "...when you can write about the sport, you can write" (Helsing, Broderick & Hammerman 2001, p. 162). Taylor (2006) describes the writing that instrumental learners are likely to produce as "a brain dump," of disconnected and unedited thoughts (p. 207).

Kegan (1982) explains that at the next *socializing* way of knowing, the underlying epistemological structure is *cross-categorical*, making these learners capable of cross-referencing information to make abstractions, inferences and generalizations. Being able to look through more than one category at a time, makes it possible to take another's perspective (Kegan, 1982, 1994); in fact, socializing knowers define their own success by how well they measure up to expectations set by valued others (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Socializing ABE ELLs have been found to measure success by how well they meet the expectations of the teacher, a valued expert (Kegan et al., 2001).

At the next, *self-authoring* way of knowing, adults think systemically and are better able to manage contradictions (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Rather than living up to the expectations of others, they rely on an internal authority, and can examine and take responsibility for their own thinking, feelings and patterns, which Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler (2000) describe as "the mainspring of adult development" (p. 30). Self-authoring ABE

ELLs have been found to demonstrate competence by reasoning through multiple perspectives (Popp & Boes, 2001). One ABE ELL transitioning toward self-authorship described his writing as having several layers (Popp & Boes, 2001).

## **Method**

### **Research Design and Questions**

To understand academic language learning experiences from learners' constructive-developmental perspectives, this study investigated: 1. What constructive-developmental perspectives do ABE/ESOL learners bring to their academic literacy learning experiences? 2. How do they experience academic literacy learning, especially in a recent summarizing unit? 3. How do learners' academic literacy learning experiences relate to their constructive-developmental perspectives?

This study employed a qualitative case study design, appropriate for gaining a deep understanding of the meaning of an experience from the perspective of those involved (Merriam, 1998). It employs Kegan's (1982, 1994) CDT as a lens because of its prior success with understanding learning experiences of non-Western adults, including ABE/ESOL populations (Kegan et al., 2001; Lindsley, 2011; Villegas-Reimers, 1996), and its valid and reliable measure, the Subject Object Interview (SOI) (Lahey et al., 1988).

### **Setting and Participants**

This study was carried out in an ABE/ESOL college and career preparation class delivered through a non-profit educational organization under Minnesota's ABE system. As an employee of the organization delivering this class, the researcher had access to it, a longstanding, trusting relationship with the teacher, and a baseline familiarity and friendly rapport with some of the learners; therefore, this class was both a convenience sample, and was conducive to developing "productive relationships" with participants (Merriam, 1998).

The ABE/ELLs in this study hailed from different countries, had different language backgrounds, different formal education backgrounds, and had been speaking English and living in the U.S. for different lengths of time. Learners who had been attending class regularly for a minimum of two weeks were invited to participate. Participants were selected by teacher recommendation based on a minimum English reading level of High Intermediate ESL and her evaluation of strong English verbal skills relative to reading skills, increasing the likelihood that they would be able to successfully complete conversational-style interviews.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection methods included two in-depth qualitative interviews per participant, and class observations during a three-week summarizing unit. Demographic information and English reading levels were also collected.

### **Subject-Object Interview**

To understand participants' constructive-developmental perspectives, the SOI, a valid and reliable measure created by Lahey et al. (1988) to assess the complexity of an individual's meaning-making, was administered. To help understand participants' learning experiences, the SOI was situated within that class as much as possible. During the SOI, the interviewer regularly offers a recap of what they heard a participant say to invite corrections; this was used as an opportunity to frequently invite corrections of misunderstandings due to participants' ELL status.

Each SOI transcript was read and independently coded and scored by the researcher and a co-scorer using the method described in the guide to administering and interpreting the instrument (Lahey et al., 1988). Both were certified raters and achieved 100 percent agreement upon discussion. Where there was a lack of clarity on a participant's meaning, that data was not included in the analysis.

The SOIs were also analyzed for information that helped answer how participants experienced academic language learning. In that process, a grounded theory interview analysis (Charmaz, 2006) was employed. First, units of text were identified in the transcriptions that answered how participants experienced academic language learning. Then, in order to reduce the likelihood of projecting assumptions or theoretical bias onto participants' meanings, the researcher conducted line-by-line coding of actions and processes in one third of the interviews (Charmaz, 2006), before developing tentatively focused codes. As each subsequent interview was analyzed, the codes from previous interviews helped inform the parsing of the data in the grounded theory process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The codes were re-reviewed at several stages to assess the soundness of the distinctions, with changes made as necessary. Finally, the interviews were re-read toward saturation of each category (Glaser & Strauss, 1965), any initially missed supporting data was coded, as was any data that was in dissonance with the developed themes. While a theoretical lens was purposely brought to this study, grounded theory analysis allowed academic language learning themes to arise from participants' own words and experiences.

### **Class observations**

To contextualize participants' descriptions of their learning experiences, class observations were conducted during a three-week summarizing unit. In-depth field notes were taken and focused on how participants may be experiencing learning, such as interactions and conversations between learners, and noted what did *not* happen (Merriam, 1998), for example, when a learner did not write anything after the teacher instructed the class to write a summary. Hand-written notes were typed shortly after completion of each observation (Erickson, 1986), and in analysis, grounded theory's constant comparative method was employed to generate analytical categories for incidents (Charmaz, 2006), such as "responding to a question."

### **Learning Experience Interview**

To understand participants' academic literacy learning experiences, a one-hour LEI was conducted with each participant. This open-ended qualitative interview was adapted from the Adult Development Project Experience of Learning Interview (Kegan et al., 2001) and from similar studies investigating learning experiences through a constructive-developmental lens (Boes, 2006; Bridwell, 2013; Lindsley, 2011). The interview protocol included questions organized into three categories: *expectations of the class*, with questions including, "What were you hoping to learn in the class?"; *learning "take-aways"* with questions including, "What are the most important things you're learning in the class?" and *process of learning* with questions including, "How do you think you learned these things?"

Data from the LEIs was coded using the same grounded theory process (Charmaz, 2006) described in the second analytical step of the SOI, beginning with line-by-line coding of processes rooted in participants' words and meaning, grouping codes by similarity of learning experiences, and constantly comparing and refining codes (Charmaz, 2006).

To understand learners' academic language learning experiences in relation to their constructive-developmental perspectives, the interviews were separated according to similar developmental perspectives and repeated the grounded theory analysis process to allow new codes the opportunity to emerge within specific developmental categories.

### **Demographic Questionnaire and Standardized Assessments**

To contextualize the findings and consider factors other than epistemological development that might explain learning experiences (Yin, 2009), demographic information was collected via questionnaire and follow-up questions during LEI. Recent English reading scores measured by the standardized Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) or Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) were also collected.

### **Trustworthiness, Researcher's Role and Reflexivity**

A constructivist approach to grounded theory explicitly recognizes that the researcher's interpretations are also a construction of reality rather than objective, and, therefore, places a strong emphasis on reflexivity (Charmaz, 2006). During data gathering, a field log and reflex journal were maintained (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), in which initial interpretations of interviews and observations were noted, along with assumptions and theoretical biases that may have been informing them (Merriam, 1998). Reflexive steps during data analysis included sending memos several times per week to track the researcher's own process of theorizing and to reflect on theoretical bias and assumptions. Initial findings were also discussed during the research process with an experienced colleague not connected to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), inviting alternate interpretations (Krefting, 1991).

## **Findings**

Findings from this study suggest that diverse developmental perspectives were held by participants and those developmental perspectives made a qualitative difference in academic literacy learning experiences. The LESLLA learner in this study, Sofiya, described academic literacy learning in themes that from an educator's perspective may look like struggle, but which were consistent with her constructive-developmental perspective and definition of success.

### **Introduction to Sofiya**

According to her school records, Sofiya was a 73-year old woman from Somalia, although she clarified, "in American number... it's not a real number (laughs)" (LEI). She had never attended school until she was an adult living in America, but describes having taught herself to read as a child:

"Always I like to write almost every night, so when I go back to sleep, before the sleep I read the book. I don't know, I got not go in school, but I like to read something. So... I'm like student. I read like student. (LEI)."

When the study began, Sofiya had been enrolled in the college and career preparation class for two weeks, but at the learning center for about two years. She stated that she wanted to go to college someday, but seemed to see that as a long way off: "I still ESL, you know" (SOI).

Sofiya's English reading level at the time of this study was High Intermediate ESL. Analysis of the SOI indicated that Sofiya was constructing meaning primarily from an instrumental perspective, with a socializing perspective beginning to emerge. Her SOI score was 2(3).

### **Sofiya's developmental perspective in context**

Sofiya was one of two learners with a dominantly instrumental developmental perspective, with an SOI score of 2(3). Four learners had socializing perspectives, indicated by an SOI score of 3, and three were transitioning from socializing to self-authoring, indicated by the SOI scores 3/4 and 4/3.

Developmental perspectives did not consistently correspond to other demographic data including reading level or educational background. For example, the participant constructing meaning from the most complex perspective, Salazam, had only an eighth-grade education in his rural hometown in Ecuador, before obtaining a GED in the U.S., while the other participant with a dominantly instrumental perspective, Illyas, had also completed an eighth-grade education along with some post-secondary training. Two of the three participants transitioning toward self-authorship had the same high intermediate ESL reading level as Sofiya. Table 1 displays participant demographics, reading levels, and SOI scores.

**Table 1**  
***Demographics, English Reading Levels and SOI Scores***

Participant	Age (years)	Country of origin	School in home country (years)	First language(s)	Years in the United States	School in the United States (years)	ESL/ ABE reading level	SOI score
<b>Sofiya</b>	73	Somalia	0	Somali	13	2	High Int. ESL	2(3)
<b>Illyas</b>	45	Somalia	10	Somali	2	>1	Advanced ESL	2(3)
<b>Leticia</b>	30	Mexico	12	Spanish	10	1.5	Low Adult Secondary Ed.	3
<b>Louam</b>	40	Eritrea	12	Tigrigna	17	1+	Beginning Basic Ed.	3
<b>Nabil</b>	26	Kenya	11	Somali	1	>1	High Int. ESL	3
<b>Teresa</b>	23	Mexico	8	Spanish	11	3	High Int. Basic Ed.	3
<b>Maria</b>	40	Mexico	13	Spanish	1	>1	High Int. ESL	3/4
<b>Masha</b>	30	China	11	Khazak, Uzbek, Kurgis, Chinese	4	1	High Int. ESL	3/4
<b>Salazam</b>	42	Ecuador	8	Spanish	25	7	Low Adult Secondary Ed.	4/3

**Note.** SOI = Subject Object Interview; ABE = Adult Basic Education; ESL = English as a Second Language. ABE/ESL reading levels included scores within the following National Reporting System level range, from low to high: High Intermediate ESL; Advanced ESL; Beginning ABE Literacy; Beginning Basic Education; Low Intermediate Basic Education; High Intermediate Basic Education; Low Adult Secondary; High Adult Secondary.

### **Sofiya's Developmentally Distinct Academic Literacy Learning Experiences**

Depending on their developmental perspectives, learners described qualitatively distinct academic literacy learning experiences. Sofiya described her academic literacy learning experiences in themes consistent with Illyas, the other dominantly instrumental learner.

In academic language learning, Sofiya and Illyas oriented to clear-cut learning successes, consequences and rules. In her writing, Sofiya wanted quantifiable evidence of success: “Sometimes she [the teacher] circle. Now she circle three or four or five. But when my goal is, she have to circle one” (SOI). Just as she focused on concrete successes, Sofiya oriented toward concrete consequences, especially when she missed class, “because I know I missed sentence” (SOI). However, as a rule-oriented meaning-maker, she also identified a clear-cut solution: “I missed yesterday the class, next I have to... get more. Double class... Example, I missed yesterday the sentence or class, so I have to take that class today” (LEI).

In the summarizing unit, while learners (constructing meaning from socializing perspectives and beyond) described understanding the text as the first step in a larger process, Sofiya and Illyas described understanding as the end goal itself. Sofiya explained: “Sometimes I read something before I didn’t know. But now I know what the meaning. That’s my successful, period” (SOI).

Just as Sofiya and Illyas described understanding the text as the end goal, they described summarizing as first and foremost understanding the text, then “writing something.” Sofiya, in describing what she would do in the summarizing unit after understanding what she had read, explained, “Then you can... memorize something or you can write something” (LEI).

All learners expressed that finding the main ideas in readings was challenging, and those constructing meaning from socializing perspectives and beyond described using strategies such as asking themselves the “wh” questions about the text or comparing ideas to determine which was most important. Sofiya and Illyas, by contrast, described looking for ideas that were important in an absolute or concrete way. For example, Sofiya, when asked about the main ideas she had highlighted, explained:

“I think it was, hundred and thousands of people, that number I highlighted.”

#### WHAT MADE YOU HIGHLIGHT THAT NUMBER?

Because it’s a big number. A big number. (LEI).

Sofiya and Illyas at times appeared to respond to questions about a summarizing activity by free-associating with the text read in that activity. In response to a question about having summarized a short article in class, Sofiya listed characteristics of the word “product,” which appeared within it, then concluded, “It create something new, that’s product. I told you, if you remember, I like to help people. So, I like something product. So of course,” (LEI).

When encountering activities requiring abstract reasoning in class, Sofiya and Illyas showed signs of disengaging, or “otherwise engaging.” When working in small groups to decide on the best of four summaries, a group member posed the question, “Which one is better?” Sofiya repeated, “We have to know which one is better.” As the other group members continued that discussion, however, rather than engaging, Sofiya sat back, re-reading the article and underlining seemingly new words. When a group member made a case for “summary three” being the best, Sofiya leaned in briefly, saying, “okay, okay.” As their conversation continued, however, she put her pencil on the table, checked her cell phone, and began talking with a classmate in Somali. While the class regrouped and debriefed on which summary was best, she checked that she has the same answer as the rest of the group, then polished her nails on her skirt, looking down.

## Discussion

The developmentally distinct ways in which Sofiya and the other instrumental learner in this study described academic language learning are consistent with what might be predicted by their developmental stage descriptions in Kegan’s (1982, 1994) CDT, and the theme of orienting to concrete successes and challenges and conceptualizing learning as a “thing” that could be “doubled” was consistent with findings with other instrumental ABE/ESOL learners (Kegan et al., 2001).

Sofiya’s academic literacy learning experiences, on one level, appear to represent struggle. However, when viewed together from the internally coherent perspective of her instrumental worldview, these themes describe a logical pathway toward success as she defined it. If understanding the text is in fact the end-goal, it is logical that summarizing could be understood as first and foremost understanding the text, then simply “writing something.” If reality is absolute and concrete, it follows that what is important from a text would be that which

is important in an absolute way. If abstract reasoning is not yet accessible, it is also logical that Sofiya would not have a direct point of entry into abstract summarizing activities, and that during such activities she might instead pursue success as she understood it – understanding the text – by re-reading the article and underlining unfamiliar words. Sofiya's apparent tendency to free associate echo Taylor's (2006) description of instrumental writing as a "brain dump," of disconnected and unedited thoughts, logical because from this perspective, adults are still developing the capacity to take a perspective on, and, therefore regulate their own thinking (Kegan, 1982; Kegan et al., 2001). Sofiya's concrete orientations to learning and apparent struggles with abstraction are described in Kegan's CDT, and appeared among instrumental learners in a previous study examining adult ELL experiences (Kegan et al., 2001).

The fact that instrumental learners described a distinctly concrete but logically consistent orientation to summarizing is consistent with Cummins' (1979) and Leki's (1996) argument that academic language learning conceptions are related to cognitive skills. In the larger study, however, even learners transitioning into self-authoring perspectives expressed challenge in learning a new genre in a new language, supporting the sociocultural argument that academic language challenges should not be interpreted as cognitive limitations.

## **Limitations**

As a small qualitative case study, the findings in this study on how development appeared to mediate academic literacy learning are not generalizable or causal. While developmental stages appeared to mediate learning experiences, participants brought many types of diversity to their learning experiences, including age, gender, ethnicity, first language(s), educational backgrounds, and, within a range, levels of English. Learning experiences may also have been influenced by culturally influenced thinking patterns (Vorobel & Kim, 2011) or cultural identity as influenced by social, historical and cultural factors (McKinley, 2015). None of these diversities were explored in systematic depth in this study, and all surely informed learning experiences.

Finally, while grounded theory analysis provides a rigorous method to ensure that themes arise from learners' words and meaning, as constructivist grounded theorist Charmaz (2006) argues, the notion of researcher objectivity in any study, including this one, is a misnomer. Other researchers analyzing the same data using the same methods may have found other valuable interpretations of these nine learners' academic literacy learning experiences.

## **Implications**

These learners appeared to bring distinct learning needs to the experience of academic language learning. To find success in academic discourse communities, instrumental learners would likely need scaffolding over time. Taylor (2006) describes developmental scaffolding as the distance between what a learner can do independently and with support, likening the concept to Vygotsky's (1978) notion of proximal development, "the space between" what a learner can do alone and with help. Perhaps one of the most organic strategies for scaffolding summarizing with instrumental learners would be to start with their already strong focus on understanding the text, which is indeed a first necessary step in summary writing (Swales & Feak, 2012). Understanding the text can be addressed through answering comprehension questions. As Illyas put it, "...if you are understanding well, you know paragraph and reading, you can easy, easy to answer. A, B, C, you can choose easily" (LEI). Comprehension questions can be framed as the wh-questions that many of the learners with socializing perspectives and beyond found helpful in identifying the main ideas in their readings. In their book on culturally responsive teaching, Marshall and DeCapua (2013) describe strategies to bridge western classroom expectations to the "immediate relevance and pragmatic tasks" more familiar to learners with informal learning experiences (p. 3), which may likewise benefit instrumental learners.

While adult ELLs, like all adult learners, bring hidden developmental diversities and developmentally distinct learning needs to the academic literacy classroom, most educators will not know the developmental perspectives of their learners. However, just as adult ELL educators draw on their awareness of diversities such as ethnicity, culture and language to inform instructional decisions, educators can be cognizant of different developmental perspectives in the classroom, striving to support not only linguistically, culturally and educationally, but developmentally diverse adult learners.



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## **Building the Letter-Sentence Bridge: Approaches to Teaching Early Literacy to LESLLA Adults**

Shelley Hale Lee, Wake Technical Community College

Jaimie Newsome Irvan, Wake Technical Community College

*This paper is an extension of a six-hour professional development training for adult ESL instructors, originally developed by Shelley Lee and taught by both of the authors.*

When we first started teaching ESL over 15 years ago, the student population was much different than it is today. In the early 2000s, most students were Spanish-speaking immigrants seeking employment in the United States. The community college classes on life and work skills met their needs at the time. Starting in 2008, the number of LESLLA (Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) students in our ESL classrooms increased, and we realized that some of our traditional methods of teaching ESL were becoming less and less effective. LESLLA learners were not benefiting as quickly from the mainstream ESL classes as other, more educated students who were familiar with Western-style education and the Roman alphabet. At the same time, many of our fellow ESL instructors were not prepared to teach LESLLA students. Oftentimes LESLLA students would drop out of beginner classes, usually because they were designed for students who already had literacy skills in their first language. LESLLA students struggled to learn to read in English and quickly fell behind their classmates. It is because of these disparities and the desire to include all students that we began to adjust our focus in the classroom.

Our classes are held at a community college in Raleigh, North Carolina, which, like many places in the U.S., has become home to a growing number of immigrants and refugees. Shelley taught for five years at the New Arrival School, designed especially for non- and semi-literate refugees. Her experiences working with newly-arrived, low-literacy adults served as a springboard for developing a new curriculum that brings explicit literacy instruction into the ESL classroom. Jaimie taught traditional ESL classes at both a non-profit and the local community college. When both organizations began to see an increasing number of LESLLA students, creating a new combined class of varying literacy levels, explicit phonics instruction became necessary for all students to participate actively in class. Both authors note that since significantly changing our approach to include systematic literacy instruction, we have noticed rapid growth among *all* students in class, not just LESLLA students. Our goal is to integrate the best ESL practices into literacy instruction and the best literacy practices into ESL instruction so that all students, LESLLA and traditional ESL students alike, can receive equal access to language and literacy acquisition.

Here, we summarize current research in ESL literacy instruction, note the guiding principles we use in class, and describe in detail some of the teaching techniques we use. The lessons included, can be used in classes made up entirely of LESLLA students, or in combined classes. Usually, we focus on direct literacy instruction for 45-60 minutes of each three-hour class and dedicate the rest of the time to ESL life skills, speaking, and listening. Individual teachers can determine the timing that works in his or her own classroom.

### **Research Base for Balanced Literacy Instruction**

The debate about whole-language and phonics instruction seems to be over, as research increasingly supports a balanced literacy approach when working with beginning readers (Vinogradov, 2008, 2009). The core components of reading include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000), but many LESLLA students have limited decoding skills and are not able to advance to the last, and most important, stage of understanding what they read.

To quickly summarize the two schools of thought, the whole-language/top-down approach focuses on *meaning*, while the traditional phonics/bottom-up approach mainly offers decontextualized acquisition of *letters and sounds*. While both have their place in the classroom, teachers cannot expect their students to pick up one without the other. All ESL students need to learn English within a context (Florez and Terrill, 2003), but

LESLLA students need context and more. As Wrigley (2003) states, “Mere exposure and continued acquisition of English” is not enough for LESLLA students to pick up literacy, just as only learning letter sounds and shapes cannot give students a full understanding of English. Rather, emergent readers need a balance of both methods, so that instruction is “both meaning-based and explicit” (Vinogradov, 2008).

When phonics instruction is contextualized, using both top-down and bottom-up approaches, the students’ needs are better met. For example, instructors can work on sounds and spelling patterns during a vocabulary lesson about a certain topic, allowing students to receive phonics instruction within a meaningful context. Literacy and language are intrinsically connected, and the teacher should provide opportunities for students to practice each one.

## Guiding Principles

Guided by the research, our teaching style is motivated by these principles:

**Progression from oral language to print** (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010): Speaking practice comes before literacy skills. Students need to be able to say and understand the words before they can read them.

**Daily, systematic instruction in foundational literacy:** During each class, students should be exposed to the components of early literacy: print concepts, phonemic awareness, phonics, letter formation, and blending sounds into words.

**Contextualized instruction:** Learning to read doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Teachers should use engaging topics that capture students’ attention as a catalyst for phonemic instruction (Vinogradov, 2008).

**Opportunity mindset:** When teachers offer their students an opportunity for literacy (Gunn, 2003) instead of communicating a deficiency mindset, the students’ affective filter (Krashen, 1982) is lowered. Students feel more confident when they see that their teacher believes in their ability to learn.

**Variety of practice activities:** Having a balance between routine and variety (Wrigley, 2003) keeps the class interesting and the students motivated. Andrea Echelberger, in the New American Horizons video series, exemplifies this practice with her LESLLA learners.

In the sections that follow, we describe personal classroom-tested lessons that reflect our guiding principles and help students move from letter-sound recognition to reading whole sentences.

## Literacy Lessons

### I. Letter-Sound Connection.

In order to learn the building blocks of the Roman alphabet, LESLLA students need explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and English phonics. Many teachers give LESLLA students the whole alphabet at once and teach the letter names but not the letter sounds. This approach is not the best one for LESLLA students (Vinogradov, 2008), as it is more effective to focus on a few letters and sounds at a time, teaching each of them to mastery. This lesson comes from *At the River* (2016), Unit 1.

We begin with teaching the letters a, m, p, s, and t in both uppercase and lowercase. This lesson starts with letters, the smallest unit of meaning, and builds up to words, a larger unit of meaning. It can be used as an introductory literacy lesson on the first day of class or can be broken down into separate lessons for several hours or days. In our experience, we saw a class of low-literacy Spanish speakers master this lesson in 30 minutes, while a group of non-literate students who spoke non-Roman alphabet languages needed six hours of instruction to reach mastery.

The objectives of this lesson are:

- 1) to identify the letter name and sound for short Aa, Mm, Pp, Ss, Tt;
- 2) write the uppercase and lowercase forms of each;
- 3) connect the target sounds with whole words;
- 4) blend the sounds into CVC words; and
- 5) write the CVC words from dictation.

The lesson starts by presenting flashcards that display both the uppercase and lowercase forms of the letters as well as a picture of a keyword for each letter (for example, apple, /a/; map, /m/; pencil, /p/; sun,

/s/; table, /t/. The teacher begins by leading students in saying the letter name, the name of the item pictured, and the letter sound. Students repeat until each letter is mastered.

It is important to teach students that the uppercase form and lowercase forms both make the same sound. To illustrate, the teacher can point to the uppercase and lowercase letters, saying the same sound for each letter. Students are encouraged to repeat the letter sounds, the name of the item pictured, and the words “uppercase” and “lowercase.”

The next step is recognition of uppercase and lowercase letters while connecting them with the letter sounds. Displaying the five flash cards on the board, the teacher provides a simple matching exercise on the board: the five uppercase letters written in a column on the left, and the five lowercase letters written in a column on the right in a different order. Individual students volunteer to draw a line matching the two letters.

A	p
M	s
P	a
S	t
T	m

Another exercise to promote letter recognition is a letter scramble. The teacher writes several rows of lowercase letters, uppercase letters, or uppercase and lowercase letters mixed. Students chorally produce the sound as the teacher points to each letter. Examples of the three variations:

a	m	p	s	t	A	M	P	S	T	A	m	P	S	t
t	s	a	m	p	M	T	S	P	A	T	P	s	M	a
m	a	s	p	t	P	S	A	M	T	a	T	S	p	m

Once students are familiar with the sounds, they are ready to practice writing and connecting the sounds to whole words. The teacher shows students how to write each letter on a whiteboard or on paper.

Aa
Mm
Pp
Ss
Tt

For students who struggle to control the pencil or marker, the teacher can write the letters as a model and the student can copy. Or, the teacher can write the letters using a highlighter and the student can trace. Three-lined paper can be helpful when learning letter shapes as well. As each student finishes writing, the teacher asks him/her to produce the sound for each letter.

As students become comfortable with the sound and the two forms of each letter, they can participate in Whole Language Connection. As the teacher calls out words that begin with the target sounds, students move a small object like a bingo chip or paperclip on their written AMPST column to correspond to them. Words may include: Monday, Saturday, Tuesday, Sunday, paper, student, teacher, marker, pencil, apple, pen, mother, table, avenue, map, sister, ambulance. Students are encouraged to repeat the words several times as they move the chip to identify the initial sound.

Teachers can extend the Whole Language Connection by providing pictures and objects that begin with the target sounds. The visual support helps students connect with initial sounds, connect with whole words,

and learn new vocabulary. Additionally, the pictures and realia can be used for sorting activities and other games later in the lesson.

After students become comfortable recognizing beginning sounds, they are ready to be taught explicitly how sounds blend to form words. Using the target sounds only, the teacher presents visuals and realia for the decodable words *map*, *mat*, *sat*, *pat*, and *tap*. Students will receive oral language and visual support before trying to read the whole words themselves.

While displaying the visuals, the teacher encourages students to talk about them in any way that is useful to them. When showing a map, for example, teachers may find that students want to find their own country or countries they have visited. A student who spent 15 years in a refugee camp in Nepal enthusiastically shared a personal connection with a tap: she used to share one outdoor tap with three families, but now in the U.S., has three. When students are able to create connections between words and their lives, that meaning-making helps the language stick.

After spending sufficient time with the five new vocabulary words and their accompanying visuals, students are ready to blend the sounds they just learned into words. One effective technique is word building. First, the teacher writes *m*, *m*, *s*, *p*, and *t* (doubling the *m* is intentional) in a column on the board, points to each letter, and asks students for its letter sound. Next, the teacher adds *a* to each consonant and models blending the two sounds. The column now reads: *ma*, *ma*, *sa*, *pa*, *ta*. To elicit a single sound, the teacher taps under each letter; to indicate blending, the teacher runs a finger under the two letters, left to right. If students are fluently producing the two blended sounds, they are ready to add the last unit. The teacher adds *p*, *t*, *t*, and *p* to each word, making the column now read: *map*, *mat*, *sat*, *pat*, *tap*. Running a finger under the first two sounds, then tapping under the third, the teacher leads students in reading, *Ma...p*. *Ma...t*. *Sa...t*. *Pa...t*. *Ta...p*. Then, running a finger left to right under all three letters, the teacher models blending the whole word as students repeat. Constant reference to the pictures and realia ensures that phonics instruction is contextual, relevant, and easily understood.

Writing is the final step in this sequence. Students identify the picture or object as the teacher holds it up, then write the word on paper or a whiteboard. Consider this teacher's demonstration:

*(Said while patting a student on the shoulder)*

T: What am I doing?

Ss: Pat.

T: Yes, I can pat my friend's shoulder. Maybe she is sick. I can say, I hope you feel better. Pat, pat, pat. Please write pat. /P/.../a/.../t/. Pat.

Students should be encouraged to produce the sounds as they write. The teacher circulates, offering gentle corrections. For students who struggle to write the words, the teacher can write the word on their board for the students to copy. After going through each word and writing them down, students practice reading and pointing to the words in pairs.

This lesson allows students to learn the alphabetic principle of connecting letters and sounds through modeling, repetition, oral language, ample practice, and finally, reading and writing relevant words that are presented in context of daily life.

## II. Decodable Words: CVC lesson

After students have mastered some letters and their sounds, they are able to participate in more complex decoding activities. This literacy lesson integrates oral language and phonics instruction through simple games and ample practice activities. Throughout the lesson, the teacher alternates top-down and bottom-up activities which give students practice in both oral language and direct phonics. Students achieve automaticity in decoding and blending nine single consonants and three short vowels which are presented contextually through objects that are relevant to daily life.

The teacher starts by reviewing the target sounds with flashcards: short vowels /a/, /i/, and /o/; consonants /b/, /d/, /g/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /t/, /x/. Cards should include a picture of the keyword plus the uppercase and lowercase form of each letter. After sound review, the targeted vocabulary is presented with realia: a map, a mat, a rag, a bag, a pad, a pan, a pin, a tin, a pot, a top, and a box. The students look at, hold,

and pass around the items as the teacher asks some discussion questions. Some example questions include: What is this? Do you have this at home? Do we have this in the classroom? What can you do with this?

When students are confident in saying the words and identifying the objects, the teacher writes the initial sounds in a column on the board: *m, m, r, b, p, p, t, p, t, b*. Students produce each sound as the teacher points to the letter. Next, the vowel sound is added (all vowels are short): *ma, ma, ra, ba, pa, pa, pi, ti, po, to, bo*. The teacher models blending the two sounds and leads the group in practicing the sounds in order.

When students are comfortably producing the blended sounds, the teacher adds the final sound and leads the group in blending the three sounds in order. To provide blending practice, the teacher can produce three separate sounds, tapping once for each sound or holding up one finger for each sound: “/b/.../a/.../g/.” Students listen and say the word “bag”. At this point, it may be helpful to lead students in segmenting as well: “Bag. What are the sounds in bag? /B/.../a/.../g/.” Students can tap or hold fingers up as they segment the word.

LESLLA students need ample practice as well as a variety of practice activities. One way to practice word recognition is to write all the vocabulary words on the board in random order and ask a volunteer to circle the word the teacher says. Students can help the volunteer by providing directions in English: up, down, left, right. This game continues until all of the words have been circled by different students. Another variation is to number the words 1-11 on the board. When the teacher says the word, the students say the corresponding number. Word cards provide yet another way to practice word recognition. Each student receives an index card with a vocabulary word written on it. Then students match the card to the correct item or picture on the table.

While phonics work is foundational for LESLLA learners, oral language development is also crucial. Games such as “What’s Missing?”, the Yes/No game, and TPR (Total Physical Response) provide students with opportunities to speak.

In What’s Missing? a volunteer closes his eyes while another student removes an object from the table. The volunteer opens his eyes and guesses the object that is missing. Classmates may help in English by giving prepositional hints (“next to the box”) or hints about the object’s purpose (“cooking” for pan or pot).

In the Yes/No game, the teacher holds up each object and makes a true/false statement about it: “This is a mat. Yes or no?” If it is a mat, the students say “yes.” If it is not, the students say “no” and provide the correct word. The teacher continues with all of the items. An effective TPR activity involves the teacher giving commands to a volunteer such as, “Put the top on the pot” or “Put the pad in the bag” while the student follows the instructions. More advanced students may volunteer to give the commands to another student. Alternating explicit phonics instruction with oral language activities provides the variety and the repetition that LESLLA students need to make the language comprehensible.

A culminating activity for this CVC lesson is simple dictation. The teacher holds up each item and elicits the name from the students, who are encouraged to repeat the word and segment the sounds as they write, for example: “Pad. /p/.../a/.../d/. Pad.” After students have written all eleven words, the teacher can lead a quick fluency exercise: The teacher says the words in random order while students circle the words on their whiteboard or paper. Then students can read the words individually for the teacher or a partner. Another extension is to use the Language Experience Approach, in which students dictate sentences about the objects to the teacher, who writes what they say on the board for later reading practice.

Because short vowels in English are often hard for learners to distinguish, ample practice is needed. Teachers may need to review and recycle using these practice activities in order to help students reach fluency and automaticity in decoding.

### III. Initial Sounds and Word Recognition Using the *Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary*

How can you teach emergent readers who are successfully decoding *pan*, *box*, and *pin* to read words like *broccoli*, *spinach*, and *cucumber*? It is a significant sign of progress when LESLLA students are able to read decodable words, as illustrated in the previous two lessons. However, daily life also requires them to read words which contain a variety of sounds and spelling patterns which have not yet been explicitly taught, such as consonant blends, digraphs and long vowels. In the following technique, embedded in a “mainstream” ESL vocabulary lesson on vegetables, students use initial sounds and their knowledge of other single consonant sounds to help them recognize the names of vegetables in the *Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary*, 2nd edition. This



lesson can be used in a homogeneous or combination class of traditional ESL students and LESLLA students. The technique can be applied to any beginner vocabulary lesson.

After students warm up with a review of the consonant sounds /b/, /c/, /g/, /l/, /m/, /p/, /s/, /t/ that they will encounter in today's lesson, the teacher introduces the target vocabulary: broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, spinach, corn, garlic, string beans, tomato, pepper, cucumber, potato, onion, carrot, mushroom and peas. The introduction can be done through a variety of oral language activities: talking about pictures of the vegetables, passing around real or realistic vegetables, and asking questions such as, "Do you like \_\_\_\_?" or "Do you cook with \_\_\_\_?" Students may want to share the names of the vegetables in their L1, or talk about the ones they grew in their native country.

After students are comfortable saying the words, they are ready to connect oral language to print. The first step is to recognize each word's initial sound. The teacher displays the eight flashcards for b, c, g, l, m, p, s and t on the board and numbers them 1-8. A sample conversation could be:

(Holding up a picture of a tomato)

T: What is this?

Ss: Tomato.

T: What is the first sound in *tomato*?

Ss: /T/.

T: What number is the first sound?

Ss: Eight.

Continuing in this fashion, the students become aware of the connection between initial sound and letter for each vegetable. The teacher then refers students to the picture dictionary page that shows vegetable illustrations at the top and a list of words at the bottom. After several rounds of practice with the pictures and words on the page, the teacher writes 1-15 on the board along with the first sound of each vegetable, in the same order as in the book. Students produce the letter sound as the teacher points to each in order.

Next, students turn their attention away from the visuals and realia to the whole word. Referring to the pictures and/or the words in the book, students tell the teacher each word as he/she writes it on the board. The list looks like this:

broccoli	9. pepper
cabbage	10. cucumber
lettuce	11. potato
spinach	12. onion
corn	13. carrot
garlic	14. mushroom
string beans	15. peas
tomato	

First, the teacher asks students to repeat the words in order. Then, he/she asks, "What number is mushroom?" Some number of students will say, "Number 14." How did they know? They used their connection with the initial sound to scan the list and identify *mushroom* as number 14. The teacher continues to ask, "What number is lettuce? Garlic? Broccoli? Tomato?" Because there is only one item on the list with those initial sounds, students can identify those words easily using the initial sound strategy. As students identify the correct number, the teacher underlines the first sound.

This kind of list can also be used for further discrimination of sounds within the word. When the teacher asks, "What number is corn?", students using the initial sound strategy may answer with number 2, 5, 10, or 13. Imagine the following scenario:

T: What number is corn?

Ss: Number 13.

T: Ok, let's check number 13. (*running finger under each sound or syllable*): c...arr...ot. Carrot. Carrot. Is this corn?

Ss: No.

T: Ok, let's try again. What number is corn?

Ss: Number 2.

T: Let's check number 2. Ca...bb...age. Cabbage. Cabbage. Is this corn?

Ss: No.

T: What number is corn?

Ss: Number 5.

T: Let's check number 5. C...or...n. Is this corn?

Ss: Yes.

Using this process, students discover how to use the consonant sounds they already know to identify words. Recognition is a step on the road to independent reading. If the teacher uses this strategy consistently, then students will internalize it and apply it independently with new words. The initial sound strategy is an important scaffolding tool that builds strong connections for students with Roman alphabet letters and sounds.

#### IV. Scaffolded Reading with Comprehension Checking Questions

Once students are familiar with the alphabet and its sounds, decoding CVC words, and using initial sounds to recognize words, they can begin reading short passages. The following lesson is taken from the *Ventures Basic* (2010) health unit. Comprehension is emphasized first, so the teacher introduces the topic using plenty of oral language, pictures and realia. The teacher can act out the text or ask student volunteers to do so. Once students are familiar with the vocabulary, the teacher reads the text once or twice while the students listen. Afterwards, the teacher asks a series of yes/no comprehension check questions to make sure that the students understand the text. Then, the scaffolded reading of the text itself can begin. The ultimate goal is for the students to read the text on their own. The text is:

**Tony and Mario are at the doctor's office. They are patients. Tony's leg hurts. His head hurts, too. Mario's arm hurts. His hands hurt, too. Tony and Mario are not happy. It is not a good day. (p. 50)**

After reading the text twice, the teacher asks the students to respond *yes* or *no* to the following statements:

T: Tony and Mario are at the restaurant.

Ss: No.

T: Tony and Mario are at the post office.

Ss: No.

T: Tony and Mario are at the doctor's office.

Ss: Yes.

T: Tony and Mario are doctors.

Ss: No.

T: Tony and Mario are patients.

Ss: Yes.

The teacher continues in this fashion for the remainder of the text, checking comprehension.

Next, the teacher distributes the text to the students and asks them to follow along, either with their finger or their eyes, as he or she reads. After listening to the text several times and connecting the words to the print on the page, the students are ready to try echo reading. Here, the students repeat chunked passages after the teacher, chorally. Next, the students practice sentence recognition. The teacher shows the text, either written on the board or projected on a screen, with each sentence numbered 1-8. The teacher reads a sentence at random and asks the students to identify which number the sentence is. The students continue to call out the number of each sentence as they hear it.

As the students develop more confidence with the text, they can transition into sentence completion: reading the second half of the sentence after the teacher reads the first half. For example, the teacher reads,

“Tony and Mario . . .” and the students say, “. . . are at the doctor’s office.” As the students respond, the teacher can see which students are able to track with the words and which ones will need more practice. Other methods of practicing literacy with a whole text are:

1. *Reading in pairs*: Students read a sentence at a time with a partner as the teacher circulates and makes suggestions.

2. *Round robin reading*: Either in a small group or as a whole class, students read one sentence at a time.

3. *Sound identification*: The teacher makes the initial sound of a word from the text, such as short o. Looking at the text, students read a word from the text that has that sound (/o/...office). The teacher continues with 8-10 initial sounds from the text.

4. *Word identification*: Students dictate sentences to the teacher, who writes the sentences on the board. Students come to the board and circle the words/phrases the teacher or another student calls out. Or, students circle words on their paper that the teacher calls out.

5. *Sentence strips*: Students work in pairs or in groups to reorganize the text, which has been written on separate index cards, and put it back together in the correct order. This activity helps students with both word recognition and word order.

These activities are only a few of the methods teachers can use when helping LESLLA learners read beginner texts with better fluency and comprehension.

## V. Connecting Oral Language to Meaningful Print

In this last lesson, students are exposed first to listening and speaking practice with whole sentences, which is then followed by scaffolded phonics, reading, and writing exercises. Offering ample speaking and listening practice before moving to print helps students learn new vocabulary and understand whole sentences.

The topic for this citizenship lesson is George Washington. The teacher begins by showing a picture of Washington and saying, “This is George Washington. He was the first American president.” Then, the teacher asks, “Who is this?” Students respond by saying “Washington” or “George Washington.” The teacher turns the one-word answer into a whole sentence: “Washington was the first president.” The class repeats the sentence. The teacher can ask again, “Who is this?” and cue the students to answer in a complete sentence.

The teacher continues by showing pictures or realia of a dollar bill, a quarter, a calendar of the month of February, and a map showing Washington D.C. The teacher models a complete sentence about each item, and cues students to repeat the full sentence, breaking it down into chunks as needed. The entire series is:

**Washington was the first president.**

**Washington is on the dollar bill.**

**Washington is on the quarter.**

**Washington is the Father of Our Country.**

**Washington’s birthday is in February.**

**Washington, D.C. is the capital of the United States.**

More or fewer sentences can be used, depending on the level of the students.

After the students have said the sentences several times, the teacher passes the pictures and realia one by one around the class. Each student holds an item, says the corresponding sentence, and passes it to the next student. That student repeats the sentence and passes the item to the next student, and so on until everyone has had a chance to say the sentence individually. This activity is repeated with all six sentences. The teacher should circulate the classroom to encourage each student to say the entire sentence correctly.

After discussing the pictures and realia, the teacher displays and reads the first sentence, which the students repeat. As the class practices, the teacher can use any of the guided/scaffolded reading strategies from the previous lesson to help students with fluency and oral/print connections.

After the students have read the sentences several times, they complete a dictation exercise, which can be differentiated according to each student’s level. Some students will only focus on a few initial sounds (/w/, /f/, /p/, /d/, /b/, etc.), while others will write entire missing words.

Another activity that involves the whole class is a sentence-scramble/line-up. Each student receives a card with a word from the sentence written on it, and must stand in front of the classroom in order, forming the entire sentence correctly. Individual or pair sentence scrambles give students the opportunity to use manipulatives as they practice word recognition techniques. Culminating activities include asking students to read the passage with a partner and individually for the teacher. Some students will enjoy reading out loud in front of the class.

This lesson provides multiple opportunities to interact with the text, which helps the students read independently and understand what they are reading. Ultimately, we want all students to become so familiar with a decoded text that they are able to demonstrate comprehension.

## Conclusion

Our LESLLA students have taught us a great deal. We have come to recognize the crucial role of explicit phonics and literacy instruction in the ESL classroom. Teachers can meet the needs of all students by adapting traditional ESL approaches and adopting the balanced literacy approach. The lessons illustrated here have been effective with our classes, but teachers should alter them to best serve their particular groups of students. Our goal is clear: to integrate the best literacy practices with the best ESL practices so that all students, especially those with limited formal education, can acquire language and literacy for their lives in their new countries.

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