

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



## Recommended citation of this article

Vinogradov, P., & Liden, A. (2009). Principled Training for LESLLA Instructors. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 4(1), 133–144. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8003946>

## Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2008 Symposium held at Karel de Grotehogeschool in Antwerp, Belgium. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Van de Craats, I. & Kurvers, J. (Eds.) (2009). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 4th symposium. LOT.  
<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/469>

## About the Organization

LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

## LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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<https://www.leslla.org/>

## PRINCIPLED TRAINING FOR LESLLA INSTRUCTORS

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### 1 *Introduction*

In our work as teacher educators in adult ESL, we see the spectrum of instructional programs for immigrants and refugees in Minnesota, USA. These programs vary greatly; some are well-funded and enjoy full-time staff and state of the art facilities, others are volunteer-run and meet in church basements or in the high-rise apartment buildings where their learners reside. The students in adult ESL programs span from the highly educated to those with no first language literacy, from those who arrived to the United States decades ago, to those who arrived last week. Often, all of these students can be found within the same classroom.

Teachers in adult ESL vary nearly as much as the students; some have graduate degrees in education or linguistics, some are licensed teachers, and others are well-meaning volunteers with minimal training. Some instructors are trained to work with children but find themselves teaching adults. Others have received excellent training, perhaps even certification in TESOL<sup>1</sup>, but are now teaching reading to adults who have never learned to read, a topic that was never explored in their studies.

In our experience, in fact, such low-educated limited-literacy second language learners (we use the term 'LESLLA learners') are rarely discussed in the preparation of ESL teachers. Many reasons may explain this: a disconnect between graduate programs at universities and the immigrants and refugees who live a few blocks away, an assumption that those who pursue teaching ESL as a career are likely to work with educated students in secondary or college settings, the historical lack of research and investment on the part of applied linguistics scholars in immigrant and refugee learners, etc. As pointed out by Bigelow and Tarone, "Participants in SLA studies are often highly literate: undergraduates in foreign language programs, graduate students in intensive English programs, or international teaching assistants. We have reviewed all the leading journals that publish SLA research and found that researchers rarely study adult and adolescent immigrant learners with very low literacy in any language," (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004: 689-690).

Regardless of why it exists, the lack of adequate training for LESLLA instructors is both real and severe. Inadequate training brings clear and negative consequences for our LESLLA learners and a level of frustration for LESLLA teachers, teachers who are trying everything in their toolboxes but are still struggling to find classroom practices

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<sup>1</sup> Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

that are effective. The research and best practices inquiry being done in this area needs to reach our teachers, and teacher educators need to be conscious of their responsibility to ALL learners. As Young-Scholten pointed out in the 2007 LESLLA proceedings, 'LESLLA participants noted that whenever feasible, research should be translated into implications for the training and professional development of practitioners...' (2007). It is this 'translation,' this connection between the fine work being done by LESLLA researchers and the actions teachers can take with that information, that we have tried to provide with our principled training workshop.

First of all, before we discuss the content of our training workshop, we must admit that it is insufficient. As much as we'd like to believe otherwise, a teacher cannot learn all she needs to serve LESLLA students well in a single afternoon. Ideally, we would teach an entire course on the topic, with a semester to explore, read, discuss, observe fellow teachers, debrief, try out new ideas, report back, form conclusions, etc. If only wishing made it so! But the reality is otherwise; teachers are eternally busy, their schools are under-funded and often cannot support extended professional development, and the academic institutions that could offer such courses remain unconvinced of their necessity, or perhaps they themselves are unprepared to address this important topic. What we *can* accomplish in a brief but carefully planned workshop is that the important questions begin to be formulated and posed, that the teacher begins to see her classroom differently, perhaps with a different view of how reading takes place for these learners as opposed to her more educated students. A teacher can, after a workshop such as this one, begin to create a network of like-minded colleagues, be inspired to read more on the topic and have a list of readings in hand, and give herself permission to try new approaches and activities in the coming days and weeks. It may be as small as realizing the importance of clear visual aids or building schema, or finding new ways to integrate useful repetition in her classroom. She may see a new way to utilize language experience stories into her prescribed curriculum, or perhaps she may feel empowered to try to teach phonics in a contextualized, meaningful way that her students will find more memorable and engaging. However small the outcome of this workshop for each individual participant, we hope it will lead to greater understanding of LESLLA learners, a greater interest in the current research, and a greater repertoire of strategies to serve these learners.

We created the workshop for LESLLA instructors with our colleague, Andrea Poulos, for a national audience of teachers and teacher-educators. It has been repeated for a number of local and regional professional development events as well. The original workshop is four hours in length and involves several key topics. We note that while many areas of the country have concentrated populations of speakers of one language, often Spanish, that is not the case in Minnesota. We take a moment in our workshop to review the diverse immigrant and refugee groups that are often placed in LESLLA classes in our area. Our learners come from many countries and speak many languages, including Somali, Hmong, Spanish, Burmese, Oromo, Amharic, Liberian English, Sudanese, Karen, Thai, and Lao. Following this introduction, we look at the knowledge base and skills required to effectively teach LESLLA learners.

2 *Knowledge base and skills involved in LESLLA teaching*

In our conversations with adult educators, we hear teachers who are frustrated with the progress of their low-literacy learners. We hear stories such as: “I’ve been teaching ESL for 20 years, but I’m new to working with pre-literate learners. It seems like nothing I’m doing is working.” Others point out a common mismatch between oral and written skills: ‘My pre-literate learners can converse just fine. Their speaking skills are very strong, but they barely recognize their names in print.’ These comments are evidence of the fact that teaching LESLLA learners is strikingly different from teaching those with strong first language literacy. In our experience, even a minimal amount of school experience and some exposure to the printed word can make a world of difference in how quickly and efficiently a learner can acquire English.

*Table 1: Knowledge base of effective LESLLA instructors*

Topic	Specification
1. The refugee/immigrant experience	the journey of specific refugee/immigrant groups, trauma and its effect on learning, demands of resettlement.
2. Types of literacy-level learners	pre-literate, non-literate, semi-literate, non Roman alphabet literate. <sup>2</sup>
3. Literacy in childhood vs. adulthood	the difference between a child acquiring literacy in L1 and an adult acquiring literacy in L2.
4. Emergent readers	empathy for the challenge LESLLA learners face
5. Second language acquisition	basic SLA theory including the role of comprehensible input, factors that affect language learning, etc.
6. Key research	the promising research that has been done by LESLLA LESLLA researchers.
7. Components of reading	the role of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.
8. Balanced literacy	top-down and bottom-up approaches as well as balanced literacy practices.
9. Approaches to teaching literacy	importance of relevant and learner-centered instruction that might include project-based learning, language experience approach, etc.
10. Connections between first and second language literacies	role of home language, and transfer of first language literacy ability to second language literacy.

<sup>2</sup> Pre-literate learners come from an oral tradition with no written form. Non-literate learners come from a literate culture, but have not had the opportunity to learn to read and write. Semi-literate learners have had some schooling, but generally less than six years. Non-Roman-alphabet literate learners are literate in a language or languages that are either not alphabetic (i.e. Chinese,) or alphabetic non-Roman (i.e. Cyrillic) or alphabetic, non-Roman and consonantal (i.e. Arabic) (Haverson & Haynes, 1982).

So why is teaching LESLLA learners so different from teaching other learners? What particular knowledge and skills do effective LESLLA teachers have? Ten main areas are critical to the knowledge base of effective LESLLA teachers; they are described in the table below. We recognize that many of these areas of knowledge are important for all second language instructors; however, this list includes areas of unique importance to LESLLA instructors.

Beyond the knowledge base that effective teachers need to serve LESLLA students, they must also know how to apply this knowledge in the classroom. A unique set of skills is required to move teachers from theory to effective classroom practice. We've divided these skills into three areas: assessment, course design and classroom practice, and materials development. These skills are outlined in the chart below.

*Table 2: Skills of effective LESLLA instructors*

Topic	Specification
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- assess literacy and language skills in L1 and L2</li> <li>- conduct needs assessments of learners</li> </ul>
Course design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- contextualize literacy instruction within real-life, relevant themes</li> <li>- teach pre-literacy skills</li> <li>- build oral language and vocabulary</li> <li>- develop multi-level lessons</li> <li>- design and teach lessons that address the components of reading</li> <li>- design and teach lessons that develop balanced (bottom-up and top-down) reading strategies</li> <li>- teach learning strategies and study skills appropriate for LESLLA learners</li> <li>- lower the affective filter of the classroom, create welcoming, productive atmosphere in the class</li> </ul>
Materials development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- choose and develop appropriate materials, adapt published materials</li> <li>- use authentic materials for instruction</li> <li>- understand value of student-generated texts</li> </ul>

We have strived to address many of the knowledge and skills in Tables 1 and 2 in the training workshop outlined below.

### 3 *One option: A LESLLA training workshop*

Teaching LESLLA learners is no simple task. So much is involved: from reading theory to issues of refugee resettlement, from assessing first language literacy to adapting published materials. The teachers that we observe and train are eager to do a good job, but they are also pulled in many directions in their jobs, and their schools often lack resources to provide in-depth preparation in working with LESLLA learners. So, how can we, as teacher educators, help these instructors further excel in their craft and help their learners thrive in their new homes? The half-day teacher-training workshop we designed attempts to do just that. It is described in the chart below, and the next

section highlights several key elements from this training.

Table 3: *Outline of LESLLA Teacher Training Workshop*

Time	Topic	Activities
20 min	Introductions	Principles, skills, practices
	Agenda	Two warm-up questions
15 min	Foreign language reading demo ‘What do those squiggles mean?’	Learn to read a bit in a foreign, non-Roman alphabet language
15 min	Debrief foreign language reading experience	What’s involved in reading?
10 min	Research	Key considerations Annotated bibliography
15 min	Principles in reading instruction ‘So what’s it all mean?’	Five guiding principles to guide successful instruction to adult emergent readers
25 min	Practices that reflect balanced, meaning-based instruction	Scenarios of a good teaching practice.
Break		
45 min	From theory to practice	Review and re-cap Overview of sample literacy-focused unit: <i>What’s in my neighborhood?</i>
50 min	Workshop time	Workshop task with a text/topic Share two key ideas or activities from your discussion with another group
15 min	Pulling it all together	Resources Reading lab materials Networking Key learnings and next steps
10 min	Wrap up, close	Q and A

#### 4 Key pieces of a LESLLA training workshop

The workshop outlined above was designed to be held in one 4-hour block in an interactive setting, where participants actively ask questions, discuss topics together, and seek input from the facilitators. The workshop includes many different components, and six of these areas require more in depth explanation: Foreign language demonstration, Annotated bibliography, Guiding principles, Scenarios of effective practice, Sample instructional unit, and Lesson planning.

#### 4.1 Foreign language demonstration

We begin with a simulation of what our LESLLA students experience when they begin to read in a language that is 1) foreign to them and 2) uses an alphabet they are not familiar with. Of course, we realize that our workshop participants are *not* illiterate, and they bring to this brief simulation a wealth of literacy, formal education experience, and perhaps a heightened aptitude for language learning. We want to at least give them a taste of what their students may experience when learning to read for the first time in an unfamiliar tongue.

Our foreign language demonstration is done in Russian, a language which uses the Cyrillic alphabet. The presenter introduces vocabulary in a meaningful context (a family and their occupations) and immediately has participants actively involved in listening, speaking, and moving about with the lesson. Gradually, the participants are introduced to certain vocabulary items in print, and they learn to read by looking for clues in the letters (bottom-up strategies) and via the established context (top-down strategies). The 'Russian learners' participate in pair reading, match vocabulary words to pictures, fill in missing letters, and eventually (within 15 minutes) are able to read four sentences in Russian with no visual prompts. Figure 1 below illustrates some of the material from this foreign language lesson.

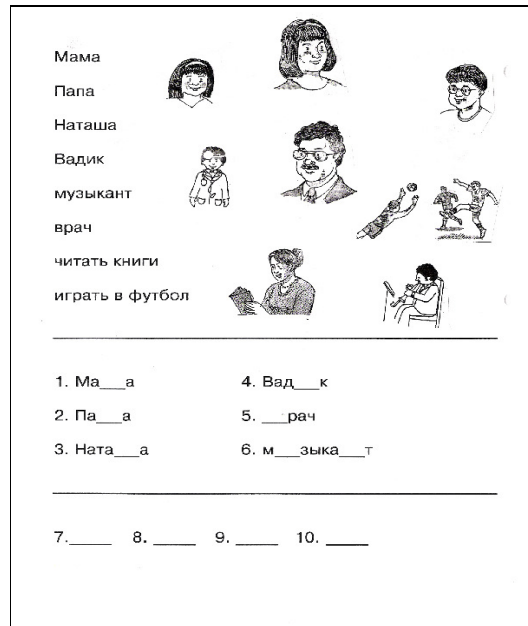


Figure 1: Material from foreign language demonstration

The foreign language demonstration, while a small portion of the workshop, plays a key role. Right away in the training workshop, participants empathize with their learners,

and they quickly identify the advantages of literacy and previous education. More purposes for this foreign language demonstration are outlined in Figure 2.

- To see or be reminded of what a huge undertaking literacy is in an unfamiliar language.
- To become aware of the strategies used for literacy, and to discuss and identify which of these strategies (and others) their students may have or lack when they begin to acquire literacy.
- To be reminded of the importance of instructional pace, repetition, comprehensible input, and encouragement.
- To begin thinking about how this experience runs parallel to their learners' experiences acquiring literacy in English.

Figure 2: Purposes of foreign language demonstration

Throughout the workshop, we refer back to the foreign language demonstration to provide examples of modeling activities, using realia and pictures, setting realistic objectives, and utilizing other sound classroom practices. Furthermore, this demonstration leads us to pose the question, 'What's involved in reading?' The discussion that follows allows us to explore the key components of reading, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

#### 4.2 Annotated bibliography<sup>3</sup>

In our outline of the knowledge base that effective LESLLA instructors need (see Table 1), we mention key research. Some of this research may be from related fields such as first language reading development in children, adult second language acquisition, and adult first language reading development. There is less research available on how adults learn to read for the first time in an unfamiliar language. Fortunately, LESLLA teachers and researchers are making tremendous strides to create and disseminate this vital information. In our training workshop, we are not able to devote a lengthy amount of time to reviewing the relevant research, but we are able to share some resources and perhaps inspire further reading. We have chosen to do this in an annotated bibliography. Through our own reading and recommendations of our colleagues, we have collected citations for 18 key articles and books on the topic of LESLLA learners. For each citation, we have provided a brief written summary, and when possible, a way to access the reading online.

During our workshop, we distribute this annotated bibliography and ask participants to scan the entries for two minutes. Then they are asked to mark two articles that concern topics they are already familiar with, and two that they would like to know more about. This brief task allows our participants to see what research is

<sup>3</sup> The annotated bibliography is available in pdf format at [http://www.leslla.org/files/presentations/Annotatedbibliography\\_LESLLA%2008.pdf](http://www.leslla.org/files/presentations/Annotatedbibliography_LESLLA%2008.pdf).



available, what topics researchers are focusing on, and to encourage them to use this list to further their own knowledge. Participants are encouraged to share this list with others, and perhaps use it to begin a research-reading group with fellow LESLLA instructors.

### 4.3 Guiding principles

While research specifically focusing on LESLLA learners is still in its infancy, we are able to draw some important conclusions about effective instruction both from existing educational research and from professional wisdom in the field. For our training workshop, we extrapolated five guiding principles for teachers to follow. Participants note that these principles overlap a great deal with what we know about sound teaching (Vinogradov, 2008). They include the tenets outlined in Figure 3.

1. Keep it in context.	- Engage learners in interesting, challenging, relevant topics/themes. Seek out and listen actively for what's important to your learners.
2. Go up and down the ladder.	- Balance top-down and bottom-up instruction.
3. Provide a buffet of learning opportunities.	- Engage learners in a variety of learning modes (including hands on, project based, visually supported lessons, etc.)
4. Tap into strengths.	- Begin with what students already know, like, and do. Routinely use student-generated texts, build around their outside interests, etc.
5. Nurture learners' confidence.	- Work to create successful, confident learners. Establish routines, post agendas and objectives, teach organizational skills and strategies that will serve learners in and beyond school.

Figure 3: *When teaching literacy...*

During this portion of the workshop, we describe each of the five guiding principles and offer several references from relevant research to support each choice for our list. We also welcome comments from participants, and they share examples from their own classrooms that demonstrate these principles in action.

### 4.4 Scenarios of effective practice

The guiding principles described in Figure 3 may appear easy on paper; they are general enough to avoid much argument. But how do we move from this tidy chart to the messy reality of an adult ESL classroom? How do we apply these principles, pulled from key research, and find ways to design better learning activities, nurture an even more productive classroom, and help our LESLLA learners become stronger readers, more confident learners, and more active participants in their communities?

To address the link between theory and practice, we created seven teaching scenarios. These scenarios illustrate how various key issues in LESLLA classrooms can be addressed skillfully. We offer these as scenarios of good practice, examples of sound,

principled classroom instruction. There is a scenario written for each of the following areas:

- *Multi-level (pre-literate and literate students in one class)*
- *L1 literacy instruction*
- *Meaningful assessment*
- *Learning beyond classroom*
- *Using authentic texts*
- *Choosing and creating materials, adapting for use*
- *Extensive reading*

Figure 4: Scenarios of effective practice

In our teacher-training workshop, we put participants in groups of three or four and assign each group one scenario. They read and discuss the scenario for ten to fifteen minutes, specifically seeking answers to these two questions:

- What evidence of the five guiding principles do you see in this scenario?
- How are the five reading skills (phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency) put into action in this scenario?

Working with these scenarios not only allows teachers to build their repertoire of strategies for the classroom, but it also gives them a chance to explore the connections between the research-based guiding principles, effective classroom activities, and the five components of reading. As time allows, groups are asked to explore another scenario or to share their findings with another group.

#### 4.5 Sample instructional unit: *Our neighborhood*

The main portion of our teacher-training workshop is here: a demonstration of a sample unit of instruction. We have chosen a topic (*What's in your neighborhood?*), and we demonstrate a unit that would take approximately 15-20 hours of instruction. Why demonstrate an entire unit in such a teacher-training workshop? Our purpose is to move beyond theory and research and hypothetical classroom situations, to move into the reality of daily lessons. We want our participants to become familiar with classroom practices that reflect balanced, meaning-based instruction. By placing these best practices in one contextualized, engaging unit, participants are able to see how effective instruction might look in an actual classroom.

While we are not able to include the entire neighborhood unit in these proceedings, we include a few pieces to illustrate this portion of the workshop. Figure 5 shows a Language Experience Story (LEA) that students might dictate to their instructor following a short walk outside.<sup>4</sup> Figures 6, 7, and 8 show phonics activities derived from this LEA story.

<sup>4</sup> LEA capitalizes on students' oral skills and allows them to tell a story to their instructor, or a literate peer, who then puts the story into writing. This approach creates a reading text with

Following a walk near our school, students generate the following text:

*We take a walk near our school.  
 We see many things.  
 Many cars, bus.  
 We see Cub Foods, a store for food.  
 Across the street, there is a big park.  
 Very beautiful.  
 On the corner, we see Holiday gas station.  
 Humboldt avenue.  
 On other side there is Caribou Coffee.  
 We walk back to school.  
 Next to school there are many houses.*

Figure 5: Language experience story from neighborhood unit

<b>S</b> school, street, store	<b>C</b> Cub, caribou, coffee
<b>A</b> avenue, across, are	<b>H</b> houses, Humboldt, holiday

Figure 6: Phonics activities from sample unit: sound chain

Students are asked to begin with a familiar word from the LEA story, and to recognize the final sound and name a new word that begins with that sound, etc. For example:

*house > school > like > cold > December > rabbit >  
 time > my > ice*

Figure 7: Phonics activities from sample unit: sort the letters

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language that comes directly from the learners. The advantage of using LEA is that the reading text includes only language that is meaningful and familiar to the students.

C	H	S
__aribou	__offee	
__ub Foods		
__oliday		
__ouse		
__tudy		
__chool		

Figure 8: Phonics activities from the sample unit: fill in the missing letters

The sample unit about *What's in Your Neighborhood?* is quite large. In addition to the above LEA story and phonemic awareness and phonics activities, the unit includes journal writing, grammar exercises, extensive reading, and a great deal of repetition and recycling of material. This demonstration of the curricular unit provides a ready example for the next portion of the workshop, where participants work in teams to develop their own units. (The entire unit is described in detail in our documents at [www.leslla.org](http://www.leslla.org).)

#### 4.6 Lesson planning

Following the Neighborhood Unit, we give participants a chance to work together on developing their own curriculum units. In groups of three or four, they brainstorm around a topic, thinking of classroom activities that will give their learners a balanced, engaging literacy experience. To help them get started, we provide each group with a topic and a short reading to include in the unit. We also distribute a graphic aid that we developed to help them organize their ideas and as a reminder of some of the important areas of instruction. The categories of this visual aid are listed in Figure 9 below.

Functional literacy objectives	Literacy development objectives	Phonic and phonemic awareness tasks
Student-generated texts	Key vocabulary (about 10 words)	Project-based learning
Learning strategy instruction	Extensive reading	Writing mechanics practice
Authentic texts	Community connections	Incorporation of student cultures and past experiences

Figure 9: Graphic organizer: topics for participants' discussion of instructional unit

Our main purpose for this lesson-planning group time is for participants to create and share with each other practices that reflect balanced, meaning-based instruction. They are given quite a bit of time for this activity, about 30 minutes, as the workshop facilitators move from group to group monitoring their progress, helping as needed. This is a terrific opportunity for our participants to share their own successes and ideas with their group members. After each group has an outline of a unit to share, they are paired with another group to compare their units. Finally, we ask for any highlights from their discussions to be shared with the entire group.

##### 5 *LESLLA teacher preparation around the globe, resources and next steps*

While this half-day professional development workshop is a fine beginning, it is certainly not the end of LESLLA teacher preparation. Promising ideas for expanding this training include moving beyond a one-day workshop, perhaps meeting several times over several weeks, with time in-between for teachers to observe and reflect on their teaching and their students' learning. Another idea is to create reading groups and mentor relationships among LESLLA instructors to encourage ongoing professional development at a local level.

Around the world, LESLLA instructors are struggling to create productive, balanced classrooms. In our work with teacher preparation, we have benefitted greatly from hearing other teacher-educators' experiences in preparing LESLLA teachers. Many projects are in process for improving and expanding current training in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, and also in other parts of the United States. Venues for preparing LESLLA teachers vary greatly. Some training is happening in workshops such as the one we have described here, some is taking place in established pre-service teacher coursework, and more and more attention is being given to online tutorials. We agree that more sharing of resources and professional development projects is needed for our teacher-educators, our practitioners in the field, and most of all, for the benefit of our LESLLA learners.

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