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A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF PRE-LITERATE AND LOW-LITERATE ADULT AND ADOLESCENT LEARNERS

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It is essential to have a healthy ecology of second language acquisition (SLA) research. Teachers, policy makers, and researchers are needed to move SLA research forward in thoughtful and productive ways which are not marked by needless polemics between cognitive and sociocultural work. A healthy ecology of SLA research should be grounded in theory and at the same time account for the instructional context and the diversity among the learners themselves. SLA theory building cannot occur when only a narrowly defined type of language learner is included in our research corpus; namely, we cannot make universal claims about SLA when our corpus does not include adolescents and adults with limited print literacy or formal schooling (LESLLAA).[1]

This paper focuses on SLA research, as distinct from other important topics such as teacher education, educational policy, curriculum and other areas that directly impact LESLLAA lives. In this paper we identify a number of research areas that we feel are ripe for continued SLA

1 We are temporarily modifying the LESLLA acronym for this paper in order to explicitly include adolescents.

research. Among the goals of current SLA research agendas are the following:

- Describe and explain cognitive processes – how second languages (L2s) are processed – often in terms of input, output and interaction. Studies of working memory in language processing fall in this category.
- Document development of L2 learner language over time; however, not enough longitudinal case studies have been done. It is challenging to sustain access to a learner, but it is vital for the field to have more longitudinal studies.
- Document what L2 learners produce and how they process language. Some strands of SLA research are challenged with the inclusion of contextual factors such as tasks, student grouping, various uses of language and language varieties, use of oral and written language, and interlocutors such as teachers and peers.
- Focus primarily on oral interlanguage, which is, we argue, best revealed in unrehearsed communication. Unrehearsed communication can show aspects of learners' interlanguage that has become internalized/automated and reveal how they solve communication tasks with the language resources they possess. Written communication, on the other hand, allows more time for learners to focus on form and edit using consciously learned rules.

We are fortunate to have our community of teachers and researchers focusing on LESLLAA learners. However there is still very little about our learners in our mainstream SLA research journals, conferences and books. Many mainstream SLA textbooks do not include any acknowledgement that LESLLAA learners exist. To claim that we understand the way *the* human mind acquires L2s, based on data from *some* humans (the literate ones) is also a problem. What if LESLLAA acquire L2s differently than literate learners? We

believe they do learn L2s differently and that we have evidence of this (Tarone, Bigelow & Hansen, 2009).

Omission of learners with limited formal schooling and limited literacy in their native language(s) is risky for SLA researchers as well as those of us who prepare teachers and for those who teach LESLLAA. Recommendations for LESLLAA pedagogy by SLA researchers aren't based on research on LESLLAA learners. This is a serious problem for teachers, curriculum developers, and teacher educators that plays out every day as exceptions are raised, materials are (mis)adapted, and opportunities for students to gain the most basic print concepts are missed.

Why have LESLLAA learners been omitted from the SLA research enterprise? Is it because they are the same as other learners? Is it because literacy doesn't matter in L2 teaching and learning? Is it because they don't tend to learn other languages? Is it because their numbers are few? LESLLAA learners do exist. According to the Human Development Index (see UNDP.org), the adult illiterate population around the world, which includes people age 15+, is 793.1 million and 64% are female. Some of the lowest literacy rates are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia. Countries where adult literacy rates in 2011 were below 50% include Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. Two thirds of the world's illiterate adults are found in Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The region of South and West Asia is home to more than one-half of the global illiterate population (51.8%). However, rates can vary widely across countries in a region. In Mali, for example, merely 26% of the population is literate in contrast to Equatorial Guinea where 93% of the population can read and write.

The National Reporting System in the U.S. collects information from federally funded adult education programs in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. In 2008-2009, there

were 111,552 women and 73,437 men in beginning English literacy classes.[2] According to the Minnesota Department of Education, there are about 30,000 adults who are enrolled in publicly funded English as a Second Language classes, many of whom are becoming literate for the first time in English (Shaffer, 2011).

Interesting, and perhaps ironic to some, is the fact that very high levels of low print literacy frequently co-occur with very high levels of multilingualism.

Take the case of Burkina Faso where only 21% of the adult population can read and write. School life expectancy is 6 years for girls and 7 years for boys. However, Burkina Faso has 68 living languages, many which have fewer than 1000 speakers. While exact numbers of languages and speakers is disputable, we can assume that many people in Burkina Faso who are illiterate frequently learn each other's languages. Afghanistan is similar. Adult literacy is only 28% and there are 49 languages spoken in Afghanistan, many with fewer than 1000 speakers. Many Afghani people who are illiterate must be multilingual. Literacy stats come from the CIA Factbook and language stats come from ethologue.com. Clearly, multilingualism does not depend upon literacy or formal schooling, as many may believe in more monolingual contexts.

In addition we live in a world where transnationalism is becoming normal, and where political strife continues to cause massive migrations. There is a wide range of conditions that precipitate large scale migrations; however, the one thing we can count on is that it is common in times of crisis for children to not attend school. Upon resettlement in neighboring countries and throughout the world, (im)migrants and refugees enroll themselves and their children in school, and join language programs (English, Dutch, German,

2 These data from program years 2004-05 through 2008-09 can be found here: http://www.nrsweb.org/docs/ESL_Fastfacts_CEL_Tagged.pdf

Finnish, French, etc.) for perhaps their very first experience in a classroom. In our profession, we have the opportunity to encounter individuals from multilingual societies, who perhaps for the first time are feeling an urgent need to attend school and acquire print literacy. We need to know how they learn and how to teach them.

Although SLA research with LESLLAA is in its early stages, we focus on the need for more research on the SLA processes of this population. We begin with a review of the fundamental assumptions and possibly relevant findings of SLA research on more literate populations. We then consider ways in which those findings may or may not apply to low-literate learners and ask, How can research shed light on their processes of acquiring a second language? and How does this research help us teach them more effectively?

Fundamental assumptions and findings of SLA research

Although we know our readers are familiar with the core assumptions of the field of SLA research, we believe it would be useful to review them again, keeping in mind the particular characteristics of LESLLAA. The field began in the mid-60's as applied linguists considered the implications of Chomsky's revolutionary claim that humans have an innate capacity to learn and use language in ways that are both universal and creative. Up to that point, the field of foreign language teaching had been dominated by a behaviorist theory that viewed SLA as a process of habit formation: The learner needed to replace L1 grammar rules (the old habits) with L2 rules (new habits). Teaching an L2 was a matter of drill and habit formation; creativity in formulation of grammar rules was not in the picture. However, in 1967 at Edinburgh University, S.P. Corder proposed that adult learners come into the language classroom with an innate, implicit 'built-in syllabus' to guide their acquisition of L2 grammar and phonology (Corder, 1967). With that built-in syllabus, they could create and try out L2 grammar

rules and produce original and creative utterances. Also in Edinburgh at that time, Larry Selinker was writing a paper called "interlanguage[3]," saying that interlanguage is the implicit system of rules that L2 learners create and use to generate utterances in L2. The interlanguage grammar is a hybrid mix of transfer from native language rules, generalized target language rules, strategies of learning, and communication patterns. Importantly, Selinker stressed that interlanguage was implicit L2 knowledge, not accessible to explicit analysis or introspection. In the 1980's, Krashen (1981, 1982) argued that L2 learners in fact have two kinds of knowledge about L2 grammar: an implicit (acquired) knowledge base that underlies and generates utterances, and an explicit (learned) knowledge base that allows one to analyze and talk about grammar rules. Explicit knowledge is conscious, analytical, and controlled, while implicit knowledge is used to unconsciously and automatically generate L2 utterances.

Though Krashen's theory is no longer in vogue, most SLA theorists still concede that there is an essential difference between explicit and implicit knowledge of L2 grammar forms. Explicit knowledge derives from linguistic analysis usually carried out in formal classroom settings: classifications of types of language forms that include nouns, verbs, and adjectives; and memorization of grammar rules that tell the learner how to assemble word classes into sequences, much as a brick layer builds a wall. Language learners can assemble these words into sentences in a highly conscious, analytical and slow puzzle-solving process. Implicit linguistic knowledge is unconscious, perhaps automated after being learned explicitly, and is the product of the built-in syllabus. It grows organically as the learner uses it to generate meaningful utterances in oral interaction.

This assumption leads to another tenet of SLA, that

3 Later published in Selinker (1972).

explicit and implicit knowledge of grammar are independent. An anecdote illustrates this: A teacher of English as a second language (ESL) was teaching a grammar lesson focused on the form of past counterfactuals in English such as "I wish I had known …" In the midst of a highly explicit discussion focused on this grammar rule, she was giving examples, and without thinking said, "I wish I would have known …" She was totally unaware that this implicitly generated utterance violated the explicit rule she was teaching. This is normal. Speakers of a language can simultaneously know the formal rules of the language(s) they speak while they routinely use alternative rules.

Most SLA researchers agree that a learner can acquire implicit L2 knowledge independently of explicit L2 knowledge. A native speaker may have a full implicit grammar of a language but no ability to explicitly talk about those rules. LESLLAA often fall into this category. On the other hand, an L2 learner can develop detailed explicit knowledge of the grammar of a foreign language but not be able to use those very same rules implicitly to generate an utterance, as to ask for (and understand) directions from the airport to the hotel.

Current mainstream theories of SLA and formal classroom learning contexts privilege explicit L2 knowledge. Input and interaction theories (Gass & Madden, 1987; Gass & Varonis, 1994), as well as sociocultural theories, posit that successful learners must be explicitly aware of linguistic units like phonemes, morphemes, and words. They must be able to notice the way such linguistic units are organized, in their own speech and in that of others.

Consider the research on corrective feedback in SLA (e.g., Lyster & Mori, 2006), which asserts that L2 learners must be able to focus not just on the meaning of the utterance, but also on its linguistic forms. Consider what the learner has to do when she says "What she is doing?" and the teacher responds "What is she doing?" Assuming that

the meaning of the question has been established, the learner must notice that formal units (words) of the utterance are in different orders. The meaning doesn't seem to be affected; this is just a formal difference. In other words, making use of corrective feedback requires that the learner engage explicit knowledge about words, their boundaries, and their orders. The literate, educated learners studied in mainstream SLA research have the training to benefit from this kind of corrective feedback.

In the same way, sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000) stresses the cognitive processes of scaffolding and co-construction in the Zone of Proximal Development. These processes often require that the learner and interlocutor share explicit metalinguistic knowledge to modify L2 utterances and make them "more grammatical" or "more complex." For example, the learners in Swain and Lapkin (1998) discuss whether the verbs they are using are reflexive or not. These terms and explicit analytical processes are assumed by sociocultural researchers to have been learned in formal classroom settings. The literate, educated learners studied in mainstream SLA research apparently have learned these terms and analytical processes.

Research with low-literate adults

The research carried out by scholars focused on pre-literate and low-literate L2 adults, in their native languages, indicates that adults and adolescents who are preliterate and without formal schooling do not have explicit, conscious awareness of linguistic units like phonemes, morphemes, and words. Such phonemic awareness derives from alphabetic literacy. Abundant research with monolingual adults has shown this to be the case. For example, Scholes (1998) showed that preliterate adults could not segment English speech into single word units. They could not tell where one word ended and another began; where the word boundaries were. Scholes concluded that the knowledge of words and word boundaries

in one's native language(s) is something one gains only from alphabetic literacy, learning to see language represented on the page as discrete words. Similarly, Ong (1988) and Olson (2002) have both concluded that phonemic awareness and explicit awareness that there are linguistic units called 'words' are a result of alphabetic literacy.

Selected SLA research with low literate L2 learners

SLA research with low-literate adult L2 learners has found similar results. Kurvers, Hout and Vallen (2006, 2007) found in research with non-literate and low-literate adults learning Dutch as an L2 that alphabetic literacy correlated with awareness of the word as a unit as well as awareness of the phoneme. Before they had alphabetic literacy, these adults viewed language simply as a referential system and a means of communication, but not as a string of elements that could be divided into linguistic units. This work offers a fascinating window into how language is processed among individuals just beginning to develop alphabetic print literacy.

Onderlinden, Craats, and Kurvers (2009) also found that L2 learners' relative ability to identify word boundaries in speech correlated with their relative levels of alphabetic literacy. Young-Scholten and Strom (2006) found that adult L2 learners developed awareness of phonemes and words only after learning to read an alphabetic script, but their research went further. They found that preliterate adults' awareness of syllable, syllable onset and rhyme was not dependent on alphabetic literacy, but awareness of, for example word initial phonemes, what we call metaphonological abilities, was dependent on literacy.

Several studies have focused on ways that oral language may be different for someone without print literacy (e.g., Strube 2007, 2009, 2010). In this research, a great deal of time is spent observing oral language learning in a classroom setting. These data produced naturalistically in classroom

settings are very special because of their potential to generate implications for both SLA and teaching.

Deficit or difference?
It is tempting to view lack of phonological awareness accruing from lack of alphabetic literacy as a deficit. However, Bassetti (2005) describes literacy relativism: Different writing systems teach us to segment oral language in different ways. For example, the English writing system represents words as discrete, while the Chinese writing system represents monosyllabic morphemes as discrete (*Hanzi*). Bassetti shows that English speakers acquiring Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) consistently segmented Chinese oral language into words, while Chinese native speakers segmented it according to Hanzi. For example, English CFL learners treated Chinese function words as separate words, while Chinese speakers affixed them to adjoining content words. English CFL learners treated compound nouns as several words, while Chinese speakers treated them as single words.

Linguistic units used by pre-literate learners to process L2 input
How do LESLLAA, who apparently do not have awareness of words and phonemes, segment oral L2 input? It may help us imagine what is going on if we revisit data from one of our adolescent Somali participants, Abukar, with emergent literacy skills but strong English L2 proficiency. (For a detailed description of Abukar, see Tarone and Bigelow, 2007.)

At the time of our study, Abukar was 15 years old, attending 9th grade classes. He had begun formal schooling in the United States four and a half years earlier, after spending four years in a refugee camp. Abukar's test scores showed that he had a relatively low literacy level, but he was making good progress developing oral proficiency in English. On our scale, his English literacy score was 6 out of a possible 9, and his Somali literacy score was 4 out of

9. He scored 50 out of 60 possible on his English speaking assessment. Based on these data and his English question formation, we placed him at Stage 5 (out of 6 possible) on Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann's (1981) developmental scale of L2 question formation. What these scores may obscure is the fact that Abukar espoused a hip hop aesthetic and was a very engaging, stylish young man, with fluent English and extraordinary pragmatics skills.

Nevertheless, Abukar frequently made errors of the following type in framing questions in English:

… what, what he is looking?
Why he is mad?
… why he come this room?

His questions at times lacked subject/auxiliary inversion, "do" support and third person singular verb marking.

As reported in Tarone and Bigelow (2007), Abukar seemed to have difficulty processing corrective feedback provided to him by MB on these errors.

01 Abukar:	What he sit on, what he SIT on, or whatever?
02 MB:	What is he sitting on?
03 Abukar:	Mhm.
04 MB:	What is he sitting on? Again. Repeat.
05 Abukar:	What he sitting on?
06 MB:	What IS he sitting on?
07 Abukar:	Oh. What he sitting on?
08 MB:	What IS he sitting on?
09 Abukar:	What IS he sitting on?

In this example, we see that even though Abukar was trying to focus on accurate form, he had difficulty processing MB's (the researcher) corrective feedback. It took him three tries to correctly include the "is" auxiliary.

The next example gives us insight into what Abukar notices in processing MB's corrective feedback:

01 Abukar:	Why he is mad? Why [he], he is mad?
02 MB:	[yeah]
03 MB:	Why IS he mad?
04 Abukar:	Why HE is mad? Why
05 MB:	Why IS he mad?
06 Abukar:	Why IS he mad? Why is, [is he]…

When we compare MB's feedback in line 3 with Abukar's uptake in line 4, we see that Abukar noticed her placement of stress on the second syllable BEFORE he finally took up her change in word order in line 6. In other words, stress, and its cousin rhythm, appear to have been more salient to Abukar than word order.

Abukar also was good at noticing, rehearsing, and later using new vocabulary words. In the following example, he learns a new word: "jar".

01 Abukar:	OK (pause) what is barrel, what is, what is the thing in it?
02	What is there? Is it, is there pennies in it?
03 MB:	Yeah. Um, again. Are pennies in the jar?
04 Abukar:	Is, are the penny in the jar?
05 MB:	Yes. And, um,
06 Abukar:	(whispers) jar
07 MB:	you know she's a waitress, so she gets tips,
08 Abukar:	O K
09 MB:	at the diner,
10 Abukar:	mhm
11 MB:	and every day she puts her tips in a jar
12 Abukar:	oh. (pause) (xxx xxx)
13 MB:	Here's the jar.
14 Abukar:	A jar?

Twenty-two turns later as shown below, Abukar spontaneously uses the new term in a new question, suggesting that there has been uptake:

Abukar:	Oh. Oh. Is this jar have, this jar, is this jar full of money?

To sum up, Abukar notices new vocabulary and second syllable stress, before he notices word order of *he* and *is*. Maybe he's using his awareness of syllable and syllable stress patterns to try to process this corrective feedback on form.

SLA theory tells us that in order to acquire a new linguistic form, L2 learners must "notice the gap" between linguistic forms in their own interlanguage and those provided in the input. But data like those reviewed above make us wonder whether Abukar is "noticing the gap" in terms of linguistic segments at all. The data above cause us to wonder whether he is noticing the gap in terms of his awareness of units like syllables and syllable stress patterns, rather than in terms of linguistic segments like "words" and "word order."

Empirical SLA research is needed to answer the following questions::

- Do all L2 forms have to be noticed explicitly to be acquired?
- Can pre-literate or low-literate adult learners acquire some L2 forms implicitly, without explicit analysis of linguistic segments?
- Do such learners structure their explicit working memory for language in some way other than visualization of linguistic segments?
- Can we capitalize on what pre-literate and low-literate adult learners do notice in oral input and use this to improve their acquisition of L2 grammar?

LESLLAA SLA research strands

After this discussion of mainstream SLA research and emerging LESLLAA SLA research, we would like to draw your attention to five promising strands of an SLA research agenda for LESLLAA.

- The metalinguistic awareness that emergent readers use in oral SLA;

- The longitudinal development of LESLLAA interlanguage, including the linguistic forms they acquire before, during and after becoming literate;
- The impact of different forms of corrective feedback on noticing of different linguistic forms by learners with different degrees of print literacy;
- Social contexts for SLA
- Classroom SLA research

We propose some testable hypotheses, research questions, and promising lines of research to guide the research agenda within these five strands.

Metalinguistic awareness: some testable hypotheses

- Hypothesis: LESLLAA are not metalinguistically aware of any linguistic forms in L2 input; all processing is semantic.
- Hypothesis: LESLLAA acquire some L2 linguistic forms without metalinguistic awareness and through semantic processing only, but other L2 linguistic forms require metalinguistic processing.
- Hypothesis: LESLLAA have metalinguistic awareness of forms in oral L2 input, but this awareness is not framed in terms of phonemes, words, or morphemes. Awareness may be framed in terms of other formal units like syllables, syllable stress pattern (or rhythm), intonation, or rhyme (vowel similarity). Awareness may be framed in terms of more global units and organizations, which may be detectable in memorization and recitation of long oral narratives.

Longitudinal development of interlanguage

Longitudinal ethnographic case studies have provided tremendous insight into the way L2 learners develop their interlanguages. Howard Nicholas has directed several doctoral dissertations, longitudinal case studies of child L2

learners, including Liu (1991)'s insightful 2.5 year study of Bob as he moved through preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Among other things, this study showed how different Bob's L2 use was when he interacted at home, in desk work at school with his peers, and in school with the teacher, and how this affected the emergence of each new stage of English questions. Longitudinal case studies could discover previously unknown developmental sequences used by LESLLAA, as well as the social factors (interlocutor, contextual cues, language use patterns) that influence this variation and patterns of spread from one social context to another.

Other longitudinal case studies with LESLLAA could include bounded units beyond the individual (see Yin, 2003), as in the case of Bob above. For example, a class could be a case, or a small group could be a case (Chapter 3, Bigelow, 2010) and followed ethnographically and longitudinally.

Corrective feedback

A number of hypotheses relate to the way that LESLLAA process corrective feedback on the accuracy of their utterances. We've seen an example of how we tried to test one such hypothesis in the study that included Abukar, and we've hinted at some of these hypotheses already. Some hypotheses in this area include the following:

- When corrective feedback is structured in terms of phonemes, morphemes, and words, only some linguistic units are noticed by preliterate adult L2 learners.
- More noticing will occur when corrective feedback is structured in terms of other formal units (e.g., syllables, syllable stress patterns, or intonation), when units like words are represented with symbols that are not script-based (e.g., colored blocks), or when corrective feedback is framed in sociocultural terms at the discourse level (e.g., Asking the learner to speak with the "voice" of a person who speaks English, perhaps a teacher.).

Social contexts for SLA

We assume that LESLLAA have different purposes for language use in different social contexts (e.g., formal vs. naturalistic, classrooms vs. communities), and this affects their patterns of interlanguage use and acquisition. Classroom teachers, and researchers, typically have no information on what those purposes are and how learners use their L2 outside of class. A variationist or ethnographic study could observe single individuals across social contexts and identify influential social variables and how these affect the L2 forms the learners use.

We hypothesize that LESLLAA bring unstudied assets to the process of oral SLA that derive from cultural practices such as recitation of long oral narratives, improvisation of oral poetry including hip hop, or memorization and recitation of the Koran. An ethnographic or variationist case study could identify those assets and cultural practices and the ways that these learners process first and second languages to accomplish those practices, and begin the journey to understanding how those processes might be engaged in classrooms to improve SLA outcomes.

Classroom contexts for research

There are many contexts for research with LESLLAA. All of our research requires bridging the great abyss between cultural and linguistic assumptions about human interaction (Watson, 2010). In the research reviewed at the beginning of this paper, and certainly including our own work, researchers typically sit with individuals in school and community settings and give them language learning tasks. Many of the tasks we ask them to do are grounded in formal schooling. We advocate for more classroom-based LESLLAA research, because we hypothesize that SLA processes shift as learners move from informal contexts to classroom contexts. Specifically, we need to capture learning in classrooms as it occurs in whole-class, small-group, and individual learning moments. Primarily, we need to ask SLA questions that contribute to

greater pedagogical relevance and also lead to support for SLA generalizations or potentially challenge generalizations that have been consecrated in our field.

Researcher access, ethics, and politics

We know that theory building to include LESLLAA requires the work and collaboration of many. There is an urgent need for more researchers who have the skills to move between school, community, and homes. This sort of work has tremendous potential to produce new knowledge about LESLLAA strengths, skills, and needs. Multilingual researchers with high levels of ethics, cultural competence, and investment in communities are sorely needed for this sort of inquiry. Those trained to do SLA research are often under great pressure to complete studies and get them published quickly. However, as we know, LESLLAA populations are often hard to reach. The process of gaining informed consent is not as easy when studying these learners as it is, for example, when doing an SLA study with an undergraduate Spanish class at a university.

As researchers build greater intercultural competence, we need to understand ourselves as outsiders by the mere fact that we have high levels of print literacy and formal schooling. We are not, nor have we ever been, illiterate members of an illiterate community. For an outsider researcher, arriving at a fair representation of learners who are so different from us is a formidable challenge. Self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of our own positionality and its influence on data collection and analysis are essential in the research process. Positionality refers to characteristics that encompass one's identity, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Rosaldo (1989) writes, "All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others" (p. 8). Reflexive journaling during the research process can aid researchers as they engage in the research process, identify

how they are perceived by the participants in their studies, and determine what lenses to use to interpret their data.

We hope that we have made a strong case that the field of SLA must not ignore LESLLAA. Newcomers to our countries will weave their stories together with our own, and we must understand them and how they learn language as part of their adaptation process. In addition, the recognition of difference in the process of acquiring a new language is vital for SLA theory building. We hope that SLA researchers will make efforts to include LESLLAA in their research programs, which will inform instructed classroom language learning. These steps will lead to a more ecological, coherent, and intentional path to a robust SLA research agenda that improves life in the classroom and the hopes for future opportunities for LESLLAA.

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