LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

Recommended citation of this article

Peyton, J. K. (2012). Understanding Adult Learners as Multilingual/Multicultural Individuals: Practical and Research Implications. LESLLA Symposium Proceedings, 7(1), 135–156. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8019598

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2011 Symposium held at University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. 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.

Vinogradov, P., & Bigelow, M. (Eds.) (2012). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 7th symposium. University of Minnesota Printing Services.
https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/472

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.

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UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNERS AS MULTILINGUAL/MULTICULTURAL INDIVIDUALS: PRACTICAL AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

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When working with adults who are learning a second (or third, fourth, or more) language and who have limited education and limited formal literacy skills in their native language, our focus in LESLLA is primarily on their learning of the target language. As stated on the LESLLA website (http://www.leslla.org/about.htm), our primary research base comes from second language acquisition and second/foreign language learning literature, and our desired outcomes are proficiency in the target language and successful integration into the target society. This is, of course, the foundation of and vision for our work in LESLLA, an approach and a goal that we all value, and a critical component of LESLLA learner success.

At the same time, it is possible in this endeavor to focus so much on the target language (usually the primary language of the country in which we work) and on learners' integration into the majority culture of the country, that we run the risk of overlooking the often complex and rich language and cultural backgrounds and experiences of the populations in our programs and classes. Even adult learners who have limited education and literacy in their native language(s) (or language varieties) can benefit from accessing the knowledge,

experiences, and skills that they do have and from perceiving that others consider that knowledge and those experiences and skills to be valuable. In addition, their languages and associated cultures can bring tremendous value to the programs and communities involved and to the educational experience overall.

In this article I argue that knowledge about, valuing of, and possibly even development of the native languages and cultures of students in LESLLA programs is critical to our successful work as educators and researchers and to the success of the students themselves. I show how this view aligns with research evidence supporting the value of native language proficiency in learning a second language and the value of building on students' personal and cultural profiles in instruction. I make specific recommendations for programmatic approaches, educational practice, and research that value adult learners as bilingual/multilingual and multicultural individuals and support and build on that background. Finally, I suggest ways that we as a LESLLA community can work together to develop this focus and approach.

This article focuses on language learners and education experiences in the United States and Canada and, therefore, on education in English. Each country in the LESLLA community has different learner populations, educational goals, and educational policies and approaches. The goal is that examples from the research available in the United States and Canada, with language learners who are not necessarily LESLLA adults, will raise issues and suggest approaches that are applicable with LESLLA adults in all of the countries involved in this endeavor.

Adult Learners as Multilingual/Multicultural Individuals

Jim Cummins (2005), Patricia Duff (2001), Ofelia García (2009), and others have described the many ways that languages, dialects of languages, and contexts and opportunities for language use can bring richness to individuals

and communities and contribute positively to identity and positioning in the educational experience and in society. Research in other countries on the important role of the mother tongue in learning a second language provides ample evidence that education in the mother tongue promotes learning of the second language (see Dutcher, 2004, for a review; however, most of the studies cited focus on the language learning of children). Research on second language acquisition with children and adults in the United States and Canada indicates that recognition of individuals' linguistic and learning strengths, whatever they are, is a strong first step toward facilitating learning (e.g., Auerbach, 1995; see discussion in Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010).

At the same time, in many education programs in the United States and Canada, the only language used as the standard for educational success is English. Languages other than English are not valued in our schools and, often, in our society generally. (See Wiley, 2005, for discussion of the emerging importance of English in U.S. language policy and education.) As a result, as García (2009) points out, "Written standard English in U.S. school assessments is increasingly used to create differences between monolinguals [monolingual English speakers] and bilinguals, which are then used as gate-keeping mechanisms for promotion, high school graduation, and college entrance" (p. 39). Cummins (2005) writes, "Within the mainstream classroom, students' knowledge of additional languages has typically been viewed as either irrelevant or as an impediment to the learning of English and overall academic achievement. Many students continue to be actively discouraged from using or maintaining their home languages" (p. 585), and "Children understand very quickly that the school is an English-only zone, and they often internalize ambivalence and even shame in relation to their linguistic and cultural heritage" (p. 590).

In the United States, students who speak languages other

than English are often described with such terms as "second language learners," "English language learners (ELLs)," and "immigrant L2 learners." We do not acknowledge, even in our terminology, that the learners we are describing/labeling have another language and cultural profile, and possibly even another educational profile outside of our educational program. (Descriptions used in other countries—e.g., in the United Kingdom, "learners of English as an additional language"— and the phrase "English for speakers of other languages" come closer to recognizing the language resources that students have.)

Martha Bigelow (2009) gives a specific example of the pattern in education programs in the United States of overlooking important components of students' lives. Fadumo (a pseudonym), a teenage girl from Somalia, attended an urban high school in Minnesota as a ninth grader. Although she had rich language, cultural, and community experiences and strong family engagement and support outside of school, she found little help or support from friends at school and often spent the entire day alone. She graduated from high school and enrolled in the local community college because of her exemplary behavior and strategic handling of high school challenges, which endeared her to her teachers and led to her success. Still, Bigelow wonders (following the conclusions of Zhou & Kim, 2006) if there could have been more support for Fudamo as a *Somali* teenager while she was in school, with all of the language and cultural components that that might include. Bigelow suggests that one approach might be to provide Somali youth like Fudamo with after-school and weekend school opportunities, where they would study and learn in their native language and share aspects of their culture. The weekend school would provide peer networks, foster a sense of ethnic identity, and (if the weekend school experience was recognized as having value), could even share in the responsibility of educating the students.

Bigelow concludes that

> In the world of public education, immigrant and refugee adolescents are often characterized by what they lack at school. Students' gaps in English language proficiency or background knowledge are often the focus of discussion around their educational needs. While it is essential to acknowledge what these students need to know and learn, it is also important to counterbalance a very powerful discourse of deficiency with a more well-rounded image of their strengths and assets. One way to do this is to examine immigrant students' and families' strengths by learning about the home- and community-based social and cultural capital that students bring to their schooling experiences (p. 7, citing Gibson, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; and Zhou & Bankston, 1994).

Another example of a student living in the United States with strong social and cultural capital outside of school, which is not recognized or rewarded in school, is Henry, a 10th grade student in a high school in Connecticut. Henry's experience with languages in and out of school is documented in a description of his German Saturday school program. (Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, July 2009). Because he was very young, he attended a Saturday German school organized by the German School of Connecticut. By the time he reached 10th grade, he scored in the 95th percentile on the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) German proficiency test and was considering pursuing higher education in Germany. The language proficiency that he reached in German, and the scores he earned, qualified him to enroll in university classes with native German speakers in Germany. However, his entire language experience took place outside of his public school, German was not offered in his school, and he received no school credit for his German study. When asked if he studied any other languages in school, he said that in order to earn the required foreign language

credit, he took three years of Spanish. He added, "But I realized that, given the school language experience, there is no way I could reach the proficiency in Spanish that I have reached in German."

Neither Fudamo nor Henry are LESLLA learners. LESLLA was established to address the needs of adults with limited literacy in their native language, many of whom have undergone major life transitions, had very limited opportunities for education, and experienced considerable trauma. Although some of these features apply to Fudamo, she was able to enter, study in, and graduate from high school. Henry grew up and was educated in the United States, speaking, reading, and writing the majority language of the country, and at the same time, studying German in a second educational program. At the same time, it is worthwhile knowing their stories, as a number of components are relevant for us as a LESLLA community to consider:

- Their formal education experience ignored and did not provide them with opportunities to develop, or benefit from, the language and cultural knowledge and experiences of their home, parents, and family.
- Henry had an entirely different, second, personal and educational profile based on access to a second educational program and opportunities to use a second language outside of school. Fudamo's life as a Somali teenager was largely ignored in school.
- Henry's language and educational profile outside of the program facilitated and shaped his future opportunities. Bigelow argues that Fudamo's high school outcomes could have been different with higher expectations and more culturally relevant pedagogy.

Fudamo's and Henry's stories, while very different from each other and from the stories of LESLLA learners, can open our minds to new ways of thinking about the learners in our programs and particularly about their experiences

outside of our programs and the social and cultural capital that they may have access to and bring to the educational experience. This is the focus of this article.

Research Supporting a Focus on Languages and Cultures of Learners

Since the 1970s and 1980s, language advocates and researchers have asked whether students benefit from education in their first language and from educational experiences that are culturally responsive and compatible with their personal, family, and community experiences. While focused on education of children, UNESCO argued as early as 1953 that the best medium for teaching individuals starting to learn a language is their mother tongue (UNESCO, 1953, p. 11). UNICEF (1999) agreed, arguing that students are quicker to learn to read and acquire other academic skills when first taught in their mother tongue (p. 41). Tucker (1999) concluded, "The cumulative evidence from research conducted over the last three decades at sites around the world demonstrates conclusively that cognitive, social, personal, and economic benefits accrue to the individual who has an opportunity to develop a high degree of bilingual proficiency when compared with a monolingual counterpart" (p. 3).

Proponents in the United States of instruction in the native language argue, based on reviews of the research, that providing this opportunity while students are acquiring proficiency in the second language will promote their school success, and that not providing it puts them at risk (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Others argue that when students lose their proficiency in their native language, when it is replaced by English in school, an important personal and cultural resource is lost (Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001). At the same time, opponents of native language instruction, often with a very limited research base for their beliefs, argue that it interferes with or delays English language development and academic achievement (Rossell, 2000). Arguments such

as this one by Rossell, as well as specific policies related to use of language in school, have had an impact on education in the United States, Canada, and other countries (see discussion in Wiley, 2005).

Similar discussions relate to the importance of designing instruction that is relevant and responsive to students' home languages and cultures, with proponents arguing, and some research showing, that if instruction is responsive to and includes students' cultural experiences, students will achieve at higher levels. Opponents of culturally responsive instruction (again, often with a limited research base) argue that students need to learn the norms and behaviors of the majority culture and not be left in second-class, separate status within the school and, ultimately, society. (See discussion of these differing views in August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 368.)

While these issues can be argued endlessly based on one's social and political stance and the research (or theories formulated as research) cited to support one's position, in the 1990s the U.S. Department of Education sought to resolve educational issues like these by setting up a system for examining the research base for specific instructional practices. Criteria for scientifically based research were established, the research support for specific instructional practices is reviewed according to these criteria, the level of evidence for specific instructional practices is determined, and practitioner-focused papers are published describing these practices and the research that supports them (IES Practice Guides, Institute of Education Sciences, 2008). With this vision in mind, the What Works Clearinghouse (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc) was established, to provide the results of high-quality research to answer the question, "What works in education?" and provide educators with information they need to make evidence-based decisions (What Works Clearinghouse, 2008). Eric Hanushek, Chair of the National Board for Education Sciences, speaking about the

What Works Clearinghouse, said, "People now accept that rigorous methods can be applied to education problems; that scientific methods can be applied to education and should be"(Spark, 2010).

With the establishment of the What Works Clearinghouse and the U.S. Department of Education's efforts to determine to what extent specific instructional practices are evidence-based, we have the opportunity to review research according to specific criteria and determine what evidence there is for the use of students' native languages and incorporation of their cultural backgrounds in instruction. Two such reviews are the National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006) and the review of promising literacy interventions for adult students learning English (Condelli & Wrigley, 2004a, 2004b).

The National Literacy Panel, which conducted an extensive review of the research on approaches to literacy development of students who speak languages other than English and carefully screened studies according to What Works Clearinghouse standards, concluded that there is some evidence that use of students' native language during instruction can promote learning and achievement. Studies meeting the standards showed no indication that use of the native language in instruction impeded academic achievement in the native language or in English, and some studies found significant differences in learning outcomes, favoring students who received instruction in the native language (August & Shanahan, 2006). Claude Goldenberg, a member of the panel, concludes, "If you learn something in one language, you either already know it in another language (e.g., transfer it to another), or you can more easily learn it in another language" (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 15).

Condelli and Wrigley (2004a, 2004b) reviewed the research (from 1983 to 2003) on adult basic education (ABE) and adult English as a second language instruction, separating the studies into two types: 1) those that meet What Works Clearinghouse standards (17 studies), with experimental

design and randomized subject assignment, quasi-experimental design with comparison groups, or regression discontinuity designs; and 2) qualitative studies. Of the studies that meet What Works Clearinghouse standards, one shows positive gains in reading and oral English communication skills of students when teachers used the native language to clarify concepts, introduce new ideas, or provide explanations. Other qualitative studies point to benefits of native language use in instruction. Condelli and Wrigley (2004b) conclude that, "Using learners' native languages, or giving them opportunities to interact in their native languages, can enhance students' sense of competence and self-worth and possibly free up cognitive resources for dealing with the learning tasks at hand" (p. 38). When possible, teachers might use the native language for clarifying concepts, introducing new ideas, or providing explanations (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009). Of course, it is not always possible or practical for teachers to use students' native languages. This is something that needs to be determined program by program. A number of different options are available, as discussed below.

There is also evidence that culturally responsive/relevant/compatible instruction can promote student learning. The Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), in an IES practice guide on *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices,* points to moderate evidence that "looking for opportunities to bridge activities outside and inside the classroom" (p. 28) and "making literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events" (p. 26) can increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning. Condelli, Wrigley, and Yoon (2009) describe a study that found that adults learning English as a second language learned more, as measured by scores on standardized tests, in classes where the teacher made connections between life outside the classroom and what was learned in the classroom, than in classes where teachers did not make such connections. The literature on culturally responsive

instruction for Native American students indicates that instruction that is culturally relevant and values students' languages does not inhibit students' academic success, and it may help to promote development of skills in math and reading and specific meta-linguistic skills (Bacon, Kidd, & Seaberg, 1982; Hirata-Edds, 2011; Frigo, et al., 2003).

Questions still remain about the evidence for using the native language in instruction and designing linguistically and culturally responsive instruction. Even with these findings — the results of specific studies, with some strong evidence, with specific groups of students, in the United States — there is a lot more that we need and want to know. Foremost for the LESLLA community is the fact that none of the studies discussed here involved LESLLA adults, with limited formal schooling and limited literacy in their native language. What do specific program designs and instructional strategies, which value students' native language and culture and build on these in instruction, look like with these learners, and what is their impact? What out-of-program and out-of-classroom experiences and learning opportunities are these individuals engaged in, and what value are those experiences bringing to instruction and their learning?

When a specific practice is determined effective based on specific research studies that meet specific criteria, we still need to know, for example,

- Is the practice more effective with some learners than with others?
- Is it more effective in some settings than in others?
- With what level of intensity and over what periods of time is it effective?
- What level of skill does the teacher need (e.g., in incorporating learners' first/primary languages into instruction) to be effective?

As Goldenberg (2008) points out, while individual studies point to the success of certain approaches, we often lack a

body of solid studies that permit us to go beyond a general finding about the positive effects of a specific focus and approach. This caution is not meant to discourage us from seeking guidance from research to inform our instructional practice but rather to advise that we proceed with caution and with knowledge about the features of our specific learner populations and instructional settings.

Implications for Instruction, Teacher Preparation, Program Administration, and Research

With these cautions in mind, there are many implications of this work for practitioners and researchers working with adults with limited education who are learning a new language and culture. Here I discuss some implications for instructional practice, teacher preparation, program administration, and future research.

Instructional Practice

Reviews of research have provided guidelines for using the native language to promote learning of another language, even when the teacher doesn't know the native language. For example, Huerta-Macías (2003) and Huerta-Macías and Kephart (2009) list the following activities that learners might engage in:

- Write in their native languages in personal or interactive journals (with fellow students, the teacher, or family or community members)
- Read books, at home or in class, in their native language and discuss them at home or in class, in pairs or in small groups
- Interview family and community members in their native language and discuss their findings in class with speakers of the language
- Meet in homogeneous same-language groups to discuss concepts learned in class

To provide culturally responsive instruction that builds on learners' experiences, knowledge, interests, and strengths, teachers might

- Engage students in learning by starting with content and experiences they are familiar with and interested in and then moving to new knowledge and skills (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008)
- Use topics and narratives from learners' lives as the basis for curriculum development (Kinloch, 2012; Weinstein, 1999)
- Bring authentic materials to class to use in tasks and other activities, "bringing the outside in" (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 1999)
- Use the language experience approach, where groups share experiences and then talk, read, and write about them (Crandall & Peyton, 1993)
- Use group and pair work, in which students practice the language, "notice the gap" between their language and that of their partners, and push themselves to reach the next level and to be understood (e.g., Swain, 2005)
- Promote student interaction through task-based and problem-based interactions (e.g., Ellis, 2003)

(See discussion of these and other approaches in Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 1999; National Center for Family Literacy & Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007; Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2010.)

Teacher Preparation

Teachers need guidance and support for implementing these practices, especially when the focus of the program, and of instruction, has been on learning only the majority language and culture. Programs might provide learning opportunities for teachers to review research and improve their practice in workshops; study groups (e.g., lesson study); journaling; coaching, shadowing, and mentoring;

observing each others' classes and discussing their observations; and watching videotapes of instruction where these principles and practices are being implemented. (See Smith, Harris, & Reder, 2005, for descriptions of these professional development practices.)

Program Administration

Program administrators might lead staff in better understanding the populations living in their specific neighborhood, district, state, or country by investigating questions such as the following, in the areas of languages used and education opportunities in the language:

Languages used

- What languages and language varieties are spoken/used in the country/area/program?
- Who speaks and uses them? Where? When? For what purposes? In what venues?
- What opportunities are there to develop proficiency in the language?
- What social networks are there? What media are accessed? What opportunities do the speakers experience as a result of using the language?
- What social and cultural capital do this language and cultural knowledge and background bring to the education situation? (Bigelow, 2009)
- What resources are there for learning more about the different language groups and education programs in the country/area/program? How can these resources be accessed and used? (e.g., Census data, population maps, program directories)

Program staff might want to:

- Map the linguistic and cultural profile of the country/area/program in terms of these questions

- Interview and document speakers of the languages and the benefits that they see for their linguistic and cultural knowledge
- Publish articles about the languages that learners speak, the value of those languages to the speakers, and key issues related to use of those languages (following the approach of Bigelow, 2009)

Education opportunities in the language

- Are there education programs in the country/area/program focused on developing proficiency in the first/native/home languages of the learner population?
- What types of programs are there? Where are they? What can be learned from them?
- What are their goals, strengths, and challenges?
- What are the benefits of having them in place — to the individuals involved, the education system, the country?

Program staff might want to do the following:

- Develop and make available resources to inform instruction that builds on and uses the language and culture
- Identify and document educational programs in which the language and culture are developed (following the approach of the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, www.cal.org/heritage)
- Document ways that the language and culture learned in these programs contribute to learners' success in their families, communities, and workplaces

Future Research

Clearly, research is needed on the ways that first language proficiency and use and cultural knowledge can facilitate learning in the target language and contribute to the development of bilingual/multilingual and multicultural individuals.

As a LESLLA community, we might begin by updating the research agenda developed at LESLLA 2006 (Recommendations to further the field of low-educated second language and literacy acquisition – for adults, 2009) to include a substantive focus on the role of the native language and culturally responsive instruction in programs for LESLLA learners. In our research, we might ask questions such as the following:

- What program models are successful with learners with these profiles?
- Is it possible in our programs to develop bilingual oral proficiency, biliteracy, and multicultural competence rather than simply seeking development of a new language and literacy and integration into a new culture?
- What is the research base across countries on use of languages other than the target language in the classroom with these populations? What research needs to be done on these questions?
- What is the research base across countries on culturally responsive instruction with these populations? How do we define culturally responsive instruction with these populations? What research needs to be done on this question?
- What political, social, and political dynamics in our countries/areas/programs are facilitating or blocking progress on addressing these questions?

Conclusion

This article focuses primarily on learner populations in the United States and Canada and on efforts to establish levels of evidence, publish and review syntheses of research that meets standards of evidence, and make applications to instructional practice. What does the research in other countries in the LESLLA community say about the strength of native languages and cultures in LESLLA learners' lives, the ways

that they can be included in instruction, and the outcomes of those efforts? What instructional implications grow out of that research? We as a LESLLA community might decide to, and build structures and systems that allow us to, expand our horizons beyond a primary focus on the target language and majority culture in order to fully understand the learners we work with and build on and develop all of the knowledge and experiences that they bring to their learning.

Bigelow (2009) gives a case study of a Somali teenage girl (Fudamo) in high school and the social and cultural capital that she brings. We learn a great deal from this study about the importance of learners' experiences outside of school in their school success. We also see that Fudamo faced many challenges, and the school could have served her better. There are many gaps to be addressed in our educational programs, if we are to contribute to develop a society in which all of us bring all of our experiences, knowledge, and skills to the educational endeavor. We have the opportunity to come together as a community, with different studies like these, and develop a plan for building on the linguistic, social, and cultural capital of learners in our programs.

As Cummins (2005) argues, advocates for language renewal and use of languages other than only the target language can and should work with educators and language communities to highlight the value of the languages spoken and to develop and disseminate instructional strategies and materials for incorporating and building on multiple languages in educational contexts. We as the LESLLA community have the opportunity to undertake this important work together.

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