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Learning Supports for Underachieving LESLLA Learners

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Abstract

ESL instructors in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, determined a need for additional support to English language learners (ELLs) who were not making expected progress in their language acquisition. This paper outlines the needs assessment process and applied teaching practices undertaken to support LESLLA learners and ELLs with learning difficulties. It also outlines the role of learning support services for ELLs at the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association. A connection between supporting LESLLA learners and ELLs with learning difficulties is also made by highlighting best practices from multiple disciplines.

Introduction

It is widely understood that learners progress at varying rates and in different ways. Still, some learners find themselves in a language-learning system that does not meet their needs. What happens when an adult second-language learner, despite the efforts of both the instructor and the learner, does not make observable progress?

This paper describes a service created to address the problem faced by language training programs for immigrants and refugees when a learner's language and literacy skills do not develop as expected. The framework

for service delivery involves these actions: observe, understand, and support (Wall, 2013). A description of these components is detailed in Section 3. The process results in an individualized plan to implement learning and instructional strategies. Instructional teams implement strategies in a way that works with available resources in their language training program.

Context

The learning support service described is housed by the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) in Calgary, Canada. CIWA is an immigrant-serving agency offering services related to settlement and integration, family, employment training, language training, and child care. In 2012, the federal department Citizenship and Immigration Canada awarded CIWA a contract to offer specialized support to adult English language learners who had learning difficulties. The service was put into place just as two major changes in Canada's immigration policy and the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program were implemented: (1) the previous federal funding limit of 1,200 hours per learner was lifted, and (2) the listening and speaking benchmarks required to apply for the Canadian citizenship test were increased to Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 5. Struggling learners who would have previously exhausted LINC hours may now remain enrolled in the same program for as long as an agency will allow them. Learners who do not make sufficient gains over the course of multiple terms may stay at the same level indefinitely. The latter change to citizenship prerequisites means that many learners are now anxious to progress to CLB 5. This may lead struggling learners to stay in school longer in the hopes that they will eventually make the progress needed to apply for citizenship, despite lack of significant progress. Learners who had previously timed out of programs at very beginning levels after limited progress may now be eligible for further L2 schooling. These

changes have the potential outcome of a renewed effort to provide instruction that meets LESLLA learners' needs.

In its first year of operation, Learning Support Services worked primarily with CIWA's general LINC program, women in a community-based ESL literacy program, and an employment training program for low-literacy women. LESLLA learners were the large majority of learners who accessed learning support services in 2012–13. Of the 37 learners who underwent the full referral and recommendation process, 17 reported zero to three years of formal education in L1; 15 reported four to nine years; and five reported 10 or more years. These data are complicated by factors such as the language of instruction in the country of origin, which was often different from that which the learner spoke in the home as a child. In some cases, the language of instruction changed as a result of a change in government.

While the host agency recognizes the importance of providing unique programming for unschooled and low-educated adult L2 learners, the reality is that most ESL programs for newcomers to Canada are general programs that do not offer a specialized ESL literacy program beyond the foundation level. Many learners are unable to access the one program in Calgary that provides ongoing literacy instruction because of conflicting schedules or a lack of access to child care. As a result, many learners who successfully develop the most basic literacy skills move into mainstream ESL classes.

A Framework for Learning Support Services

The learning support service offered by CIWA is available to language training programs for newcomers to the city of Calgary. Instructors, educational assistants, and program coordinators can refer any learner whom they feel is not making expected progress and for whom they would like further teaching and learning strategies. An instructional team that wishes to refer such a learner makes a referral to learning support services with the permission and understanding of the learner.

The subsequent process involves three interacting components, which are described below.
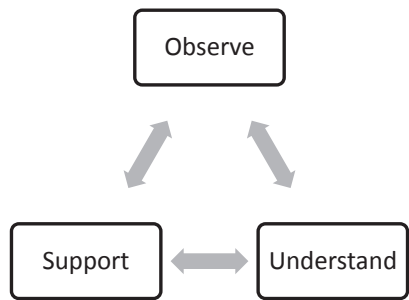

Figure 1: Framework for Learning Support Services, Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (Wall, 2013)

1. Observe. Once a learner has been identified as having difficulty, more specific observations can be made that will help pinpoint her strengths and problem areas. An instructor's observations might be that a learner is grasping little of the course content, as evidenced on weekly tests. Observations could also be behavioural in nature; for instance, the learner may appear distracted or disengaged, or may frequently make off-topic interruptions in class. These observations provide a starting point for the process. Teachers' observations, however small they may seem, are an important first step in recognizing what it is that is hindering a learner's progress.

While limited progress is the overarching concern in most cases, more specific observations of a how a learner interacts with various tasks are invaluable as the instructional team works to find tools to assist a struggling learner. At higher levels of English reading and writing proficiency, instructors might cite trouble with reading comprehension, spelling, or organization. At beginning levels, observations include ongoing difficulty with letter orientation, using a calendar, and reading at the word or sentence level. Other observations have included difficulty in following oral instructions, and pronunciation that makes the learner's speech difficult to understand. Instructors include their observations in

a basic referral form, initiating the involvement of CIWA's learning support services.

After a referral is received, four to six sessions are arranged to identify a learner's strengths and gaps in learning. Components of this needs assessment process can include classroom observation, one-on-one work with the learner, paper-based assessments, and a learner interview. Learners identified as having difficulty with reading and writing tasks in class are given a variety of tasks to ascertain their familiarity with emergent literacy skills. The tasks are based on two primary tools for LESLLA programming in Canada: the Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Literacy Learners ESL Literacy (Johansson, Angst, Beer, Martin, Rebeck, & Sibbileau, 2001) and the ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework (Bow Valley College, 2011). Those referred mainly for spelling and reading difficulties were assessed for phonemic awareness. The needs assessment also includes an interview with L1 support to inquire about any additional factors that might be affecting a learner's progress.

The learner interview is part of the needs assessment, recognizing that learning involves the whole person. Interviewing a learner can be an effective way to better understand her strengths and challenges (Schwarz, 2005). Whenever possible, the learner is interviewed with the assistance of a first-language interpreter. The interview involves questions about the learner's prior experiences with formal schooling, learning style and preferences, language use outside the classroom, and health considerations that might affect L2 learning. Learners are notified that they can opt out of answering any question. Information disclosed that is pertinent to instructional delivery may be shared with the instructor, if the learner permits. When a learner notes that she is unable to clearly see the text on a page, for instance, this information could be useful to inform how materials might be adapted.

Observations made throughout this process inform an understanding of factors affecting a learner's language acquisition.

2. Understand. Observations provide a starting point for understanding possible causes for an individual learner's limited progress. Factors affecting a language learner's progress vary. The learning support service approaches the learner holistically, taking into account the possibility of a learning disability, but also recognizing linguistic, sociocultural, and socio-affective factors.

Learning disabilities. In other adult learning environments, a learning support service might involve testing for learning disabilities. One in 10 persons in Canada is thought to have a learning disability (Price & Cole, 2009). If learning disabilities affect such a large percentage of a population, then it would make sense that one in 10 ELLs and one in 10 LESLLA learners has a learning disability. While CIWA's Learning Support Service can refer a learner for learning-disability testing if deemed beneficial, it is not equipped to assess learning disabilities. The issue of testing for learning disabilities in adult English-language learners, however, is problematic. For example, diagnosing a person with a learning disability requires eliminating any other cause of the learning difficulty. Also, most adult ELLs who are referred for additional support experience multiple barriers. For LESLLA learners, developing literacy skills for the first time and in a new language means that language acquisition will look different from that of most adult ELLs. In addition, physical health issues, lack of sleep, and trauma can all affect learning. On top of this, test questions are culturally biased. For example, a person raised outside of a Western culture may understand a question differently from how it was intended (PANDA—Minnesota ABE Disability Specialists, n.d.). In addition to all of these complicating factors, the tests are in a language that the individual is still learning.

Given the complexity of factors affecting LESLLA learners' language and literacy acquisition, concentrating on learning disabilities is likely not a productive objective. Instead, Learning Support Services has concentrated on identifying a learner's strengths and challenges, determining which skills are developed or not, and pinpointing strategies

that are currently observed. Learning disability research is used to better understand best practices in supporting multibarriered learners.

Linguistic factors. Linguistic factors are a key consideration when identifying strategies that will support a learner's language acquisition. Learners who accessed learning support services in 2012–13 were affected by multiple linguistic factors. First, language literacy, English orthography, and contextual knowledge are some of the linguistic factors considered in understanding an adult ELL's language skills development. Additional linguistic factors, which are beyond the scope of this paper, affect second-language and literacy acquisition.

Most referred learners in 2012–13 reported no or limited formal education in the first language, including those learners from the general ESL program. Literacy skills often acquired in L1 that are transferable to second-language literacy acquisition were not in place for these individuals. During the needs assessment, outcomes from the ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework (Bow Valley College, 2011) and the Canadian Language Benchmarks for Literacy Learners (Johansson et al., 2001) served to approximate the ESL literacy benchmarks at which a learner was working. Some learners were at the foundational level, working on conceptual skills like connecting meaning and print at the most fundamental level. Other LESLLA learners who were referred were able to read at the sentence level, but had missed some of the literacy skills for which their classmates with more formal schooling may not have needed instruction.

Ten years of LESLLA research to date highlights the importance of recognizing the impact that limited formal education in L1 has on literacy development as an adult in L2. Studies in the Netherlands and United Kingdom note learning differences for those with limited formal education in L1 and those with no formal education in L1 (Kurvers, Stockmann, & van de Craats, 2009; Young-Scholten, 2009). One study showed that no years of formal education in L1 significantly differentiates the time it takes to develop literacy skills in L2 from those who have had limited formal education in L1 (Kurvers, Stockmann, &

van de Craats, 2009). Most LESLLA learners in Calgary study English in classes alongside high school and university graduates. Given recent findings about how LESLLA learners acquire language and literacy, it is no surprise that these learners plateau in their literacy acquisition.

Adding to the complexity of L2 literacy acquisition for many language learners is the opaque nature of the English orthographic system (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010). Relying on sound–letter correspondence alone will enable readers to decode words like *rent,* but not *bought*. ESL literacy learners must learn to engage multiple decoding and encoding strategies to achieve reading fluency. Phonological awareness, phonics skills, and word patterning strategies are all integral features of effective reading and writing instruction.

Gaps in background knowledge can mean that a learner misunderstands or misses the intended meaning of a text or classroom activity. Roessingh (2005) notes that even when a learner can read the words and sentences in a text, the meaning can be lost when the text is culturally embedded. She argues that part of teaching the text is uncovering the underlying concepts together before reading. For LESLLA learners who have developed the literacy skills to begin preparing for adult basic education programs (e.g., grade 5–6 preacademic upgrading course work), support to develop awareness of common themes and contexts that they will encounter as they continue their education can be helpful.

Socio-affective and socio-cultural factors. Socio-affective and socio-cultural factors can also contribute to a learner's progress or act as a barrier to further language and literacy development. A learner's level of acculturation, affective filter, and experience with violence can also affect her ability to learn a language.

The ability of a newcomer to adapt to the host country while maintaining her heritage can increase or decrease stress levels and make it easier or more difficult to complete tasks like grocery shopping or visiting a doctor. Some learners describe the difficulty of raising children in a culture very different from their own. A case study by Norton and

Toohey (2001) shows how the acceptance and value of an immigrant by the dominant culture can influence L2 development. In their study, acceptance into the dominant culture resulted in increased opportunities to speak the target language and achieve stronger language gains.

The affective-filter hypothesis suggests that stress levels faced by a language learner impact her language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Stressors connected to language learning or from life beyond school increase the affective filter, making language learning more difficult. Learners might experience fear of embarrassment in the classroom and difficulty adjusting to life in a new country.

Violence and trauma, both past and present, are also factors that affect adult language learners. Jenny Horsman and the Spiral Community Resource Group (n.d.) note that acting out, spacing out, and attending sporadically are sometimes related to experiences of violence or trauma. Given that many LESLLA learners in Canada arrive as refugees, considering trauma as a possible factor may be helpful.

The above description of how learning disabilities and linguistic, socio-affective, and socio-cultural factors might influence language and literacy acquisition is brief and omits numerous other factors that are beyond the scope of this paper. However, they illustrate ways in which taking a holistic approach to understanding a learner makes it possible to offer individualized support that will meet that learner's needs.

Support

The resulting support that came from observing and understanding the learners varied. Specific instructional strategies were recommended to the instructional team in a type of learning plan. In year one of the service, all referred learners received either some individual or small-group instruction, as educational assistants were available within the programs in addition to the in-class modifications made by classroom instructors. The following chart breaks down the types of support provided for low-educated and formally educated learners.
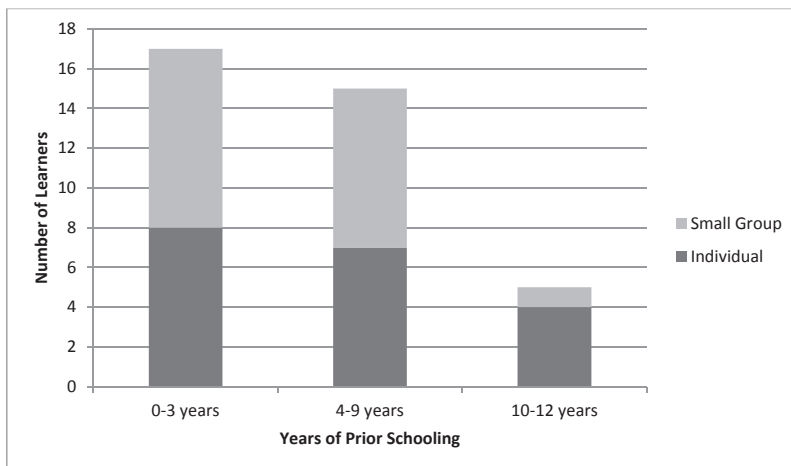
Figure 2: Individual versus small-group supports for low-educated and formally schooled learners

Professional development was also made available to agency staff. Finally, the learning support service liaised with other departments within the agency to increase learners' support networks. What follows is a description of the types of support offered to LESLLA learners in year one.

Pullout instruction. One instructional team made accommodations for a small group of LESLLA learners who were studying in a mainstream ESL class. Recommendations for providing focused support for this group were grounded in best-practice guidelines in two areas: working with LESLLA learners and working with learners with reading difficulties.

The educational assistant worked with five learners for 30–60 minutes a day, focusing on literacy instruction and strategy development. The classroom instructor and learning-support specialist worked together to develop reading materials at two levels. They also developed supplementary materials for each group. For the group of LESLLA learners, these materials included highly supported tasks to develop skills required in a classroom setting, such as matching exercises and

true-or-false comprehension questions. (See DeCapua and Marshall's work, 2010, for a discussion on developing academic skills in low-literacy learners.) By creating two sets of leveled materials, the classroom instructor and educational assistant were able to carry out instruction with similar content and with level-appropriate materials for each group of learners. While this process might be considered time-consuming, the result was that the group of LESLLA learners was able to work with materials at their instructional level and develop both literacy and academic skills.

In this instance, the classroom instructor and educational assistant incorporated balanced literacy instruction into their lesson planning, beginning with a context that is familiar and relevant to learners, and then engaging learners in phonics and grammatical learning within that context (Vinogradov, 2009). The group of low-educated learners received daily instruction using the same text for one week. The instructor and educational assistant working with these learners were then able to follow a Whole-Part-Whole model (Trupke-Bastidas & Poulos, 2007) to work on reading and writing skills. LESLLA research recognizes the importance of making connections between learners' lives and literacy activities (Condelli & Spruck Wrigley, 2008) and building literacy skills on already existing oral language skills (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010).

Best practices in working with young emergent readers who have reading difficulties were also incorporated into the literacy instruction of LESLLA learners. Marie Clay's Reading Recovery program was developed as an early interventionist model to prevent literacy difficulties for the lowest-scoring students after one year of school (National Reading Recovery Centre, n.d.). Reading Recovery is a highly rigorous model that may not be fully implemented with adult L2 learners. Aspects of the program, however, have been helpful in informing the development of learning plans at CIWA. Clay (1993) recognized the necessity of intensive, daily reading instruction that emphasizes targeted literacy strategy and skills development. This reading interventionist methodology involves carefully scaffolded instruction that supports struggling young readers to come up to grade level. Instructors at the

Calgary Immigrant Women's Association drew from Clay's methodology when working with the group of five LESLLA learners. These students' strategy work included the use of sound boxes, or Elkonin boxes (see below), to develop phonological awareness. Learners worked with word families and developed analogy-recognition skills within their texts. These tasks were helpful in progressing these learners' literacy skills.
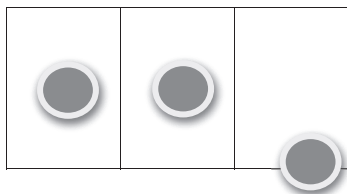
Figure 3: Sound boxes are used to develop phonemic awareness. A learner listens to a slowly articulated word. She moves one token onto the card for each phoneme she hears. Above, a card with three boxes is used for a word with three phonemes (Clay, 1993), such as *bus* or *phone*.

Torgesen's (2002) recommendations for the prevention of reading difficulties also influenced the development of CIWA's learning plans. In his work on reading difficulties in children, Torgesen argues that explicit, intensive, and supported reading instruction is key if young readers who are struggling with literacy are to avoid ongoing reading difficulties throughout their school years. Since LESLLA learners have had limited exposure to literacy in L1 and are now learning to read and write in a new language, it would follow that LESLLA learners also need explicit, intensive reading instruction. Torgesen offers phonemic awareness as an example of a skill that must be explicitly taught and rehearsed regularly (intensively) to build a foundation for phonological awareness. In the LESLLA group described in this paper, instructors used sound boxes with bingo chips instead of letters as one tool to develop phonemic awareness.

Individual support. Some learners worked with a tutor in or out of class, for periods as short as 15–20 minutes a day and up to one hour,

two times per week, targeting their specific needs. Those receiving individual support either were in different classes or had dissimilar needs. Both previously unschooled and schooled learners worked on tasks to develop phonological awareness. Phonological awareness and pronunciation exercises were often taught together, particularly with vowel sounds, which tended to be the most problematic for referred learners.

Learners in an employment training program for low-literacy women were referred for assistance with language, literacy, and content area. These learners participated in individual support at the beginning, when the focus of support was largely language and literacy. The focus of their support later shifted to developing study skills that would enable them to recognize the main ideas in their courses and learn industry-specific language. These learners functioned at a slightly higher level of English literacy than did the LESLLA learners described earlier.

In-class modifications. In addition to using a pullout model of instruction for referred learners, recommendations were made for possible in-class modifications. One instructor who referred students for learning support services noted that a number of learners in her class were not making the connection between a simple worksheet-based medicine label reading activity and the purpose of the text. Most of the learners who had difficulty with the task were LESLLA learners in her mainstream classroom. After consulting with learning support services, the instructor carefully scaffolded the medicine label reading activity task by attaching simplified labels to old medicine bottles. This use of realia with adapted medicine labels was found to be highly successful when paired with explicit instruction and ongoing practice. This reflects the importance of providing clear instruction to LESLLA learners on how to perform abstract classroom tasks, as described by DeCapua and Marshall (2010). Still, one LESLLA learner unable to complete the task was confused by a later stage of the task, which involved transferring the information from the medicine bottle to a paper-based matching

activity—a reminder that applying concrete knowledge and decoding skills to abstract tasks can be problematic for unschooled learners.

The same instructor began incorporating regular phonological awareness-building tasks into her classroom instruction, with the idea that there might be additional learners who would benefit from it. While this was found to support more than the group of referred LESLLA learners, those who had more experience with formal education were observed to require less emphasis on these types of metalinguistic tasks than did the low-educated and previously unschooled learners.

Teaching strategies employed in the first year of the service were implemented via pullout instruction, individual support, and in-class modifications for referred learners. This service would not have been complete, however, if it focused only on these individual learners.

Professional development and training. The creation of learning plans was a collaborative process that involved working with the instructional team to identify and understand learner needs and determine potential teaching and learning strategies that would work in class. As noted earlier, support was offered in the process of adapting or writing texts and supplementary materials. This type of work created opportunities to consider the unique needs of LESLLA learners collaboratively and increase the instructor's ability to identify learner needs independently.

In its first year of service, CIWA's learning support service offered professional development workshops to family literacy practitioners. This particular family literacy program works primarily with mothers who have limited formal education in L1. The program's objective is to provide parents with the skills and tools needed to develop school-readiness skills in their preschool children. Workshops addressed topics such as the role of L1 literacy in second-language literacy and the impact of trauma on learning.

Recognizing the whole person. Referred learners were immigrants and refugees with varied life experiences. Supporting the LESLLA learner may be as much about making connections to resources outside

of the classroom as it is about language and literacy learning. During the intake interview, a learner sometimes chooses to disclose information that learning support services is unable to handle directly. In such cases, referrals to counselors are made for housing, employment training, and one-on-one counseling. Services for settlement and integration, family counseling, and employment are available in numerous languages from CIWA staff or volunteer interpreters.

During the first year of service, referred learners identified numerous issues affecting their learning. A number of learners cited problems with eyesight. Some lived in precarious situations or were near homelessness. Others experienced distress over separation from children, or they identified financial concerns that distracted them from learning at school. Learners who chose to name these issues were offered assistance in scheduling an appointment with professionals who were then able to offer more specialized services.

Addressing the material and affective facets of a learner's life helps to alleviate immediate needs. It also provides an additional person in the learner's support network for the future. Working closely with other departments has proven to be fruitful, as learners who have a place to live and who have adequate nutrition are better able to concentrate than those who live in shelters or wonder where they will find their next meal.

In its first year of existence, CIWA's learning support service provided holistic support to learners and instructors by (1) suggesting instructional strategies for individual support, pullout support, and in-class modifications; (2) offering formal and informal professional development to practitioners; and (3) expanding a learner's support network for needs in the areas of settlement and integration, family counseling, and employment skills development.

Significance to the LESLLA Community

After 10 years of research in the LESLLA community, second-language literacy programs now have a bank of best practices from which to draw.

LESLLA's mandate to connect research and practice will continue to be a critical element in the successful support of unschooled and low-educated adult L2 learners in language training programs for immigrants and refugees. The service described in this paper endeavors to contribute to this effort.

The learning support service described was implemented within programs for low-educated L2 learners and also in general ESL programs for newcomers to Canada. Employing a model to observe, understand, and support learners who had not made noticeable progress proved to be valuable in addressing unmet needs and facilitating the growth of L2 and literacy skills of referred learners. Successful implementation of the model described depended on the collaboration of instructors, program coordinators, settlement practitioners and counselors, and the learning support specialist to provide a holistic approach to supporting referred learners.

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