

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



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## LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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# **Determining What LESLLA Learners Want to Do in Class: A Principled Approach to Needs Assessment**

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## **Abstract**

Trying to assess what literacy learners want to learn in class when they have limited English oral and written skills is a challenge. For this project, we reviewed current needs assessment tools designed for LESLLA learners and found them lacking. We used action-research methodology to design a new needs assessment tool to help LESLLA learners prioritize potential topics of interest, which could then be covered in an ESL class. We found that learners enjoyed this particular needs assessment and that it helped them to focus on learning goals. As instructors, we noted that this activity was a good use of class time and also that it helped us to focus our instruction. We argue that this method is one way of conducting a needs assessment for LESLLA learners, and that the field would still benefit from additional approaches.

## **The Role of a Needs Analysis in Teacher Planning**

Developing a language learning program that meets the stakeholders' outcomes as well as the learners' skills, needs, wishes, and goals consists of following many steps (Brown, 1995; Graves, 2000; Richards, 2008). According to Brown (1995), language program development should involve conducting a needs analysis to identify learners' needs;

determining objectives; testing to identify placement, proficiency, and learning; finding or creating appropriate materials; and teaching the learners. These steps are not completely linear and may need to be revisited once new information at any stage has been uncovered. Therefore, it is essential to continue to evaluate the program and make additional changes according to learner needs.

Graves (2000) also describes multiple steps in designing an appropriate language course. In the following, she defines needs assessment as:

a systematic and on-going process of gathering information about students' needs and preferences, interpreting the information, and then making course decisions based on the interpretation in order to meet the needs. It is an orientation toward the teaching learning process which views it as a dialogue between people: between the teacher and administrators, parents, other teachers; between the teacher and learners; among the learners. It is based on the belief that learning is not simply a matter of learners absorbing pre-selected knowledge the teacher gives them, but it is a process in which learners – and others – can and should participate. (p. 98)

Again, Graves (2000) specifies that needs assessment is greater than simply identifying learners' interests and abilities; it is used to develop self-reflection skills in learners, to learn how to identify personal learning needs, and to create personal ownership of the learning process. Moreover, it establishes a line of communication between the learner and the instructor. Some of the methods she suggests for initially collecting this information are questionnaires, interviews, educational activities (grids, charts, lists, writing, and ranking), and group discussions. Brown (1995) also lists examining existing learner information and test scores, and engaging in meetings.

In the LESLLA classroom, most of these needs assessment tools are inappropriate, given the very nature of our learners. For example,

a typical suggestion for a classroom may require learners to write a paragraph outlining what they want to achieve over the semester. LESLLA learners struggle with basic writing and are in no position to complete a task like this without substantial assistance. We cannot conduct many of the suggested activities such as ranking or charting even in a first language because our learners lack the school-related skills that make the task seem relevant to them. Previous test scores and existing learner information are probably most effective for determining that certain learners belong in our class rather than for determining what learners want to know—and even then, they are problematic. Using formal tests, whether for placement or to assess learners, is a socially constructed reading practice that comes from formal education. In fact, even our best option, interviewing learners, is fraught with challenges. It implies that we are speakers of the learners' L1 or that we have available translators, and that we have adequate time to sit with each learner. Even more challenging, asking learners what they want to learn in class implies that they have enough experience with formal language education to be specific about what they want, and even that they understand the purpose of the question. In our experience, when LESLLA learners are asked (even in their L1) what they want to study, their response is, "English!" When prompted to be more specific, they generally reply with something such as, "Everything. I need to know everything in English."

## **Our Methodology**

Our research question emerged when we were informed that we would need to conduct a needs assessment for our learners. We looked at the tools currently available to us but found them lacking. We knew they needed improvement, yet we were not sure how best to go about improving them. We decided that this would make for an excellent action-research project. We used Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler's (2010) seven steps for developing action research as a guide. These steps

included identifying a problem, understanding the current teaching context, reviewing the literature, creating a plan of action, carrying it out, and then collecting data, reflecting on the data, and making tentative conclusions.

Once we delved into the current definition of needs assessment, we had the language to define our problems with the other needs assessment tools and to discuss why they were insufficient. Once we knew what we did not want and why, we were able to start working on creating what we did want. This project was refined over three semesters. Each time that we followed our procedure for conducting the needs assessment, we returned to our definition and added to our steps. We have concluded that a needs assessment, at least for LESLLA learners, involves planning, delivery, and ongoing work. Our current procedure is described below.

## **Our Teaching Context**

In our teaching context, students come to us having already been screened by a government agency called the Language Assessment Referral and Counselling Centre (LARC). At LARC, learners with permanent-resident cards are tested and informed about potential programs offered in the city. If the assessor believes that the learner has little formal education or if the learner self-reports this, then the assessor administers a nationally designed literacy test called the Canadian Language Benchmarks: Literacy Placement Tool (LPT) (Tang & Fraser, 2005), which determines abilities in the four skills. In addition to being asked about their previous education, students are asked about their academic needs and aspirations. The students then select a program or school that they would like to attend (full time, part time, seniors' courses, parenting classes, etc.) and are presented with a Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) card. They take this card to the institution of their choice and present it in order to inform the school of their language proficiency level.

After arriving at our institution, students meet with an intake worker who helps them fill out a registration form. They are then placed on a waiting list for a suitable class. When a spot becomes available, students are called and told that they can attend the class. On the first day, each student receives a placement slip that he or she gives to the teacher. If the student has a child in day care, then the student registers the child with the day-care staff, fills out necessary paperwork, and receives a brief orientation to the day-care program. While we have ongoing enrollment, students typically begin at the start of the academic semester. Although it is possible for multiple students to enter midway through the program, it is rare. With small class sizes (only 12 students for each literacy class) and a long waiting list, our students tend to value their opportunity to attend class.

While there are some exceptions, LESLLA learners are generally placed appropriately in our classes. At our institution, learners are placed according to their reading/writing abilities, numeracy skills, and previous education, rather than their oral skills. We keep files on students that identify the languages that they speak (when known), their contact information, initial placement scores, intake interviews, previous report cards, and familial information. Without exception, our learners are adults. Most are refugees from Africa or Asia, although some are immigrants by choice. Approximately 75% are mothers of large families and have little formal schooling.

## **Developing Our Needs Assessment**

Conducting a needs assessment that focuses on both students' interests and the curricular expectations of the Canadian Language Benchmarks requires many more steps than a typical needs assessment conducted in a class with more-advanced language and literacy skills. In our experience, LESLLA learners have a difficult time with prioritizing and goal setting, both of which, we believe, are school-related and culturally embedded skills. As a result, our system for needs assessment

takes place in three distinct phases: planning, delivery, and ongoing needs assessment.

**Planning.** The planning phase of our project was conducted over three steps: brainstorming potential topics, linking the potential topics to the Canadian Language Benchmarks, and selecting images that correspond to potential tasks.

**Step 1. Brainstorming potential topics.** We began planning our needs assessment by brainstorming potential appropriate topics. Since we have a mandate of teaching settlement English (i.e., those topics that are most relevant to learners' immediate living needs), we are somewhat restricted in the range of what we can offer our students. While Valentine's Day might be interesting to our learners, we exclude it because it does not help our learners find jobs, contact landlords or seek medical attention. Accordingly, our first step was to create a mind map listing key topics that might be covered in class (see Figure 1). We admit that the map is not exhaustive, but it did provide us with ideas.

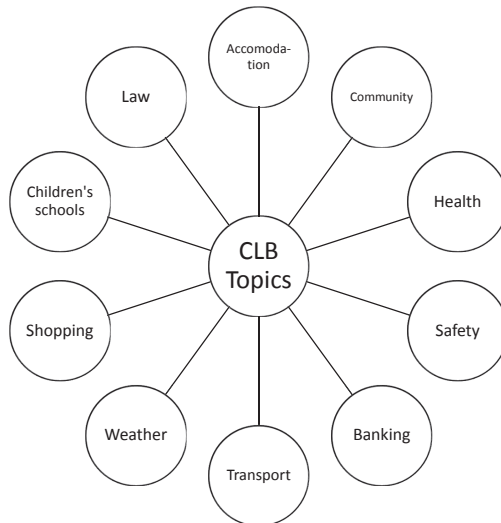


Figure 1. Brainstorming of potential topics to be covered in class

Once we brainstormed potential classroom themes related to settlement, we limited our learners' choices by selecting only four. We picked four themes for two main reasons: first, we wanted our learners to prioritize, so it was important not to flood them with options; and second, we wanted to link our themes to our curriculum guides: the Canadian Language Benchmarks: English as a second language for adults (Hajer & Kaskens, 2012), and the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for literacy learners (Johansson et al., 2001). While any of the potential topics could have been interesting to our learners and instructors, we looked at what we had covered previously and then thought about our resources. We were prepared to cover community, law, children's schools, and banking.

When we examined the obtained needs assessment tools for LESLLA learners, we found that they unfortunately stopped at step 1. Typically in the existing needs assessments, the analyst creates a page with potential topics and asks the learner to select from these abstract nouns (see Figure 2 for a sample of a typical needs analysis). We feel that this style of needs analysis does not work, for several reasons. First, abstract nouns such as *transport* are not always easily represented in pictures. While a picture of a bus may be used to refer to transport, it could also mean learning different forms of transportation, taking a bus, becoming a bus driver, or fixing a bus. Bruski (2012) refers to these sorts of images as symbolic and says that many second-language learners have challenges when interpreting them. Second, learners have difficulty linking images with tasks. For example, LESLLA learners may not equate the abstract noun *law* with the task of speaking to the police about traffic violations. Since instructors need to deliver tasks, learners' choices should be presented to them in the form of tasks if the needs analysis is to be relevant to the learners. Strube, van de Craats, and van Hout (2009) discovered that LESLLA learners of L2 Dutch found it challenging to retell picture-stories even after eight months of instruction. These learners often saw the pictures as separate elements instead of part of a whole; they misinterpreted them and lacked coherence when describing them.



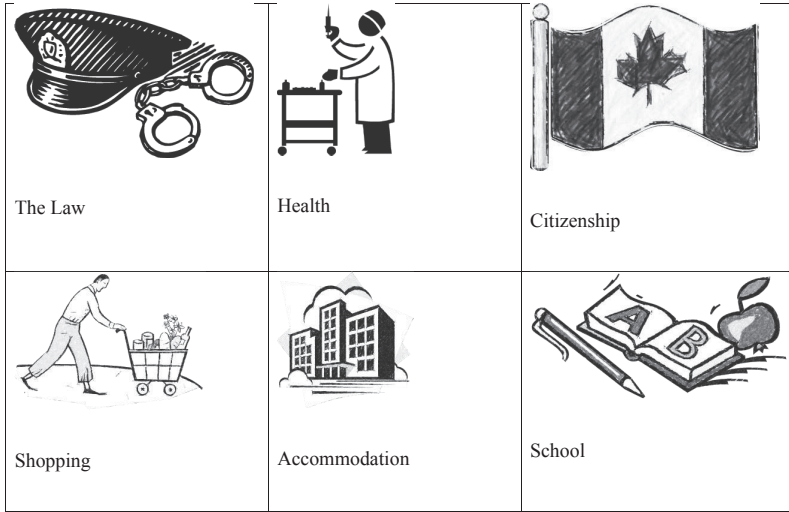


Figure 2. Typical needs analysis

**Step 2. Linking the potential topics with the CLB.** After having chosen potential themes (community, law, children's schools, and banking), we examined how each theme could be linked to our curriculum guides. In LINC programs, literacy instructors are expected to use two guides for planning. The first, Canadian Language Benchmarks: English as a second language for adults (Hajer & Kaskens, 2012), outlines speaking and listening goals. Canadian LINC instructors, regardless of the previous educational experience of their learners, use this document for guiding the speaking and listening portion of their lessons. Speaking competencies are listed as interacting with others, giving instructions, getting things done, and sharing information. Similarly, listening competencies are interacting with others, comprehending instructions, getting things done, and comprehending information. Instructors who do not teach LESLLA learners use the remainder of this document for guiding the reading/writing portion of their classes.

The second, Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for literacy learners (Johansson et al., 2001), is used by instructors to guide reading, writing, and numeracy instruction for LESLLA learners. The authors have broken reading instruction into four language

competencies: reading and understanding formatted and unformatted interactional messages, reading and understanding short instructions, reading and understanding formatted and unformatted information, and reading and interpreting written ideas and feelings. They have broken writing into four language competencies, as well: conveying formatted and unformatted interactional messages, recording formatted and unformatted information, presenting formatted and unformatted information, and expressing written ideas and feelings.

We created the following table to assist us in selecting images.

Speaking			
Community	Banking	Children's Schools	Law
Interacting with others Task: Make an appointment for a flu vaccine	Giving instructions Task: Send money overseas	Getting things done Task: Call your child's school to report an absence	Sharing information Task: Call emergency services
Listening			
Community	Banking	Children's School	Law
Interacting with others Task: Get rid of bed bugs/ head lice	Comprehending instructions Task: Understand the bank teller	Getting things done Task: Listen to the menu options on the telephone	Comprehending information Task: Learn about car safety
Reading			
Community	Banking	Children's School	Law
Read and understand short messages Task: Read the names of shops and services in the community	Read and understand short instructions Task: Read ATM instructions	Read and understand information Task: Follow your child's school calendar	Read and interpret ideas and feelings Task: Read major traffic signs
Writing			
Community	Banking	Children's School	Law
Convey formatted and unformatted messages Task: sign up for a community event	Record formatted and unformatted information Task: completing a form to send money overseas	Present formatted and unformatted information Task: fill in a child's reading log	Express written ideas and feelings Task: exchange insurance information after an accident

**Step 3: Selecting images for the needs assessment.** Once we had established a potential list of tasks that might occur within a particular theme, we selected images that reflected these tasks. In total, we selected 20 images. The images represented the following categories: headings (one image each that represented the concept of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; four images for speaking tasks based on the previous chart; four images for listening tasks; four images for reading tasks; and four images for writing tasks). We chose our pictures based on certain principles:

- Use photographs instead of clip art. We believe that clip art or cartoon images are difficult for our learners to understand (Bruski, 2012; Dowse, 2004; Strube, van de Craats, & van Hout, 2009).
- Use pictures that reflect the task, rather than pictures that reflect the theme (i.e., remove symbolic images). For example, a picture of a judge could represent the theme of law, yet it most likely would not be clear from the context what exactly the students were expected to learn about law. A photo of people exchanging information at the scene of an accident makes it clearer to learners that they will be learning about law specifically regarding traffic accidents (Bruski, 2012).
- Avoid photos with busy backgrounds, unless the background makes the picture more comprehensible (Szwed, Ventura, Querido, Cohen, & Dehaene, 2012).
- Use photos of adults, unless children are specifically a part of the theme; avoid images that look childish (Bell & Burnaby, 1984).

**Delivery.** The delivery phase of our project was conducted in class with our learners. It took approximately 15–20 minutes of class time.

**Step 4: Beginning the needs assessment with the learners.** We used the images from step 3 in order to identify the interests of our learners. We began by giving each student an adhesive-backed memo note and asking her to write her name. For a learner who was not yet able to write her

name, we used a highlighter pen to write the name for her and asked her to trace it. We posted the four pictures that represented speaking, listening, reading, and writing on the board. We asked the students to identify the four skills and then asked them if they knew what they meant. During the discussion, some students made statements such as, “Speak to my friend,” “Listen to music,” “Read the book,” and “Write on the paper.” We took these statements as proof of student comprehension. We then asked our learner who spoke the most English which skill she wanted to learn the most. We asked her to bring her adhesive-backed memo note to the front of the class and place it on the picture of the action that she most wanted to do. We then asked our second most orally proficient student to do the same. Finally, we invited the remaining students in our class to do the same. We reviewed the student choices with statements such as, “Three people want to study speaking, and six people want to do listening.”



Figure 3. Students have placed their names on their chosen activities to be covered in class

Next, we removed three of the four photos from the board and left the photo for speaking. Under it, we placed the four potential speaking tasks that learners might complete with us. Again, we talked about each photo: “You must call the school when your child is sick, when you want to make an appointment for the flu shot, when you want to

send money to your family, and when you want to talk to the police.” Students began talking to each other in their first language and began translating for each other; they discussed what each photo meant. We handed each student an adhesive-backed memo note, asking them to write their name on it, come to the board, and choose the task they most wanted to do. The photo below demonstrates how the students completed this activity.



Figure 4. The first student places her name under the listening activity that she most wishes to cover in class.

We completed the same exercise for the three remaining skills: listening, reading, and writing. With each set of pictures, we discussed the potential tasks and asked learners about them. We passed out a new adhesive-backed memo note to each student and asked her to choose. We observed that some students appeared to randomly place their note, while others looked pensive. Some students said that they wanted more than one note, but we told them that they could only choose one.

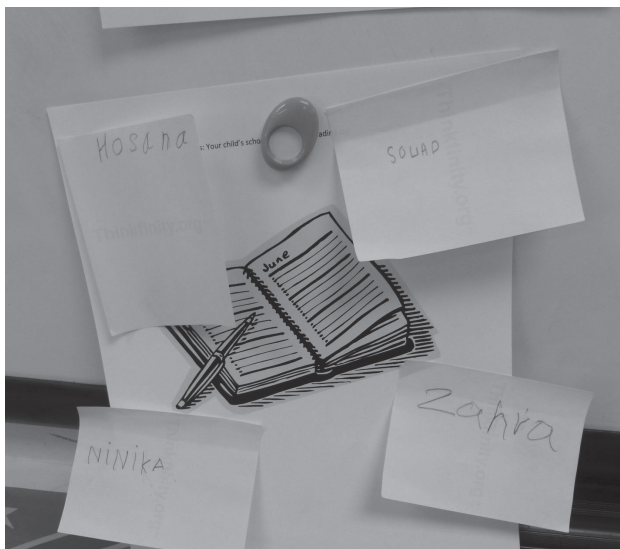


Figure 5. Examples of students' names placed on their chosen activity

**Ongoing needs assessment.** An essential component of our needs assessment process is that it is ongoing.

**Step 5. Charting student responses.** We found that it was important to show our learners that we used their responses for planning and developing classroom activities. Therefore, it was essential that we have some kind of long-term visual representation in the classroom. Without this visual, the learners would not see the link between the selecting activity that we just completed and the tasks that we would be completing in class. We typed the learners' choices onto a chart, which we displayed in a prominent place in the classroom. Whenever we worked on a new activity, we pointed out to our students that it was a speaking, listening, reading, or writing activity so as to remind students of their priorities. For example, we might make a statement such as, "This is a speaking activity. We will learn how to speak to your child's teacher. Maryam, you said it was important for you to speak to your child's teacher." While not every learner was able to study the theme of her choice, each learner at least worked on activities that related to her preferred skill.

**Step 6: Creating a unit plan.** After we determined what the interests were from the learners, we started to plan our unit. Our theme was the one chosen by the greatest number of responses from the voting activity of step 3. In this case, the majority of our students chose the tasks associated with the law. We created four tasks based on the learners' choices. These are presented in the chart below.

Tasks	Canadian Language Benchmark Competencies	Skill-building activities
Listening  Following police instructions at a traffic stop	II. Comprehending Instructions  -Understand[ing] very short, simple instructions, commands and requests related to immediate personal needs. P. 4	Imperative verbs for the police (give me your licence, put your hands on the wheel, etc.)  What your rights are when you are stopped
Speaking  Practicing safety at the scene of an accident	II. Giving Instructions  -us[ing] imperative forms and memorized stock expressions  -us[ing] appropriate courtesy words such as please and thank you) p. 40	Knowing what you must do at the scene of an accident  Formulaic expressions to make sure everyone is okay  Knowing how to call an ambulance
Reading  Looking up when they are doing neighbourhood snow removal on the city website (This means there is a parking ban in effect.)	Read[ing] and understand[ing] formatted and unformatted messages (simple notes and letters) p. 17	Reading the days of the week.  Identifying the city website.  Typing one's address.  Reading parking signs
Writing  Exchanging information at the scene of an accident	Record[ing] formatted and unformatted information (copy[ing] or reproduc[ing] information from a student card) p. 19	Practicing copying down pink card information, licence plates, driver's licence information, and phone numbers

**Step 7: Ongoing assessment.** As mentioned in step 5, we felt it important to remind students of the choices that they had made previously. We also made a point to note the activities that the learners seemed to enjoy. At the end of each week, we looked over the activities completed in class and had the students vote on which were their favorites. Once we had completed the unit (approximately six weeks), we repeated the needs assessment.

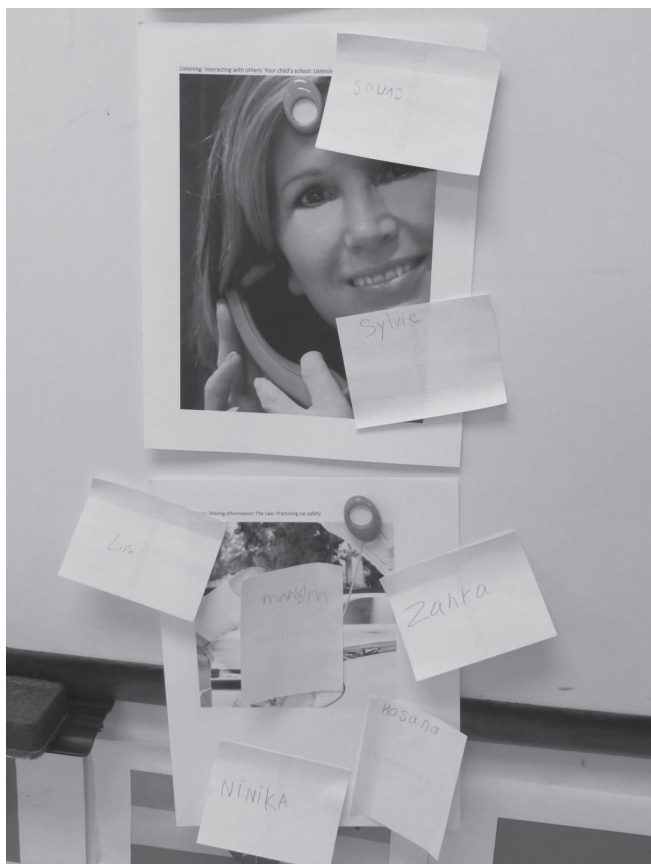


Figure 6. Another example of students' names showing their chosen activity

### **The Significance of Our Project**

Teaching second-language-learning adults with no first language literacy presents special challenges. Our adult students have never been to school and, as a result, often lack more than the ability to read; they lack other school-related skills (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Faux, 2004). Some of the missing skills are interpreting pictures (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Dowse, 2004), making realistic short- and long-term goals (Fritz & Alsabek, 2010), completing worksheets (Trupke-Bastidas, 2007), and understanding why they are being asked to complete certain tasks (Crevecoeur, 2010).



When we measured the previously available needs assessment tools against the definition presented by Graves (2000), we found those tools lacking. According to Graves' definition, needs assessment was meant for more than mining learners' interests. By participating in a needs assessment, learners were meant to open an instructor–learner dialogue, to identify their own learning goals, to take ownership of their learning, and to develop metacognition (Hardy, Albertsen, & Millar, 2009). As instructors, we wanted these for our learners as well, yet we realised that to develop these, we would need to create tools that would help us achieve these things. To do this, we needed something to bridge the actual needs assessment activity with what was done daily in class. We could not assume that our learners drew connections between our needs assessment and our tasks. This meant that our procedure would require multiple steps.

We found that by conducting our needs assessment in this way, we were able to talk to learners about what they wanted in a manner that we were not able to do previously. The pictures of the tasks (as opposed to the abstract nouns) transformed the needs assessment from something theoretical and foreign to something concrete and comprehensible. When we asked the students to choose among the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), we were certain that they understood the task. This scaffolding helped the learners understand that we were asking them to prioritize and make choices. Yet, our communication with our learners did not end there. We continued to engage them in dialogue by posting their choices in the classroom and referring to them often, and by reviewing activities each week and voting to decide which activities were the favorites. And while some learners took these steps more seriously than others, all expressed their preferences and were heard.

In addition to creating dialogue between our learners and ourselves, the needs assessment helped us to set meaningful goals. Once learners chose tasks that were personally relevant, they were in a better position to articulate what they wanted to learn. We used this information to write learner contracts—a requirement at our institution. We found

that our students' goals became not only more specific, but also purpose driven. They changed from "I want to improve my reading" to "I want to be able to read store signs so that I know what each store is selling." This, in turn, helped learners to take ownership of the learning process.

Teaching one's learners how to learn is an important aspect of a LESLLA instructor's job. Yet, we know very little about developing metacognition in our learners. We found that this project helped us to teach learners both to prioritize and to see an interconnectedness between all of the activities we do in class. By forcing the learners to vote with only one adhesive-backed memo note, they had no other choice but to prioritize. The initial choice of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) led to an increasing narrowing of options, which, in turn, made goal setting specific and achievable. This also helped our learners to see the connectedness between the activities in class. Because our learners also voted regularly and reviewed what was covered in class, they started to see how all of the small activities fit into the larger task.

By completing a needs assessment in this way, we also found benefits for us as instructors. As mentioned previously, it helped us to complete learner contracts. Since our learners came to us with goals in mind, writing our learner contracts was far less stressful than it had been in the past. As soon as we started to prepare our needs assessment, our tasks became self-evident. We were creating the tasks that the learners truly wanted to do; we no longer needed their buy-in. We also found that while there was a lot more work at the onset of a unit, it reduced our workload in the end.

## **Future Research**

There are other alternative options for gathering what can be covered in class. One suggestion put forth by Dr. Olenka Bilash and others is the creation of a fotonovela project (Emme, Kirova, Kamu, & Kasanovich, 2006). For this method of needs assessment, learners take

their smartphones or digital cameras into the community and take photos of personally relevant situations, with the intention of bringing these photos back into the classroom. This suggestion has great merit. It allows learners to demonstrate what is important to them and to show what they struggle the most with in their daily lives. While we feel that this idea has great value, it is not the path we chose. As instructors in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program, we are given a fairly narrow scope of what we are permitted to teach. We felt that this method would have required a great deal of translation, at least initially, since many of our learners have weak oral language skills. Unfortunately, we simply do not have access to enough translators. We also feel that this kind of fotonovela project, while very worthwhile and interesting, has the potential to take on a life of its own. We also realize that the LESLLA field needs multiple evidence-based teaching methods and that our action-research project is but one. We strongly encourage our colleagues to explore and implement our needs assessment, a fotonovela project, and any and all other methods that they find appropriate.

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