

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



## Recommended citation of this article

Young, S. (2015). The Impact of Literacy on Question-Oriented Usage Events in the ESL Classroom: A Case Study. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 9(1), 274–297.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8022598>

## Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2013 Symposium held at City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, 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.

Santos, M. G., & Whiteside, A. (Eds.) (2015). *Low-educated second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 9th symposium*. Lulu Publishing Services.

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/474>

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# The Impact of Literacy on Question-Oriented Usage Events in the ESL Classroom: A Case Study

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## Abstract

Research on English question development in second language acquisition has primarily been conducted in laboratory settings using oral tasks designed to elicit question forms, with findings often associated with the effects of corrective feedback and focus on form (Mackey, 1999; Spada & Lightbown, 1999), task complexity (Kim, 2012), and syntactic priming (McDonough & De Vleeschauwer, 2012). Findings from these studies are limited by the separation of the learners' question production from authentic experiences in an L2 classroom context where written input, teacher talk, and peer interactions all play various roles, and by a participant population that is largely skewed toward more educated and literate learners. To address these limitations, this longitudinal case study utilized a usage-based linguistics (UBL) framework to portray the complexity of experiences that one low-literate adult ESL learner encountered during question-based usage events. UBL focuses on the emergence of language within a locally situated experiential learning environment where learners integrate linguistic patterns into a growing mental inventory through contextualized use (Robinson & Ellis, 2008). Analyses of the focal participant's question-oriented usage events demonstrated the impact that low literacy skills and interlocutor relationships have on opportunities for English question production and practice.

## **Introduction**

For beginning adult English language learners in an immersion context, there is much about the language (and often, the cultural and social norms associated with the language) that is unknown. The learner must rely on the teacher to provide the input, the modeling, and the practice opportunities with peers to make sense of and take ownership of the language and communicative situations they encounter. Asking questions serves an important role in language socialization (Li, 2008); in a basic sense, it shows language learners how speakers in a particular speech community engage with their interlocutors. Explicitly teaching question-asking through the use of question-oriented activities shows learners how to articulate their curiosity about the world through the key words of *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*.

Second language (L2) oral development in instructed, print-rich environments is inherently tied to a spoken and written “feedback loop” (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002) through which a learner’s L2 comprehension and production of questions may emerge. This meaningful feedback loop may be blocked for learners who do not have the necessary educational background to meet the linguistic demands and socialized practices of the formal L2 instructed setting (Duff & Talmy, 2011). The current study addresses this gap by taking one well-researched aspect of L2 development, the production of questions in English, and by relating this body of traditional SLA knowledge to the educational experience of one beginning level, low-literate adult ESL learner over 11 months of classroom instruction. In addition, this study is an attempt to leverage usage-based insights (Eskildsen, 2012; Robinson & Ellis, 2008) as a theoretically interesting new perspective that can help illuminate the study of L2 development by LESLLA learners as it unfolds in classroom-based interactions. Specifically, the present research examines the complexity of factors related to one learner’s experience in “usage events” (Eskildsen, 2009) that were focused on developing the ability to ask questions and to engage in question-oriented interactions.

## **Literature Review**

The background literature for this study is situated at the crossroads of three strands of research: the impact of low literacy on L2 development, question development as a component of classroom interaction, and usage-based linguistics, as a means of exploring and explaining the nature of how, when, with whom, and for what purposes learners explicitly encounter, practice, and produce question forms in the L2 classroom. The exploration of this intersection portrays L2 question development not as a linear sequence but rather as a fluctuating and complex system, taking place inevitably at “the level of mundane interaction” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 156).

### **The Role of Literacy and Educational Background in L2 Question Development**

This study focuses on one particular linguistic pattern, English questions. SLA researchers have investigated the acquisition of question structures in English, in part because it is relatively easy to elicit these during oral interaction tasks and it is difficult to acquire the structures themselves (Pienemann, Brindley, & Johnston, 1988). The development and production of question forms in adult English language learners represents a significant area of research on the effects of interaction on SLA, with many studies using Pienemann et al.’s (1988) stages of question acquisition as a means of operationalizing and describing L2 development (Mackey, 1999; McDonough, 2005; McDonough & Mackey, 2006; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Spada & Lightbown, 1999). This research has consistently shown that these stages are predictable for all English language learners, regardless of L1 background, although learners progress through the stages at different rates. The factors impacting the duration of each stage are still being studied. However, a common finding in many SLA studies of question development is that L2 learners benefit from interactions that are manipulated in some way to provide opportunities for learning. Prior to the current study,

the impact of literacy within a print-rich instructional environment, the relationships between peers during question-oriented interactions, and the use of a case study approach to describe longitudinal experiences with question development had not been explored in the published research.

## **Usage-Based Approaches to Describing L2 Development**

Usage-based linguistics (UBL) is the overarching framework used here for exploring the experiences of one low-literate adult English language learner as she encountered and used questions in the ESL classroom. This approach is particularly well suited for a case study of L2 development because it accounts for four fundamental characteristics of language in use: language as *emerging*, language as *contextualized*, language as *complex*, and language as *experiential* (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006). These characteristics are, in turn, related to the research on one aspect of conversational interaction—questions—and how literacy skills affect learners’ abilities and opportunities for interacting in the L2 classroom.

Usage-based theories of language and L2 development focus on the emergence of language forms based on a learner’s contextualized experiences, frequency of input, and opportunities for entrenchment (Ellis, 2008; Ellis & Ferreira-Junior, 2009; MacWhinney, 2006). UBL situates language development as “a dynamic process in which regularities and system emerge from the interaction of people, their conscious selves, and their brains, using language in their societies, cultures, and world” (Ellis, 2007, p. 85). To reflect the complexity inherent in each learner’s individual developmental trajectory, calls have been made for longitudinal corpora of language learning, as the learners encounter linguistic patterns provided by the interactional environments they experience, which in turn affect the input, practice, and opportunities for entrenchment that these patterns undergo (Eskildsen, 2012; Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005; Robinson & Ellis, 2008). The importance of language use in social interaction is foundational to UBL theories of L2

development, as it is the means through which learners encounter and derive linguistic patterns in meaningful and contextualized experiences.

The practice of asking questions seems an ideal choice for exploring how UBL frameworks can account for the effects of interaction on a learner's L2 experiences. Because conversational interaction often requires asking and answering questions, it stands to reason that investigating the experiences associated with question production and related behaviors will provide insights into L2 development. The benefit of conducting UBL-framed SLA research within a longitudinal, classroom-based paradigm allows for the examination of the complex connections among the linguistic, social, and educational factors associated with the contextual development and use of L2 questions.

## Research Questions

This descriptive case study of one low-literate learner addresses three research questions:

- RQ1. To what extent does the L2 instructional environment provide *opportunities* for question-oriented usage events?
- RQ2. In what ways is a low-literate learner's participation in question-oriented usage events affected by her interactions with various *interlocutors*?
- RQ3. What is the impact of *literacy requirements* on a low-literate learner's participation in question-oriented usage events?

## Methods

To introduce and present the methods used to address these research questions, this section describes the original data source as well as the data collection and analysis procedures.

## **Data Source: The MAELC**

The Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus (MAELC) (Reder, 2005) provided the source of all data for this longitudinal case study. The MAELC contains over 4,000 hours of videotaped adult ESL instruction that took place from 2001 to 2005 in the Lab School of Portland State University, in partnership with Portland Community College (see <http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/> for more information). The focus of instruction at the Lab School was oriented toward English learning for basic communication and life skills, serving adult English language learners from a variety of linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

## **The Study's Focal Participant, Amina, and Her Classroom Context**

To identify prospective participants for this longitudinal study, the video corpus was searched using proprietary query software to identify low-literate learners (defined as having six years or fewer of formal education) in Level A classes who attended the Lab School consistently over the course of multiple terms. The Level A class was intended for beginners who “usually can say their names and addresses, need help to conduct day to day business and usually have trouble giving or writing personal information independently” (Reder, 2005, p. 4). After observing recordings of several learners who fit these criteria, one focal participant, Amina,<sup>17</sup> was chosen for this study. Amina, a Somali Muslim woman who appeared to be a senior citizen, attended the Lab School's Level A classes from the fall 2002 term to the spring 2004 term, for a total of five terms. Table 1 outlines the date and term of each recorded session in which Amina was a focal student, and indicates the teacher and the general topical content covered in that day's lesson. These seven data points capture and reflect Amina's on-camera participation in five consecutive 10-week terms with two different teachers.

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<sup>17</sup> All names of participants are pseudonyms.

Session	Date	Term	Teacher	Topic of the class
1	10/28/2002	1	Sally	Telling time
2	2/3/2003	2	Sally	Daily schedules and time
3	3/6/2003	2	Sally	“Do you like...?”, shopping, vegetables
4	4/21/2003	3	Diane	Calendars and holidays
5	7/7/2003	4	Diane	Families and children
6	8/4/2003	4	Diane	Health problems and remedies
7	9/29/2003	5	Diane	Personal introductions, addresses

Table 1. Overview of the corpus data

**Data Collection and Analyses**

Data collection entailed an intensive process of observation focused on Amina’s videotaped data, as well as that of her instructional environment. The observations yielded extensive field notes for each of the seven 2.5-hour classes in the coded data that describe Amina and her interlocutors, their actions, gestures, relevant spoken/written language, and times associated with question-oriented talk and question-oriented practice activities. Amina’s literacy-related practices during copy work associated with questions were noted, as well as during any pair work that required her to write down questions or her interlocutor’s answers to questions. The Lab School’s use of remote-controlled cameras that could zoom in on any documents that Amina read or wrote was invaluable for noting these literacy practices.

Through multiple viewings of the video data and readings of the accompanying observation notes and transcripts, a coding protocol gradually emerged that identified, categorized, and described Amina’s spoken language, literacy practices, and interactional behaviors during question-oriented practice activities. (See Appendix for coding protocol.) The coding protocol was later used to identify usage events in which Amina appeared to stand at an intersection between the intended oral production in communicative activities and the literacy/schooling



practices required to effectively participate in these activities. Finally, turn-taking behaviors between Amina and her interlocutors in question-oriented interactions were identified and coded—with the expectation that greater frequency in initiating and completing a question–answer sequence results in a greater amount of practice.

## **Results**

For all five terms in which Amina appeared in the corpus, she remained in a Level A class for beginners. The curriculum focused on functional English related to life-skills content such as telling time, sharing personal information, describing health problems, and going shopping. These classes included students who were highly educated in their native language as well as students, like Amina, who had limited educational backgrounds.

During conversational pair activities featured in the MAELC, the data offered a glimpse of Amina’s immigration and educational history. In February 2003, Amina told classmates that she arrived in the United States in 1995, but she quickly added that she had not been attending school the entire time when qualifying her response: “Not school. Not school.” During a lesson on family and children in July 2003, Amina indicated that she has eight children, all living in the United States, and many grandchildren.

Amina copied almost everything written on the board into her notebook; zoomed-in camera shots show that Amina was meticulous and, for the most part, accurate in her copy work, but her efforts were slow and laborious. She was often shown to be copying something that the teacher presented on the board much earlier in the lesson, with considerable lag time. At times, she could be seen copying things that were not directly related to any classroom task—that is to say, she copied indiscriminately and often remained focused on the copy work even though the rest of the class had moved on.

In terms of her relationship to other students, the corpus data showed Amina usually sitting alone silently (often copying off of the board) during downtime while other students talked to one another. She remained at her seat during each class's 20-minute break and was rarely engaged by other students in casual conversation. However, she participated to the best of her ability in question-oriented practice activities; she not only asked the scripted questions required by the task, but also asked her fellow classmates unscripted personal questions about their own lives—indicating that she was capable of interacting and willing to interact with her classmates, given the opportunity. When she was seated next to a classmate, she asked for help and also provided help as needed. However, Amina's classmates' reactions to her during question-oriented interactions often demonstrated a lack of confidence in her abilities, illustrated by their reluctance to engage with her, their directive behaviors when negotiating tasks, and, in some instances, their appropriation of tasks that Amina was meant to do herself. These reactions often seemed to be related to the literacy demands of the task for which Amina may have been unprepared. These are discussed in depth below.

### **Classroom Opportunities for Question-Oriented Usage Events**

The first research question addressed the opportunities that were afforded by the L2 instructional environment for the learners to engage in question-oriented usage events. In UBL theories of L2 development, “usage events” are integral to forming the necessary associations of linguistic patterns within a specific communicative context (Eskildsen, 2009; Eskildsen, 2012). In this study, communicative practice activities, the primary purpose of which was for students to ask and answer questions, were identified and categorized as question-oriented usage events (e.g., reading question-and-answer dialogues aloud from a textbook, interviewing a partner in a pair or small-group activity, and interviewing another classmate in a whole class “mixer” activity). The interview activities were usually scaffolded by using a conversation grid

or a similar blank template that students were required to fill in with the information given to them by their interlocutor(s).

The occurrence, frequency, type, and duration of question-oriented usage events varied somewhat in Amina's experiences. Following Pienemann et al.'s (1988) question stages, the questions designated for practice by the teacher were primarily Stage 3 questions (fronting of a questioning element with, *Do you like \_\_\_? Is there a holiday in \_\_\_?*), Stage 4 questions (limited/pseudo inversion, e.g., *What is your ZIP code?*), and Stage 5 questions (full inversion, e.g., *How many children do you have?*). Although each recorded class session featured at least one question-oriented peer activity, the total amount of class time spent directly on asking and answering questions ranged from six minutes to 35 minutes during a 2.5-hour class.

Transcripts of each recorded class session show that Amina produced 20–40 questions per 2.5-hour class period, with the exception of the July 2003 class, in which she asked only three questions. A very small number of these questions were self-directed (no response expected), such as when she looked to enlist the teacher's help during a pair activity and said under her breath, "Teacher. Where is teacher?" During teacher-fronted modeling of formulaic questions to be practiced in pair activities, Amina produced questions that echoed the teacher's example. However, the majority of Amina's questions were produced within the context of question-oriented instructional time, for which the primary purpose was to model, practice, and ask questions with peers.

### **Interactions with Interlocutors during Question-Oriented Usage Events**

The second research question addressed the ways that Amina's participation in question-oriented usage events was affected by her interactions with various interlocutors. The findings discussed here are examined first in terms of interactions that Amina had with her

teachers, then in terms of interactions that Amina had with her peers during question-oriented usage events.

**Question-oriented interactions with teachers.** The most frequent source of input for the students in this corpus was the teacher herself. The teacher's provision of modeling and scaffolding when directing and monitoring question-oriented activities set the tone for how successfully the task might progress. This input could be oral (providing models, eliciting repetitions from students, echoing or recasting what another student had said) or written (writing questions on the board, directing students' attention to writing on the board, in the textbook, or on a worksheet). The amount of "meta-talk" about questions and the students' participation in question-related activities added to this input, as well.

Although both Sally and Diane taught Level A, presumably with the same approximate proficiency levels represented in each class, they each took a different approach to how they set up, monitored, and talked about question-oriented activities. Sally's approach appeared to be minimal, avoiding meta-talk about the process or activity itself—preferring instead to give short, direct instructions following whole-class modeling. For example, her instructions for a "What time is it?" practice activity with toy clocks, for which one partner was to play the role of teacher and the other of student, was minimal and relied mainly on gestures.

Excerpt 1 (2/3/03): Sally's instructions for the time activity  
[pointing] Practice together with your partner. [The]  
teacher [says]: "What time is it? What time is it?" Practice  
different times.

Amina completed the question-oriented tasks in Sally's classes with an expected amount of success; that is to say, she produced the target questions required by the activity and sometimes extended her question production beyond what the activity required.

Diane's approach to setting up and modeling question-oriented activities featured more speech overall, with more meta-talk about the

question activity itself. In a lesson on calendars and students' national holidays, Diane gave students a calendar template on which they were supposed to write their country's most important holidays. Students were then told to go through each month of the year with a partner, asking in regards to their home country, "Is there a holiday in [month]?" Diane set up the activity in this way:

Excerpt 2 (4/21/03): Diane's instructions for the calendar activity

I would like you to talk to your partner, okay? You need to talk to your partner and ask— [trails off, gets sidetracked by a question from a student] ... Did everyone do this one? Did you talk to somebody? Now you go to talk to somebody. And what is the question? First question. What's the first question? What's your name? Okay. [writes down on transparency] What is your name? Okay that's the first question. What's your name? Okay, so you're going to do it together. Very good. What's your name? What's your name? And then what is the other one? What's the next one? Country. What's your country? Or where are you from? Where are you from? Okay ... Holidays in your country. And I want people to practice. [writes on board] Is there a holiday in January? For each month. You have to say all the months ... October? When? What holiday? I want you to exchange. I want you to talk to each other.

Amina had two different practice partners in this activity, both of whom seemed to follow the intended purpose of the activity by attempting to interview Amina with the target question, "Is there a holiday in [month]?" However, Amina had trouble understanding the purpose of the activity and did not use the target question to elicit responses from her partners. Instead, as excerpt 3 demonstrates, she

simply listed the months of the year for her partner to respond to. During this interaction, Diane came by to monitor Amina's interaction with her second partner, Irene. Diane directed Irene to be patient as Amina listed the months (line 4), but she did not model or insist that Amina actually practice the target question; in fact, she praised her (line 6) even though she never produced the target question.

Excerpt 3 (4/21/03): Amina's language during the calendar activity

1. Amina: Okay. March.
2. Irene: Okay, in April—
3. Amina: March.
4. Diane [to Irene]: Let her ask you. Let her say *March*, and then respond.
5. Amina: March.
6. Diane: Very good. [to Irene] Yes or no?
7. Irene: No, no.
8. Amina: Okay. April.
9. Irene: April. Yes.

The amount of teacher meta-talk in setting up the calendar activity (excerpt 2), coupled with the teacher's lack of direction for Amina to produce the target question (excerpt 3), likely contributed to the fact that Amina did not produce a single target question ("Is there a holiday in [month]?") during the usage events with two different partners.

**Question-oriented interactions with peers.** Each question-oriented usage event in the corpus was examined to see how Amina and her interlocutor approached the task. From the video corpus data, five general patterns emerged: (a) Amina initiated for the first question; (b) Amina's interlocutor initiated for the first question; (c) Amina initiated a subsequent question; (d) Amina's question was partially or completely cut off by her interlocutor; and (e) Amina's question or initiation of

communication was ignored or rejected by her interlocutor. Table 2 shows the distribution of these behaviors across the seven class periods included in the corpus.

	A-initiated Q1 <sup>1</sup> (a)	O-initiated Q1 (b)	A-initiated QX (c)	A- Q cut off (d)	A- Q rejected (e)
Totals	11	11	10	18	5

*A* = Amina; *O* = Other student

Table 2. Turn-Taking Behaviors Associated with Amina’s Questions (Seven Class Periods)

Amina’s attempts at asking a question were (d) partially or completely cut off in 18 instances and (e) ignored or rejected by her interlocutor in five instances. Excerpts 4 and 5 demonstrate these preemptive behaviors on the part of Amina’s classmates. In excerpt 4, Amina and her classmates were surveying each other in a whole group mixer on what vegetables they liked (“Do you like [vegetable]?”). After Amina answered Nadia’s Q1, she began to ask her own question. However, Nadia cut her off by providing her response before Amina completed the question.

Excerpt 4 (3/6/03): Amina’s question is partially cut off by classmate Nadia

1. Nadia: Do you like mushroom?
2. Amina: Mushroom, no. Do you like—
3. Nadia: I like corn.
4. Amina: —beans? Eh, corn?

In excerpt 5, the task was to ask three questions about family members. Karen initiated the interaction and, after asking Amina the three questions, directed Amina to take her turn in asking the three questions (line 1). However, Karen seemed to grow impatient with

Amina (line 3); Karen then provided the answer to the first intended question, “How many children do you have?” (line 7) before Amina could produce the question.

Excerpt 5 (7/7/03): Amina’s question is completely cut off by classmate Karen

1. Karen: Seven, yeah. Ask you—ask me. Karen.
2. Amina: Karen.
3. Karen: Yeah, Karen. Number two.
4. Amina: Number two.
5. Karen: Yeah.
6. Amina [writing]: Okay, Karen. Karen—
7. Karen: I have, I have two children. Two children.

In five other instances, Amina’s initiation was rejected by her peers, who seemed to ignore the request by walking away or simply rejecting the request (by saying no) before they moved on.

### Literacy Requirements for Question-Oriented Usage Events

The third research question addressed the impact that literacy requirements have on question-oriented usage events. Although questioning activities such as those featured in this corpus are inherently designed to elicit spoken language, the literacy demands and “schooling” behaviors associated with oral communication activities cannot be ignored. Of the 14 usage events identified in the corpus, there were five activities in which Amina had to copy the questions from the board onto her own paper. In some cases, Amina copied directly into her own notebook instead of copying onto the blank template that was intended to be used. In each instance, video data showed Amina laboriously copying questions (and, in some cases, other text from the board indiscriminately) long after other students had gotten up and were moving around to participate in the question activity.



Figure 2 illustrates the indiscriminate copying that Amina often engaged in. On the board, the teacher had written a series of questions, with one question emphasized: *What do people from your country do when they have a sore throat?* The following directive was, *Ask this question to each person in the room.* The zoomed-in camera shot showed that Amina did not copy the question but the directive itself. In her subsequent interaction with a classmate, she did not attempt to produce the target question.

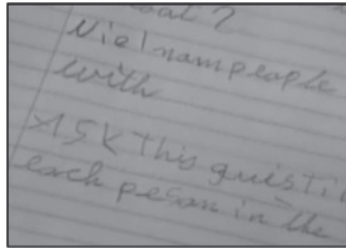


Figure 2. Amina's copy work: "ASK This quistion ..."

Throughout the corpus, particularly in Diane's classes, Amina's focus on copy work and writing was often prioritized at the cost of her participation in question-oriented peer practice. In their interactions with her, Sally and Diane both verbally indicated their awareness of Amina's developing literacy skills and associated struggles. During the calendar and holidays activity described above, Diane suspected that Amina didn't ask the target question ("Is there a holiday in [month]?") to her partner, Hana, and didn't write down Hana's name on the response sheet.

Excerpt 6 (4/21/2003): Amina's participation is questioned

1. Diane [to Hana]: Did she ask you? Did she ask you?  
Did Amina ask you? You
2. talked to Amina, right? Did Amina talk to you?
3. Amina and Hana [in unison]: Yes.
4. Diane: Did she write down your name?
5. Hana: Her name is [inc].

6. Diane: Yeah, but did she write down your name?
7. Hana: [inc]
8. Diane: No, she needs to write your name. Okay.  
[looks at Amina's paper] Yeah.
9. Okay, you wrote her name. Uh, don't write it for her.  
She needs to [this is to her]
10. practice [mimes writing in air]. Okay? Don't write  
it for her.

In lines 8–10, Diane seemed to be privileging Amina's literacy practice over her question-asking practice, commenting on Amina's need to write Hana's name herself, but not mentioning again the need for Amina to also ask the target question. The video corpus shows that Amina's classmates often appropriated her written work, physically taking her paper and writing questions or responses on it in Amina's place. In these instances, it seemed that Amina's classmates' perceptions of her language and literacy abilities affected their willingness to further engage with her in certain activities.

## **Discussion**

Usage-based theories characterize L2 learning as “a process of meaningfully revisiting the same territory again and again, although each visit begins at a different starting point” (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 83), and consequently call for longitudinal data that do not separate the learner from the learning context. Although the findings highlight many issues for a low-literate learner's exposure to and opportunities to practice English question forms, three key issues are developed in this section as they relate to question-oriented usage events: the relationship between the input provided and question practice, the relationship between peer relationships and question practice, and the relationship between (limited) literacy skills and question practice.

For beginning ESL instruction, peer interaction needs to be highly structured, repetitive, and intentional. In a communicative classroom,

question activities are useful for encouraging interaction because they give learners something to ask (and respond to) multiple times in succession, when they may be otherwise unable to produce much language on their own. Each recorded class in the corpus offered Amina formal opportunities for practicing questions. All of these questions were highly scripted and dictated by the teacher for practice within a particular thematic unit.

Despite exposure to a range of question constructions across the seven recorded classes, Amina's actual production of the target questions in these usage events was limited. Many of the activities relied on interview templates or conversation grids to guide interaction as students copied questions onto their own papers and recorded classmates' responses. While the written modeling of communicative language is often seen as facilitative from a pedagogical methods perspective, it clearly hampers a low-literate student's participation in a question-oriented usage event if literacy skills lag behind oral production. Camera shots in the last three recorded sessions in the corpus show Amina copying Stage 4, 5, and 6 questions (Pienemann et al., 1988) from the board to ask a partner during a communicative activity. However, she never produced these questions orally—illustrating the need to consider the usefulness of providing written modeling of questions rather than providing the questions in a pre-written format for literacy learners.

Amina's teachers and classmates were certainly aware of her limited language and literacy skills, but that awareness did not always translate into the modeling or assistance Amina needed in order to successfully participate in and complete the question-oriented usage events.

For a low-literate learner like Amina, the connections between the requirements of [classroom] literacy practices and the development of questions cannot be ignored (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009). It is reasonable to conclude that Amina's observed literacy abilities impacted how her classmates chose to approach and interact with her, ultimately impacting her accessibility to and participation in the question-oriented usage events that might otherwise have helped her L2 development.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

According to UBL, meaningful encounters and repetitions of “utterance schemas” (Eskildsen, 2012), such as question constructions, eventually result in automaticity and entrenchment of formulaic sequences (tokens) as well as productivity of new language based on available slots in construction patterns (types). To conduct a richer UBL-informed analysis of how Amina’s production of tokens and types may be developing her L2 question abilities, it is necessary to collect and analyze more question-oriented usage events with more unscripted/undictated questions in the data.

Supplementing observational data with interview data would be an important step for future LESLLA classroom research. The opportunity to interview learners such as Amina would add to our understanding of the impact that motivation and interest in class may have on learners’ outcomes in such usage events. For example, Amina attended Level A classes for five consecutive terms with two different teachers. The curriculum remained fundamentally the same for each class, as Amina saw former classmates disappear (perhaps to higher class levels) and new ones arrive. Interview data might identify perspectives on classroom interactions that were potentially clouded by frustration or boredom at encountering the same questions and topics.

The prioritization of copy work, often at the expense of oral interaction, illustrates the need for future research on literacy and oracy practices among LESLLA learners. Do other LESLLA learners prioritize copy work, and, if so, is this attributable to the sheer amount of written input or the expectations for using it? Might LESLLA learners use copy work to avoid oral interactions with other students or because literacy development is a priority over oral development?

To build on this descriptive research, further empirical studies are needed to address the issues related to question development that are taken for granted in highly literate instructional contexts. We need to more closely examine the ways in which low literacy skills and limited educational backgrounds may prevent the practice of oral question production in

communicative instructional contexts. What connections exist between reading or writing questions and using them both formulaically and productively? What is missing, under-emphasized, or over-emphasized in a given instructional environment to support a low-literate learner such as Amina? To reinforce and expand on Tarone and Bigelow's (2012) initial LESLLA research agenda, these relationships and their impact on L2 development bear further investigation in future research on LESLLA learners, particularly from a usage-based perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The current study identified one learner who was unable to fully benefit from the practice opportunities provided in the classroom for three primary reasons. First, if the questions to be asked had to be copied from the board, it took the learner a significant amount of time to do so, which resulted in less time and fewer opportunities for actually practicing the questions orally. Second, the learner's copy work was sometimes prioritized over oral practice, although no explicit literacy instruction was actually provided in the video data. Finally, the perception that many of Amina's classmates had of her relatively lower English language and literacy skills often resulted in their visible impatience and appropriation of her language production (oral and written) during their interactions with her.

By taking a closer look at LESLLA learners' interactional experiences in a print-rich environment, L2 teachers can build their awareness of these issues and reconsider the methods that they use to build oral and literacy skills in learners of varying educational levels (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). Given the findings from this study, recommendations can also be made for placing low-literate learners into separate classes with explicit literacy instruction that does not come at the expense of oral communication practice.

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## Appendix: Coding Protocol for Amina's Question-Oriented Usage Events

<i>Instructional Context</i>				
A. Question-oriented instruction	1. Participation structure 1a. Teacher-fronted 1b. Dyadic	2. Question activity 2a. Oral interview 2b. Dialogue/ scripted written Qs 2c. Conversation grid/graphic organizer 2d. Drill		
B. Non-question-oriented instruction	1c. Whole class (mix) 1d. Individual work			
C. Non-instructional time				
<i>Authenticity</i>				
A. Asker doesn't know the answer prior to asking (more authentic)		B. Asker knows the answer prior to asking (less authentic)		C. Not applicable (question does not require an answer)
<i>Scriptedness</i>				
A. Scripted	1. Task/topic-specific: yes or no	2. Question type 3a. Yes/no 3b. Choice 3c. WH-	3. Production 3a. Target-like 3b. Non-target-like	4. Source of question 4a. Copied notes 4b. Board 4c. Student textbook 4d. Student worksheet 4e. Teacher input 4f. Student input
B. Semi-scripted				
C. Unscripted	1. Task/topic-specific: yes or no	2. Question type 2a. Yes/no 2b. Choice 2c. WH-	3. Production 3a. Target-like 3b. Non-target-like	4. Purpose 4a. Ask for definition, word, pronunciation, information, spelling, translation 4b. Ask for help (instructions) to complete a task 4c. Meaning negotiation (verification, clarification, repetition) 4e. Small talk/ personal talk 4f. Self-directed/ rhetorical