

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



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About the Organization

LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org>

Website

<https://www.leslla.org/>

What do we know from 1 ½ decades of LESLLA symposia?

Martha Young-Scholten

This paper provides an overview of 13 years of plenaries, panels, papers, posters and workshops presented at Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) symposia. These are described in terms of their methodology, their focus, where the presenters come from and/or work. When considering these presentations against the Mission Statement, it becomes apparent that the stated aims are still out of reach. Ways to begin to meet these aims are suggested.

Keywords: LESLLA symposia, methodology, research, WEIRD.

1. Introduction

The year 2005 saw the creation of a unique international and interdisciplinary organization, *Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults* (LESLLA), which aimed to bring together those researchers, teachers, trainers, programme managers and policy makers working with adult migrants with little or no formal schooling. What became LESLLA's mission statement was contained in an invitation sent out worldwide by the organizers to anyone who they thought would be interested.

Since the inaugural symposium in Tilburg, in 2005 (see Figure 1), which attracted some 25 delegates, symposia have been held for three days, from late summer through the autumn and have attracted up to 250 delegates (Minnesota, 2011). During the second symposium in an English-speaking country in 2007, the danger that LESLLA would be swallowed up by the English-speaking world was pointed out and steps were taken to make sure the organization would be international and multilingual. It was agreed that at least every other year the symposium would have to be in a non-English speaking country. This requirement was adopted from the 2008 symposium onwards and has

become part of the LESLLA Constitution ratified in August 2017 at the symposium in Portland (see <https://www.leslla.org/constitution>).

Linguistics, Language Acquisition and Literacy

Inaugural Workshop on Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition
Tilburg University – August 25-27, 2005, The Netherlands

Low-educated second language learners

There exists a substantial body of work on adult second language acquisition (SLA) and second/foreign language learning, yet most studies deal with adults with native-language schooling through at least secondary school. In many countries the majority of immigrants are low educated. A quick scan of five years of publishing in TESOL Quarterly, for example, shows that only a fraction of the articles concerns the most vulnerable second language (L2) learners: low or non-literate adults with at the most primary schooling in their native language. Previous studies of immigrants such as the European Foundation's 1980s study of adults from six different language backgrounds in five European countries have left unaddressed a range of issues whose resolution has the potential to directly impact educational policy. These include variation in input from different sources (extra-classroom, the classroom and written text) and variation in cognitive ability relating to language aptitude and working memory.

Non-literate second language learners

The literature on children's literacy is vast, yet studies of non-literate adults' L2 development are rare. Since initial interest in the 1980s there has been silence on this research domain apart from a few studies in European countries, in the Netherlands (Kurvers & Van der Zouw, 1990; Kurvers, 2002), in the USA (Young-Scholten & Strom 2004) and in Sweden (Skeppstedt, 2003). Studies of adults have either focused on educational practices (Condelli et al.) or have involved adults who failed to learn to read and write in their native language despite schooling. Unlike for children, there has been little investigation into the linguistic competence and the metalinguistic processes connected with reading development of immigrant L2 adults with little or no native language schooling. This gap is not only remarkable, it is unfortunate. For some decades now western countries have been dealing with immigrants who are gaining literacy for the first time in their life in order to start their educational 'career' and to apply for citizenship, while the response of educational policy makers has been inconsistent. Without a solid evidence base, this is to be expected.

A new workshop on a new research topic

Research on language acquisition and literacy has been carried out in different disciplines. The first of what we hope will be a new workshop series wants to bring together linguists, psycho-linguists, psychologists and educational scientists in order to establish a multi-country, and multi-target-language research agenda. There is no group that meets regularly to consider interdisciplinary research on adult immigrants learning to speak and write a language other than English. By bringing together those working on the acquisition or literacy development in any second language by adult immigrants with little or no schooling, this LESLLA (Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) workshop's ultimate aim will be to provide comprehensive evidence at the international level that will more effectively inform language education policy in all those countries in which the neediest of immigrants' settle.

Figure 1. Invitation to the inaugural LESLLA symposium.

This further led in June 2018 to election of officers (see <https://www.leslla.org/leadership-team>).

2005	Tilburg University, the Netherlands
2006	Virginia Commonwealth University, USA
2007	Newcastle University, UK
2008	The Karel de Grotehogeschool, Antwerp, Belgium
2009	Bow Valley College, Calgary
2010	The University of Cologne
2011	University of Minnesota
2012	University of Jyväskylä, Finland
2013	San Francisco State University, USA
2014	Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands
2015	Flagler College, St Augustine, USA
2016	Universidad de Granada, Spain
2017	Portland State University, Oregon, USA
2018	University of Palermo, Italy

Table 1. Venues of the annual LESLLA symposium¹.

At these multi-day symposia (see Table 1), delegates have given more than 400 presentations ranging from plenaries, panels, papers, posters to workshops and demonstrations. A forum within which like-minded individuals come together and discuss ideas is fundamental to LESLLA. This sentiment expressed by a delegate is often expressed to organizers of the symposium: “Taking part in these events has profoundly shaped and benefitted my understanding of topics related to adult literacy and migration. More importantly, through LESLLA, I have met new colleagues, made new friends and built lasting professional networks” (PhD student in the UK from Germany, 2018).

2. What is our body of work?

The most important activity of the organization by far is its annual symposia. Therefore, almost halfway through LESLLA’s second decade, it is not only useful but important to review what has been

¹ This paper focuses on the symposia which took place up to LESLLA 2018. LESLLA 2019 was held in Pittsburgh and LESLLA 2020, scheduled for Malmö, Sweden, was held virtually in August 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

shared by symposium delegates in terms of expectations of what all this sharing ought to result in.

This review is of 418 presentations of all types at symposia rather than of the papers published in proceedings produced after each symposium (<https://www.leslla.org/proceedings>). It is presentations which are much more likely to capture the full range of concerns of those who participate LESLLA both formally (by attending one or more symposia) or informally by following LESLLA on Facebook or Twitter. Academics and graduate students may write up their presentations and go through the review process for inclusion in the proceedings. However, for the many practitioners who also participate in LESLLA symposia, if they are unfamiliar with the anonymous review process, this additional step for sharing their ideas is less likely to be deemed to be worth their time and effort. Their voices along with those of academics and graduate students are equally heard during symposia.

The following subsections aim to paint a picture of symposia activity first by describing type of learner and then categorizing them on the one hand by approach and on the other hand by topic.

2.1. Learners

The learners in presentations have almost always been adults without formal schooling in their home language/languages of origin and accordingly, usually no literacy in this language/languages. This is the result of the requirement which symposium organizers convey to abstract reviewers. In some cases, however, abstracts which do not deal with LESLLA learners per se but do deal with topics relevant to those who work with LESLLA learners have been accepted, after discussion between organizers and reviewers. LESLLA revolves around literacy, and the literacy skills of reading and writing are typically gained in the classroom or through one-on-one tutoring. Presentations which do not refer to a pedagogical context of some sort are rare.

Because the classes many practitioners teach are mixed ability in terms of educational background and literacy skills there is frequent reference in presentations to those with some formal schooling and

hence some home language literacy. Across symposium presentations, learners are from the same large set of countries around the world with low rates of literacy due to instability, poverty as well as tradition. (See the LESLLA website for a list of languages learners speak: <https://www.leslla.org/languages-of-leslla-learners>.)

Some (around ten) presentations focus solely on women and some (about 25) have considered adolescents still in compulsory schooling. Interestingly, length of residence/LoR is usually not a variable unless the presentation explicitly focuses on newcomers. LoR is therefore not prominent in presentations. This relates to the recognized variation in how and when adult migrants first and later access language and literacy classes over often lengthy periods of residence in their new country.

2.2. Approach and topic

Before looking at what these presentations have been about, we will take a look at how they can be categorized in terms of approach, which here rather loosely refers to methodological approach. This is as varied as that in very large education research conferences such as the annual AERA conference (cf. <https://www.aera.net/About-AERA>) or in applied linguistics, the triennial AILA conference (<https://aila.info/>).

Under approach, this has included:

1. systematic studies of multiple variables: various skills and/or practice and/or provision and/or testing and/or training;
2. ethnographic research on one or several individuals;
3. policy overviews;
4. description of practice (with respect to approach, method, techniques, materials); of provision (programmes; resettlement processes); testing and assessment, training and professional development;
5. action research and/or small-scale classroom studies;
6. studies of language acquisition (morphosyntax, phonology, vocabulary);

7. studies of reading development from a psycholinguistic perspective.

Percentages for each category are shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Methodological approach of LESLLA symposium presentations

Presentations can also be categorized by learner topic. 141 presentations are relatively broad and cover a range of language, literacy and life skills. The remaining 277 focus more narrowly on one of the topics in Table 2 (see percentages in Figure 3).

Agency/autonomy/empowerment/identity	Oral skills
Attendance	Phonology
Digital skills	Pragmatics
Health literacy	Practitioner awareness, knowledge and skills
Heritage languages	Trauma
Interaction with parents' children's schools	Visual skills
Literacy (general); reading (general); decoding; comprehension	Vocabulary
Morphosyntax	Workplace
Numeracy	Writing

Table 2. LESLLA presentation topics

In some approaches, the researcher looks at the effect of something (independent variable) on a learner outcome (dependent variable). As a whole, LESLLA symposia presentations do not lend themselves to this sort of description since quite often what's in the *topic* category is not a dependent variable given the types of presentations which LESLLA symposia delegates offer (i.e. plenaries, panels, papers, posters, workshops, and demonstrations).

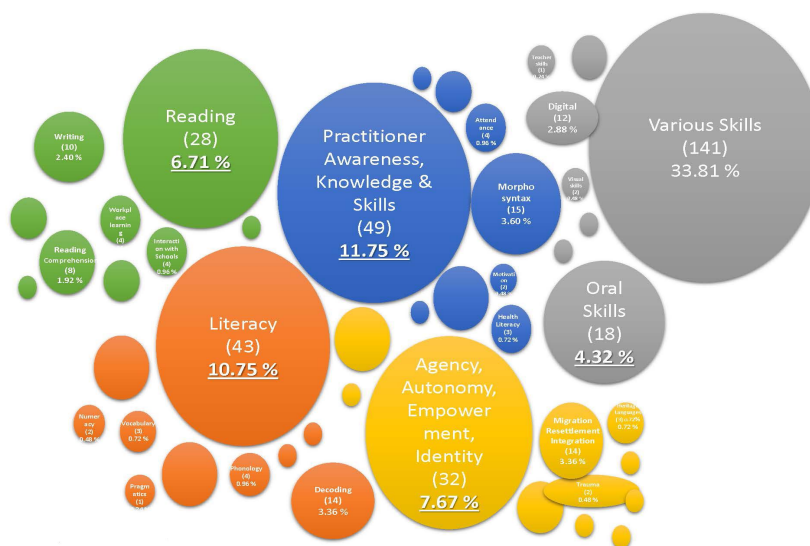


Figure 3. Distribution of the 418 presentation topics.

While the above description has been useful, we now turn to the importance of this overview of symposia. To what extent are these presentations achieving LESLLA's mission?

3. LESLLA mission: accomplished?

After the first symposium in Tilburg in the Netherlands, a mission statement was drawn up for inclusion on the new website in 2006:

Research on language acquisition and literacy is interdisciplinary and international. LESLLA brings together researchers and practitioners

from many countries with backgrounds in linguistics, psycho-linguistics, psychology and education to establish an international and multi-target-language research agenda. During annual symposia and information sharing throughout the year, LESLLA participants will increase the body of knowledge and outline the areas of research that require investigation for low-educated second language learners. The group's ultimate aim is to use research to improve practice and inform second language education policy in all those countries in which the immigrants most needing educational support settle.

The group's – LESLLA's – ultimate aim is to use research to improve practice and inform policy. How have symposia presentations contributed to the achievement of this aim? It is difficult to draw any conclusions without far-reaching examination of a variety of aspects of the lives of adult migrants with little formal education with respect to the language and literacy of their new country. But we can take a look at the systematic studies of LESLLA learners to see what they might be telling us.

3.1. The contribution of systematic studies

The LESLLA website states that “the response of educational policy makers has been inconsistent. Without a solid evidence base, this is expected”. It is systematic studies (13.43% of presentations under “approach” in Figure 2) which are most likely to contribute to a solid evidence base. These are larger-scale studies of up to 500+ learners which often examine the contribution and/or interaction of multiple variables (language, literacy, exposure, social, cultural, cognitive). Such studies include intervention studies with control and experimental groups who are pre- and post-tested to explore the effect of an independent variable such as a certain reading method on an aspect or aspects of literacy. One example of such a study was summarized at the inaugural symposium and written up in the first proceedings as Condelli and Wrigley (2006); for full report see Condelli et al. (2003).

Funded by the US Department of Education, the study asked what types of class arrangements and instructional variables correlate with improving learners' literacy and language and what student, program

and instructional variables relate to class attendance/persistence of adult ESL literacy students. There were 38 classes in 13 adult education programs in seven American states with 495 students who spoke 30 languages. 33.1% of these students had no formal education/were not literate in a home language. They were tested on their reading, writing, speaking and listening in English at 0, three and nine months into the study. Researchers also observed classes each month to see what teachers did. Results showed that reading skill growth correlated with:

- regular attendance;
- use of learners’ home languages for explanations;
- instructional hours per week;
- use of real world materials/connection to outside classroom.

Oral skill growth also correlated with regular attendance and use of learners’ home languages for explanations, as well as length of classes and focus on oral language with varied practice and interaction.

A meta-analysis of pooled data from the 13.43% and other relevant studies like this is needed to start to build a solid evidence base. The question arising will be whether these systematic studies are sufficiently similar to conduct a meta-analysis. But another question will be whether this is something the LESLLA community ought to undertake. Application of big data findings (e.g. meta-analyses) to policy is often for political and/or financial ends and may not always help practitioners or their students (e.g. on PISA results, Barrett and Crossley 2015).

The greatest proportion of symposium presentations (= 44.8%) falls under the description category. These are presentations that report on one or more aspects of working with LESLLA learners with respect to pedagogical practice (approach, method, technique, materials), provision (programmes), resettlement, testing and assessment and training and professional development. A presentation on one of these topics may refer to systematic studies but it may simply describe what the presenter (and colleagues) has done or has been involved in to address one of the many challenges these learners face. Such descriptions may be the inspiration for a larger-scale systematic study on the one hand, or a narrowly focused small-scale

study quantitative or ethnographic study on the other and this may also be the starting point for an MA or PhD study.

3.2. Basic research in LESLLA

While the “E” in LESLLA – education – has received considerable attention by symposium delegates, the “Ls” in LESLLA – literacy and language learning – have surprisingly received far less attention. In considering these Ls by approach, studies of reading development represent a mere 5.76% and studies of language learning/acquisition represent only slightly more, at 6.71%. Studies of reading development – of which there are some important ones under “systematic studies” category given their large sample size and inclusion of multiple variables – reach very similar conclusions. Adults learning to read for the first time but in a new language follow a route of development that in many ways resembles that of children; see Kurvers (2015) for an overview of such research in the Netherlands. It is not possible to draw such conclusions about the acquisition of syntax, morphosyntax, phonology or vocabulary because not only are too few studies over all but because within these three domains of language are numerous linguistic phenomena each of which could be studied on its own². At first glance, it might not seem to matter whether a learner accurately produces the second person singular suffix in German, negative polarity questions in English, geminates in Italian or front rounded vowels in Swedish. But acquisition of linguistic competence is the bedrock upon which reading rests. Initial reading, being able to decode words, in an alphabetic orthography requires phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness, and this awareness piggybacks on phonological competence. Without morphosyntax and syntactic competence in the new language and knowledge of the meanings of nouns, verbs and adjectives, comprehension of text beyond words is impossible.

Prompted by pleas in Tarone and Bigelow (e.g. 2012), the second language acquisition research community has recently recognized the

² But see Mocciano’s presentation at LESLLA 2018, now in this volume, and her volume of 2020.

need to go beyond findings based on the population of White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) individuals to which Henrich et al. (2010) refer. Because this also applies to most researchers, samples are those of convenience: the students at the institution at which the researcher teaches or at which his or her graduate students have contacts. SLA researchers introduced new initiatives to replicate previous studies with a non-WEIRD population. Doing so is a challenge for those without contacts outside the vast world of educated second language learners. Members of the LESLLA community can make an important contribution to SLA by aiming over the next several years to quadruple the percentage of studies on language acquisition presented at symposia. One way to encourage such research is through small-scale studies.

3.3. The role of action research

The impetus for the establishment of LESLLA was two-way sharing of ideas, by academics with practitioners and vice versa. Action research plays a special role in this respect, and the 18% which represents this approach is encouraging. These are small-scale studies the conducting of which is usually efficient, requiring few resources since these are typically presenters' own classrooms. These studies have a high degree of ecological validity because they take place in real classrooms with real practitioners and thus results resonate with other practitioners. Such studies move from action to systematic when the practitioner is undertaking an MA and especially a PhD, and requirements result in more rigorous methodology. Aberdeen and Johnson (2015: 109) call for "multiple evidence-based teaching methods. We strongly encourage our colleagues to explore [...] any and all other methods that they find appropriate."

In the categorization of presentations by approach, the 18% excludes language acquisition and reading studies and instead covers studies of use of real world materials; making connections to outside the classroom; oral language focus with varied practice and interaction and use of learners' home languages for explanations. Aberdeen and Johnson helpfully spell out steps from Lodico et al. (2010): (1) identify the problem; (2) understand the current situation;

(3) review the literature; (4) create an action plan; (5) carry it out; (6) reflect on the results; (7) draw conclusions. Working with one's own learners is one way to increase the number of studies of language acquisition whereby the starting point of the seven steps is a linguistic phenomenon instead of a problem. The LESLLA community is extremely well placed to support studies that compare learner by home language, by target language, by orthography and writing system while also taking social and cultural factors into account.

4. LESLLA as an international organization

LESLLA is special in its international and multi-disciplinary orientation and is ideally placed to make a difference at a supra-national level. This makes cross-cultural studies straightforward, practitioner + researcher studies feasible. The aim is to confirm the value of good ideas, particularly those which have been discovered by non-academics, by those who are not disposed to carry out large-scale studies. *If it works in Burlington does it work in Berlin and Barcelona?* But so far, LESLLA has not realised its international potential and, as in academia, English and the USA dominate..

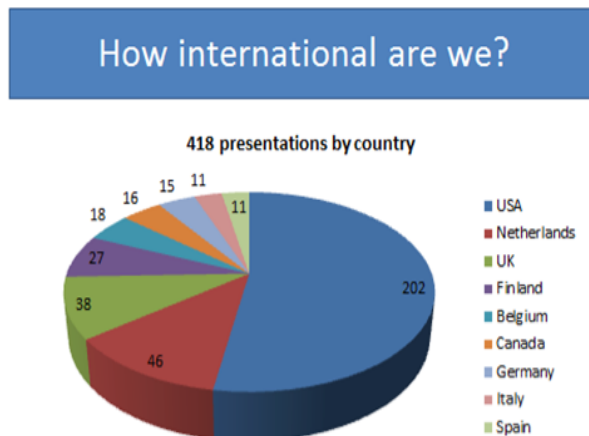


Figure 4. Presentations by country.

English dominance (see Figure 4) is further shown by the fact that 65% presentations were on L2 English. Dutch is second as the L2, 15%, for Flanders + Netherlands and this has to do with the high level of English proficiency of Dutch speakers, not to mention LESLLA having been hosted in three Dutch-speaking cities (Tilburg, Antwerp and Nijmegen). Some countries might be expected to be more active than they are in terms of percentage of migrants, e.g. in 2015, Sweden admitted 163,000 refugees (= 1.6% of the population) and in 2017, there were more foreign-born individuals in Sweden (17.6%) vs USA (15.3%). Low participation is likely due to the existence of a strong regional body whose work duplicates that of LESLLA, the Nordic Alpha Council; see <https://nvl.org/Om-NVL/In-English>.

Rich and Western receiving countries have dominated the symposia: only 2% of presentations have either been on or from those from other countries: Brazil, East Timor, Eritrea, Haiti, Israel, Japan and Rwanda (although at least Israel and Japan can also be included in the WEIRD category). The dominance of English is unfortunate because some of the major receiving countries in Europe – Greece, France, Spain and Italy (two of whom have hosted LESLLA for this among other reasons) – are not well represented. This does not account for low participation by practitioners from southern Europe at symposia other than the one in their own country. Rather it is likely to be practitioners' weak English skills connected to educational backgrounds that involve their home language rather than English.

5. Conclusion

In a mere 1 ½ decades, LESLLA has come a long way. With formalization in 2017-2018 and election of an executive committee, this thriving organization is well-placed to reach its potential in making a difference in how migrant adults with little or no formal schooling are supported in developing sufficient oral and literacy skills to become active and independent members of their new communities.

In 2013, the idea of “Partnerships in LESLLA” was introduced with the aim of stimulating a new culture of cooperation and collaboration. Calls to examine learners who are not WEIRD should

encourage members of the LESLLA community to start encouraging small scale research to rise to the challenge of meeting this call.

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