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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

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# LASLLIAM.
# A European reference guide for LESLLA learners

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From the very start of the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, it became clear that literacy is presupposed at the entry level. Research conducted in the last decades highlights the need for CEFR descriptors below A1. Moreover, research on language acquisition among low-literate learners reveals the complex needs of non-/low-literate learners. The "Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants" is a tool, promoted by the Council of Europe, to design curricula, courses, teaching materials and assessment instruments aimed at adult migrants, with a special attention to literacy learners.

**Keywords**: literacy, framework, descriptors, progression, syllabi.

## 1. Background and rationale

"Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants. A Reference Guide" (hereafter LASLLIAM) is a tool to design curricula, courses, teaching materials and assessment instruments aimed at adult migrants, with a special attention to literacy learners (non-literate and low-literate adults)[1].

LASLLIAM explicitly refers to the Common European Framework (CEFR), particularly to the notion of communicative language competence as a multidimensional competence and the action-oriented approach and intends to complement the CEFR for the educational needs, language contexts and users that the CEFR does not explicitly address. The CEFR is a descriptive and flexible tool, but since its publication in 2001, scholars, curricula designers and

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teachers have highlighted inadequacies when it is adopted in second language teaching to immigrants.

The main goal of the CEFR was to develop a shared understanding on teaching objectives and the assessment criteria across Europe, to enhance transparency of courses, syllabi and qualifications, and promote international co-operation in the field of modern languages (Council of Europe 2001: 1). It served the overall aims of the Council of Europe to achieve greater unity among member states, by converting the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures from being a barrier into being a source of "mutual enrichment and understanding" (Council of Europe 2001: 2). Thus, the CEFR focuses on foreign languages more than on second language learning. Furthermore, it assumes that the user is an adult learner who speaks one or more European languages, understands cultural and axiological references that are common to European societies, albeit in their diversity, and is (well) educated (Van Avermaet and Rocca 2013). Little attention is paid to the specific difficulties and training needs of learners who speak languages which are typologically far from the European languages, and which are spoken mostly by migrants (Vedovelli 2002). Implicit social assumptions underlie some descriptors, which sometimes refer to rituals (for example, "propose a toast" at level A1, Krumm 2007) that immigrants may not know or to levels of social equality in communication, whilst communication between immigrants and natives is often asymmetrical (Dittmar and Stutterheim 1984; Krumm 2007). Domains of great importance in the life of adult immigrants, such as the occupational and administrative domains (Beacco et al. 2014; Krumm 2007) and the educational domain, especially adult education and vocational training (Kuhn 2015), are not sufficiently considered.

Finally, literacy is presupposed at the entry level both by the CEFR and its recent Companion volume (Council of Europe 2018), which articulates level A1 of the CEFR in the two levels, Pre-A1 and A1. The introduction of a level before level A1 responds to the need to plan the initial teaching of a new language and assess the competence achieved in the first contact with it by the same literate learners who the CEFR targets. For example, the Pre-A1 learner can "give basic personal information in writing (e.g. name, address,

nationality), possibly using a dictionary", a task which may require a substantial period of training for an adult literacy learner.

## 1.1. Research background

Research conducted in the last decades highlights the need for CEFR descriptors below A1 specifically aimed at the needs of adult literacy and language learners (e.g. Borri et al. 2014a; Markov et al. 2015; Rocca et al. 2017). These are adults who are facing the complex and demanding task of learning a language while at the same time either learning to read and write for the first time (non-literates) or developing their literacy competencies (low-literates). From an educational perspective, there is an obvious mismatch between common language courses provision, targeted towards and designed with literate learners in mind on one hand and the needs and expectations of non-literate or low-literate learners. Moreover, studies conducted at the national level in different countries indicate that the types of tests used in educational contexts fail to assess what low-literate learners can do insofar as these tests presuppose literacy and familiarity with print and test materials (Gonzalves 2017). Several studies revealed that non-literate adults progressed more slowly in L2 reading and writing development compared to adults who could already read in a non-Roman script and found convincing evidence for the important impact of L1 literacy on L2 reading and L2 learning in general (Abadzi 2012; Condelli and Spruck-Wrigley 2006; Gardner et al. 1996; Kurvers and Stockmann 2009; Warren and Young 2012).

From the perspective of cognitive sciences and language acquisition, research into these non-literate or low-educated learners indicates why this task is so demanding: a slower pace in learning, problems with focusing on linguistic features in L2 learning, difficulties in achieving fluency, with standard exercises and with the standard way of testing.

Factors identified in the literature that affect progress include lack of skills that are normally presupposed in L2 teaching, such as metalinguistic skills, different ways of processing oral language and abstract visual information, working memory, and less experience with study skills.

### 1.1.1. Metalinguistic awareness

Research revealed convincing evidence that non-literate adults or adults not familiar with an alphabetic script do not show awareness of phonemes (Morais et al. 1979; Read et al. 1986; Reis et al. 1997, 2007; for an overview see Van de Craats et al. 2015). Other studies pointed to limited awareness of word boundaries (Homer 2009; Kurvers et al. 2007; Rachmandra and Karanth 2007). In most of these studies even low educated readers significantly outperformed nonliterates in phonemic and lexical awareness, while awareness of syllables and rhyme revealed less clear-cut differences between non-literates and adult readers. Learning an alphabetic script implies becoming aware of those linguistic features that are represented in the writing system. Similar findings that point to limited metalinguistic abilities were revealed in studies on the acquisition of oral L2 skills, such as interpreting or correctly recalling a recast, answering context-poor questions or the use of grammatical markers in storytelling (Strube 2014; Tarone et al. 2007, 2009).

### 1.1.2. Processing (linguistic) information

More recent studies have been using new methodologies in information processing that tap more or less directly into the processing of linguistic or visual information. Several studies revealed that adult non-literates did not differ from low-educated readers in repeating existing words, but differed significantly in repeating (non-existent) pseudowords, in memorizing pairs of phonologically related words, and in naming fluency based on a formal criterion (e.g. words beginning with p) (Dellatolas et al. 2003; Kosmidis et al. 2004; for an overview see Huettig 2015). All studies pointed to the fact that effective processing of phonological information turned out to be dependent upon having had a formal (literacy) education.

Several studies also investigated the processing of visual information, such as recognizing or copying line drawings or abstract figures. Nonliterates consistently obtained significantly lower scores on measures relating to naming line drawings and the recognition or copying of abstract figures (Dellatolas et al. 2003; Huettig, Sing and

Mishra 2011; Kosmidis et al. 2004). Several studies also revealed that verbal working memory was significantly influenced by literacy (Da Silva et al. 2012; Ostrosky-Solís and Lozano 2006) and that high-literates processed phonological information much faster and more efficiently than low-literates.

In sum, adult nonliterates do not differ much from literates in semantic processing, in recognizing and recalling known objects and figures, and in processing context-bound and familiar information. But they do differ in literacy related information processing: processing phonological information, recalling and remembering pseudowords, judging word length, and in recognizing and reproducing abstract (nonsense) figures.

The outcomes of these (neuro)psychological studies converge with empirical classroom studies. Nonliterates can easily process semantic information embedded in a concrete, communicative context of familiar domains, while even those readers who have recently learned to read have additional formal mechanisms available to process spoken language. And contextualizing teaching constantly is being considered one of the main predictors of success in adult literacy classes (Condelli and Spruck-Wrigley 2006; Kurvers, Stockmann and Van de Craats 2010; Warren and Young 2012).

Ardila et al. (2010: 689) conclude that literacy and schooling affect the networks and pathways in the brain used in cognitive processing: “Without written language, our knowledge of the external world is partially limited by immediate sensory information and concrete environmental conditions”.

### 1.1.3. Situated cognition

Many studies have highlighted the important role of situated cognition (Kirshner and Whitson 1997; Reder and Davila 2005; Robbins and Aydede 2009) in the processing of information by first-time literacy learners. Although the definitions of situated cognition slightly differ, most definitions highlight the importance of lived experiences (embodied) and interaction with the concrete and daily context (embedded) in the development of cognitive processes and the building of cognitive representations (Robbins and Aydede 2009).

Non-literates gradually learn to abstract knowledge from specific contexts (Bereiter 1997). It seems likely that written language plays an important role in this respect and that in becoming literate, cognitive processing transfers from the concrete extra-linguistic context to the linguistic (con)text (Reder and Davila 2005; Robbins and Aydede 2009).

Non-literates enter the classroom relying on well-developed semantic and pragmatic information processing skills in a familiar language about familiar topics, and gradually begin to grasp features of language. Most predictors of success in the adult L2 literacy classroom do point to the importance of the semantic-pragmatic information processing that is already familiar to the student. Or, as Whiteside (2008) suggested: adult literacy teachers should start with language that is grounded in the familiar, instead of starting with written input.

All these factors should be addressed while planning a course in second language and literacy. From an educational perspective, there is an obvious mismatch between common language course provision, targeted towards and designed with literate learners in mind on one hand and the needs and expectations of non-literate or low-literate learners on the other. Moreover, studies conducted at the national level in different countries indicate that the types of tests used in educational contexts fail to assess what low-literate learners can do insofar as these tests presuppose literacy and familiarity with print and test materials (Gonzalves 2017).

### 1.2. Towards a new Framework for second language and literacy acquisition

In many countries it was felt necessary that the CEFR had to be complemented with descriptors for levels below A1, including levels for those migrants with no or hardly any previous schooling, or for low-educated semi-literate migrants, who can read and write in a non-alphabetic script. Soon after the CEFR was launched in 2001, several countries providing adult education for non-literate migrants started to develop a basic L2 Literacy Framework of references and syllabuses, for example in the Netherlands, Norway, Germany, Austria, Finland

and Italy (Beacco et al. 2005; Borri et al. 2014a; Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2015, 2018; Cito 2008; Feldmeier 2009; Finnish National Board 2012; Fritz et al. 2006; Markov et al. 2015; Stockmann 2004). In most countries, the developed frameworks only covered learning the written language, mostly from both a technical literacy point of view (learning to read and write the written code) and from a functional point of view (learning to use written language in personally relevant everyday situations), following the CEFR categorisations of purposes and genres (e.g. reading for information, reading correspondence etc.). In some countries the framework was complemented with a portfolio as a tool to guide, assess and reflect on development for learners and teachers (e.g. Cito 2008; Stockmann 2006). The Italian framework also presented descriptors for oral second language acquisition and a general overview of notions, genres and functions and used four domains (private, public, vocational and educational) for illustrative descriptors (Borri et al. 2014a).

These endeavours became the more important, since most countries introduced language requirements for permanent residence or citizenship and because of the empirical evidence that in the standard CEFR-based tests most of these candidates got the result "below A1" and were unable to show the progress they had made. This problem motivated a group of researchers at the 2016 LESLLA conference in Granada in 2016 to launch the idea to apply for a European Literacy and Second Language Framework for this group of vulnerable learners.

As Europe's leading human rights organisation, the Council of Europe also has denounced the discriminatory effect of educational practices that do not consider the specificity of adult non-literate and low-literate migrants. In particular, in its documents on language and education policy, the Council of Europe (2017) has urged member states to provide literacy courses along with language courses (Council of Europe 2017). Therefore, the Council of Europe has promptly supported LASLLIAM, as a tool to enhance the quality of language instruction for those vulnerable subjects and immigrants in general. The LASLLIAM falls within the broader initiative of the Language Policy Division in the context of migration, specifically through the portal LIAM (Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants, https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants), which was launched in

2007. Over the last decade, LIAM has conducted surveys to monitor the misuse of the Framework in the examination of compulsory language for third-country nationals, has conducted research studies and developed guidelines and policy recommendations as well as tools, such as the "Toolkit" for language support offered to asylum seekers and refugees (https://www.coe.int/it/web/language-support-for-adult-refugees). The LASLLIAM hopes to make a significant contribution to longstanding – and urgently needed – efforts to improve language learning opportunities for non- and low-literate immigrants.

### 1.3. A complementary approach to literacy

As said, the LASLLIAM reference guide endorses the CEFR approach, especially the notion of communicative language competence, which is understood as the learners' ability to act socially, using strategic language resources – in mother tongue and in second language – together with other available resources, such as cognitive, learning, personal, and relational. As a social agent, the learner relies on these resources in language and literacy learning.

The CEFR does not prescribe a teaching methodology, but "relates to a very general view of the language use and language learning" (Council of Europe 2001: 9); LASLLIAM relates in a similar way to a view of literacy, literacy teaching and learners.

*Literacy* is polysemic word, which encompasses different concepts and may have different translations. In a narrower sense, literacy refers to the initial teaching/learning of reading and writing by children and adults, as well as the acquired ability to read and write. It corresponds to the terms *alphabétisation* and *alphabétisme* (French), *alfabetizzazione* and *alfabetismo* (Italian) (UNESCO 2005; see Minuz 2019 for an overview). Literacy learning goes beyond learning to code and decode spoken and written language, which was traditionally considered the scope of literacy teaching. Mastering written language involves two aspects: "written language as discourse style – the recognition that the kind of language used for writing is essentially different from the one used for speech; and written language as a notational system – the perception and growing command of the

representational system that is used in the written modality" (Ravid and Tolchinsky 2002: 433). The technical skills connected with the code go alongside with the knowledge of the characteristics of written texts distinguished by register, genre, and modality.

Against this view of literacy mostly as an individual practice and a set of cognitive skills, a different view of literacy focuses on writing and reading, as well as literacy learning, as socially situated practices. One cannot separate the activity of reading and writing from the social contexts that define and legitimate literacy practices (Gee 2011 [1991]; Orsolini and Pontecorvo 1991; Street 1981), nor from the power relationships between both subjects and classes (Freire 1970). Attention is paid to different forms of literacy, the "multiple literacies", which include not only decoding and understanding the words, but also on the interpreting of signs, symbols, pictures and sounds and the use of information and communication technologies (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; The New London Group 1996). Recently, the importance of a "literacy environment" has been highlighted: for the individual process of literacy to be successful, it is necessary to create an environment in which literacy, the practice of writing, is widespread and pervasive (Easton 2014).

We share the position of those who consider the two approaches complementary and not antithetical, two non-exclusive perspectives from which to look at literacy and literacy learning/teaching (Ravid and Tolchinsky 2002; Tarone et al. 2009). While talking about learning the written language, one should take into account both the learning subject and the spaces, functions and values attributed to the written language by the large and restricted community in which the subject learns to read and write. Following the latest definition of literacy by UNESCO (2017), we consider literacy "as 'communication involving text'. Literacy 'involves text' because text is increasingly mixed with other modes, such as image and symbol, across manuscript, print and electronic media. Literacy is 'communication' since its function and value lie in communicating with others or oneself, alongside verbal and non-verbal modes" (UNESCO 2017: 14). Thus, literacy and literacy learning not only represent getting access to the written code, but they also represent a component of the communicative language competence and the

learning to read and write by adults as an enrichment of the resources on which they can rely while acting in the world.

## 2. The LASLLIAM

### 2.1. Structure of the LASLLIAM

The LASLLIAM reference guide provides a curricular framework/scaled can-do descriptors from non-literacy and beginner oral competence in L2 to A1. It is developed based on the already existing frameworks for L2 literacy in English, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Norwegian, and Finnish, including other frameworks, such as the *Canadian Benchmarks 2000 – ESL for Literacy Learner* (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks [2001] 2015). Although the instruments are organized differently, they echo the same view of the education needs of literacy and second language learners. They also share "the idea of literacy as a kind of education which, leading to the acquisition of instrumental competences, is a way to decode a wider range of socially relevant meanings – conveyed in written language –, in order to integrate even usually marginalized people" (Borri et al. 2014b:7).

Learners' educational needs, specifically the experience with written language, combined with experience in the oral target language, contacts with target language and distance between the first language and the target language define the learner profiles, which will be described in the introduction to the LASLLIAM. Those who work in the different branches of education are the envisaged users of the LASLLIAM: for curricula, education authorities and directors of education institutes; for teaching material, authors of manuals, teachers and volunteers giving linguistic support to migrants and refugees; for course and class planning, teachers; for assessment, the organizers of diagnostic tests, exams and certifications.

The framework describes language and literacy "can dos" in four domains of primary use: the personal domain, the public domain, the occupational domain, and the educational domain. Descriptors for both the technical and functional aspects of literacy learning and for oral L2 acquisition are scaled in four levels. The scales represent

tables of descriptors (see annex) for each level, that highlight progressions in terms of:

- Literacy in terms of technical skills
- Communicative language abilities (reception, production interaction and mediation)
- Strategies (related to learning and language use)
- Digital competence
- Linguistic inventories (functions, genres and general notions)

Levels 3 and 4 overlap with the Pre-A1 and A1 levels of the *CEFR* and *Companion Volume* in the description of reception, production and interaction activities. This does not imply that the literacy process ends in the Pre-A1 and A1 phases. The ability to use the acquired literacy skills to carry out some very simple actions, such as finding some information (time, address, and price) in a simple text, is to be considered as a stage in a functional literacy process that proceeds parallel to language learning and continues well beyond level A1. Literate learners do not have to follow this path because they are able to transfer the literacy skills from their L1 to the new language.

The LASLLIAM is still a work in progress, which will be concluded by December 2021, after a one-year piloting phase. This paper presents the approach the authors have chosen in developing the scales for technical literacy and communicative language abilities.

## 2.2. Technical literacy scales

Technical literacy is defined as the ability to access to the written code in order to read and understand short sentences and texts featuring familiar language with some fluency and to write words, sentences and short texts featuring familiar language at a basic level. In European languages the written code is an alphabetic script, in which letters or graphemes represent phonemes in spoken language.

The four levels are defined as a continuum from getting to know the features and functions of written language and learning some words by heart, to being able to read and write fluently simple familiar sentences and short texts as in CEFR level A1.

Level 1 covers becoming aware of and recognizing letters and phonemes, learning by heart some personally relevant words (e.g. name and address) and a number of orthographically simple words that can be used as an anchor to learn the basics of the alphabetical principle. From the second level on the levels are defined by learning to decode and recode simple words and sentences, according to the conventions of each of the languages, to gradually learning to read and write more linguistically and orthographically complex words and sentences, and gradually becoming more fluent.

The indicators of progress are partly the same as for all scales (see below) and partly specific for technical literacy. These specific indicators can be defined in a general way, but the application will differ for each of the languages involved, because of differences in the repertoire of phonemes, in regularity of spelling to sound principles (or transparency of the orthography), in the syllabic make-up and the morphological richness of the languages (Verhoeven and Perfetti 2017; Ziegler and Goswami 2006). These specific indicators are defined along the dimensions of linguistic complexity (from linguistically simple to more complex), orthographical regularity (from regular to irregular), the learning process (from memorizing to slow decoding to fluent reading), and practice (from practiced words to new words).

As said before, the levels represent a continuum which also indicates that there is no need to stick to input as defined in the levels. These principles are mainly important for what students are expected to read or write independently. With guidance students can deal with personally relevant and more complex linguistic material, as long as they are not expected to work alone.

## 2.3. Communicative language abilities

Communicative language abilities are, as in the CEFR, at the heart of the LASLLIAM. Like in the CEFR and the updated Companion Volume, the communicative language abilities are divided into reception (oral and written), production (oral and written) and interaction (oral and written). The LASLLIAM developers however are well aware that new and fast developing technologies will likely

challenge the clear-cut boundaries between several modalities. In online interaction for example, oral and written language can be used at the same time (e.g. using an online translation tool or speech technology) and written language will often be used together with visual symbols like emoji's. Differently from the CEFR, the illustrative descriptors in the thematic LASLLIAM scales are not provided for different genres (like correspondence, messages and notes in writing or monologue and dialogue in oral language). Instead, the LASLLIAM scales are overall scales plus scales specified for the four domains listed in the CEFR (private or personal domain of house, family and family life, the public domain of the relevant public services and shopping, the occupational domain of job and workplace, and the educational domain of teaching and learning). Most of the descriptors are defined in the form of "can do function X by applying technical skill Y or strategy Z" (e.g. can understand a very simple instruction by reading practiced words and using visual cues). Indicators of progression are described along the dimensions of autonomy (e.g. working with guidance before working alone, relevance (from personally relevant to generic), modality (oral before written and reception before production), context (from more to less context), meaning (meaning before form) and practice (practiced before new). Although the scales are developed for oral and written production and interaction for four different levels, it is important to stress that the linguistic abilities for an individual might differ across the different aspects. An adult migrant might enter a second language and literacy class with already a basic oral proficiency, but without any experience with reading and writing, another one might be a proficient reader in a different script and equipped with several study skills. In other words, a learner might be at level 1 for reading and writing, but close to CEFR A1 in oral L2 proficiency. The profile of the learner will be, next to his personal needs and ambitions, an important starting point for the teachers.

## 3. Conclusion

In developing the LASLLIAM, the authors are aware of ethical issues connected with language and literacy teaching in Europe. In specific,

they discourage the reference to LASLLIAM descriptors as standards to be achieved in formal certifications, instead of as criteria to define learner profiles. Moreover, they are not in favour of the use of LASLLIAM to develop high-stake and large-scale exams as a practice which results in an unethical and unfair discrimination against non-literate and low-literate adults. That is especially true with regard to compulsory tests related to any kind of legal requirements for entry European countries, residence permits and citizenship.

As already indicated, the LASLLIAM is a *tool* to design curricula, courses, teaching materials and assessment instruments aimed at adult migrants, with a special attention to literacy learners (non-literate and low-literate adults). This tool is still work in progress. The scales with the descriptors for technical literacy, communicative language abilities, mediation, strategies, digital competencies and the linguistic inventories are in the making. It is crucial that the first drafts of the scales are carefully piloted and validated in several countries and several languages. The LESLLA community can be very valuable it this process.

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