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“Getting a grip on basic skills”. Toward professional development of LESLLA teachers

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“Getting a grip on basic skills” is a project, which aimed to develop and pilot an in-service teacher training model for promoting the skills of LESLLA (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults) teachers in supporting the development of basic skills of immigrant adults. In this article, we will describe the project, planned and implemented in Finland, discuss observations and implications of the pilot, and give some examples of the good practices developed and observed during the project. Additionally, we will contemplate the challenges of the long-term web-based training model and the teachers’ everyday work.

Keywords: LESLLA teachers, in-service teacher training, immigrant education, professional development, blended learning.

1. Introduction

Immigration is a rather new phenomenon in Finland, and the adult education system is not current from the perspective of L2 Finnish and literacy teaching and learning. According to Nieminen et al. (2015), the most recent estimation from 2014 suggests that approximately 3% of all adult immigrants living in Finland had a maximum of 2-3 years of schooling from their childhood, but the percentage of adults who are new to print literacy was unknown. At 7.5%, the number of people whose first language is not among the official languages of Finland (Finnish 87.3%; Swedish 5.2%; Sami languages 0.04%) is rather small when compared to other Western countries, but at the national level, the growth from 1.5% in 1997 is significant (Official Statistics of Finland 2020). The number of immigrants is expected to continue to increase in the future.

In this article, we present the key elements of the project “Getting a grip on basic skills: pedagogical design for teachers and advisers in

immigrant education"[1], which promoted the skills of teaching and advising personnel in supporting the development of basic skills of adult students who have experienced interruptions in formal, school-based learning in their childhood. As there is no systematic pre- or in-service training system for this target group in the country, this project aimed to fill the gap.

The definition of the basic skills is based on OECD's (2013) *The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) survey, which measures adults' proficiency in basic skills – literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. In the survey, information about how adults use these skills at home, at work, and in the community were collected.

First, *literacy skills* mean using written texts (print-based or digital) for one's everyday life (OECD 2013). In our project, literacy was not limited to reading and writing only. According to Luukka (2003, 2013), texts as multimodal entities can also consist of or include visual or auditory elements such as voice, pictures, or movement; the ability to construct meanings is the most important feature of a text. *Numeracy* means "the ability to access, use, interpret and communicate mathematical information and ideas in order to engage in and manage the mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life" (OECD 2013: 59). According to this definition, mathematical skills are not limited to cognitive aspects, but also involve the ability to engage with mathematical challenges (Malin et al. 2013). Lastly, *ICT-based problem solving* includes, for instance, digital skills and the evaluation of information (OECD 2013). Thus, technological basic skills are not enough, but it is also important to be able to utilise these skills to solve everyday problems, for example, in public transportation (Reder 2015).

According to Malin and colleagues' (2013) analysis of the results of PIAAC, Finnish adults' basic skills are excellent in literacy and numeracy, and considerably above average in ICT-based problem solving when compared to all OECD countries. On the other hand, they also noted that in Finland, about 11% of adults have insufficient

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literacy skills, 13% are struggling with numeracy, and 30% have great difficulties with ICT-based problem solving. This means there is an obvious need for educational solutions explicitly targeting the improvement of adults' basic skills.

Finally, we see *study skills* as an important component of all the above-mentioned skills. They are linked with success in both academic and non-academic (e.g., employment) settings. According to Hoover and Patton (2007), and Devine (1987), in learning new skills or knowledge, learners use a variety of academic "tools" (e.g., strategies and cognitive skills) to support their learning; these study skills enable learners to, for example, acquire, organise, remember, and use any kind of information.

In this article, we first describe the project and our pedagogical thinking, and then discuss the good practices, challenges, and further ideas that we came across during the project. We talk about *participants* when referring to the LESLLA teachers/advisers who participated in the training, and *immigrant students* when referring to the learners in their classes. Finally, by *educators* we mean the project personnel.

2. The project and its participants

In "Getting a grip on basic skills: pedagogical design for teachers and advisers in immigrant education" (2017-2020), we developed and piloted a national teacher training model for promoting the skills of LESLLA teachers and advisers in supporting the development of basic skills of immigrant adults. The project was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF).

The piloted training was based on blended learning. The participants primarily used the online learning platform, Peda.net, though face-to-face meetings also took place during the training. Peda.net is used in every form of education in Finland and it offers a comprehensive selection of tools for online teaching and learning for teachers and students. Peda.net allows teachers to build different task types, discussion forums, and learning environments for students, and it also enables the teachers to give feedback to the students. The students have access to the course materials and tasks and they also

have a personal profile space where they can store their assignments to demonstrate their learning.

The teacher training pilot was divided into six modules (see Figure 1). The participants could choose to study either all of them or select modules as part of the training.

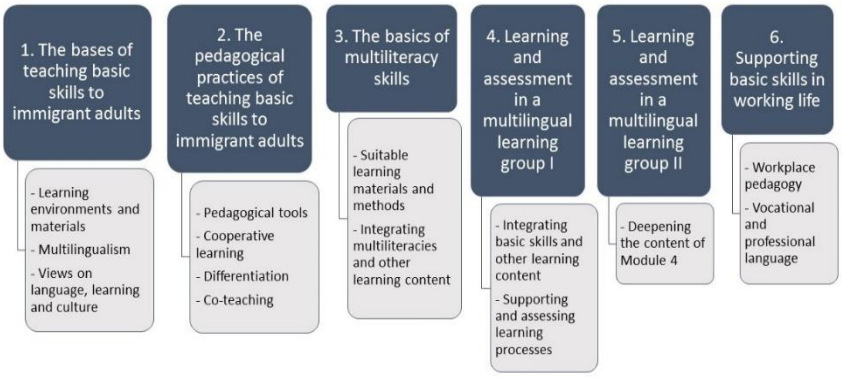

Figure 1. The modules of the teacher training pilot.

By the end of the registration period, 107 teachers or advisers expressed interest in enrolling for the training, for instance, to get new pedagogical tools for teaching basic skills to LESLLA students and to find peer support. Altogether, 71 teachers or advisers participated in the training: some of them took part in the training from the beginning and completed all the modules, whereas others started in the middle of the training. The participants worked in different kinds of institutions, which organise adult education for immigrants. The most common study path options that are available for adults with immigrant background are introduced in Figure 2. The following forms of education were represented among our participants: adult liberal education, adult basic education (ABE), integration training, general upper secondary school for adults, and vocational education. The participants were teachers of literacy skills, L2 Finnish, L2 Swedish, foreign languages, special education, mathematics, and social studies. There were also special needs assistants and study advisers among the participants. Additionally, some of the participants worked either

voluntarily in NGOs or as paid staff in asylum seeker reception centres. Most of the participants were qualified teachers.

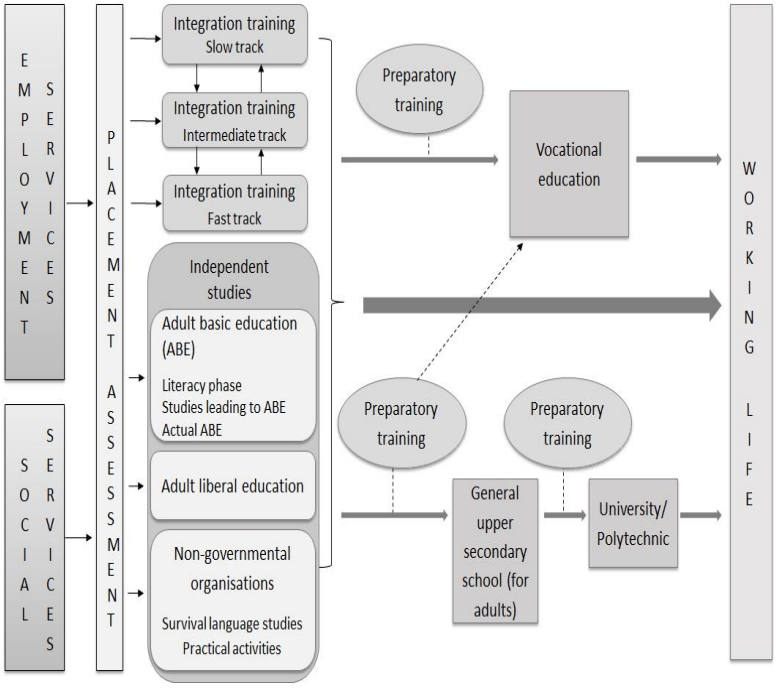

Figure 2. Study path options for adult immigrants living in Finland. Updated version of Ohranen et al. (2015).

However, some participants worked under two job titles concurrently, for example, as an L2 Finnish teacher and a study adviser, and it is rather common that the jobs change occasionally. The courses or programmes in which the participants were teaching were free of charge for the students.

3. What is behind the pedagogy?

3.1. New literacies

According to Lankshear and Knobel (2011), the combination of online learning and new literacies challenges the structures of

education. Teachers need more information about using pedagogically motivated technology in their teaching, and they benefit when they learn about new literacies and the new textual landscape, where texts are significantly more multimodal and multilingual. This made the designing of our online course challenging: we as planners had to motivate the participants to work online for a relatively long period and familiarise them with the rich world of new literacies. The participants' professional knowledge was challenged positively when they were designing meaningful digital learning material for LESLLA students. The combination of online learning and new literacies was a complex process that gradually developed during the project. The process also goes on in the work of the teachers in the future.

3.2. Design for learning

The whole project was built on the underlying principle of learning as a process in which the agency of a learner and their interaction with others plays a crucial role. This kind of a socio-constructivist perspective is the basis of all the current curricula in Finnish education – but there is still a need to develop the pedagogical practices. Hence, the training design supported the participants in developing their pedagogy in interaction with each other and the educators; to rethink their views on language and learning, receive feedback and share pedagogical innovations. In the modules, we utilised the teaching model developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005). In general, this model focuses on learning outcomes rather than content, exercises or pedagogical tricks only. In line with this pedagogical thinking, the design of the training began with careful planning of the goals and the assessment according to the learners' needs. Only after this were assorted communicative exercises designed to suit these goals.

3.3. Language conceptualisations

When talking about immigrant education, it is crucial to pay attention to the teacher's views on languages and language learning. Teachers'

conceptualisations of language affect learning situations, teaching materials, assessment of the students' skills, and talk about language (Dufva et al. 2011). Salo (2009) suggests that every teacher has an idea of how language learning happens and how language teaching should be organised; however, these conceptualisations are not always equivalent to the actions in the classroom, and sometimes they are not even articulated. To be able to act in an appropriate way as a teacher, it is important to recognise and to be aware of the conceptualisations that affect and regulate teaching. Contrary to the monological language conceptualisation which treats languages as separate entities and puts stress on mastering the linguistic forms and structure, the dialogical conceptualisation stresses meaning and functions as well as the changing and dynamic character of language; it also sees language learning as learning to do things with the language (see Dufva et al. 2011). In the development of our training, we subscribed to the dialogical conceptualisation. In the piloted training, the participants were emboldened to verbalise their thoughts and develop their views on language from the first module. In every module, the participants were instructed to consider their relationship to language and language learning, and they were encouraged to try teaching methods that reflect the dialogic language conceptualisation.

4. Recognising good practices for LESLLA

4.1. Co-creation

The piloted training design supported learning through technology-enhanced interaction offered to participants (e.g., interaction between participants in the discussion forum and educators' feedback). Participants were active agents of their professional development and were treated as experts in their own field. They were therefore encouraged to co-create training materials by sharing their well-established practices. Educators facilitated the learning process by structuring the training and guiding participants in their learning, for example, by giving timely feedback, support, and inspiration. Many of these pedagogical solutions (e.g., the co-creation of material by different stakeholders and the availability of a range of interaction)

were possible thanks to using Peda.net as a learning platform. The platform proved to be a successful tool for the co-creation of the training. Innovation was an integral part of this training design. Participants were exposed to pedagogical innovations throughout the training and were encouraged, for instance, to utilise new pedagogical design in modules 4 and 5. The co-created pedagogical tools used in the training (e.g., peer-assessment, phenomenon-based learning) could be modelled by participants in their current and future work or serve as inspiration for their professional development.

4.2. New concepts and continuous reflection

The 1.5-year-training served as an ideal tool for the development of pedagogical thinking and creation of intercultural and language-aware mindsets (see e.g., Piller 2012). The approach follows an idea, discussed by e.g., Brookfield (2017) and Burbules (1993), that becoming a critically reflective educator is a long-lasting process. In our training, the participants were continuously encouraged to dialogue on diverse topics in relation to existing theories, their own work, the experiences of peers, and feedback from colleagues. They were also given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with pedagogical innovations and reflect on them, which is the first step towards innovation becoming a part of professionality. The continuous reflection was also stressed in assessment practices. Through different reflective and portfolio tasks, participants had the chance to build new knowledge in connection with the knowledge gained in previous modules, in line with ideas behind experiential learning in adulthood (e.g., Jarvis 2012). For example, in module 3, the professionals were encouraged to reflect on the reading circle in relation to the material gathered in the Peda.net platform. Portfolio tasks were seen as a logical continuum rather than separate entities.

4.3. Innovation through collaboration and learning-by-doing

Collaboration and exchanging new ideas through dialogical approaches was at the centre of the development work within the

project and training concept itself. The training concept was developed in close collaboration with a range of experts familiar with the Finnish context. It was also possible to utilise already internationally recognised good practices, for example, in module 3 (see Suni et al. 2018). The designers of the training share various professional backgrounds in terms of research field and teaching experiences. In the process of designing the training and creating the training materials, experts from other national universities were constantly consulted with to secure the quality of the training. Nevertheless, the developmental work was not without setbacks and can be best described as a continuous process of experimentation and learning.

Previous research shows both deficiencies and potential related to the utilisation of already existing expertise in educational institutions (Kärkkäinen 2017; OECD 2016). Therefore, one of the main ideas of the training concept was to provide participants with the opportunity to exchange their experiences within the same institution and across different workplaces. For instance, the participants completed their portfolio tasks in small groups based on their workplace and residence. They were continuously encouraged to share and comment on good practices surrounding activities and assessment practices.

The collaboration and innovation were further enhanced by engaging of different stakeholders in the participants' learning. For example, the module 6 which devoted to the development of basic skills in workplaces, engaged participants into close collaboration with employees and immigrant students through listening to their voices and experiences. The material gathered by immigrant students in their workplace in the form of photos and recordings of the meaningful learning moments was further discussed with students themselves and employers to broaden teachers' perspectives and practices related to immigrants' basic skills.

4.4. Flexibility

The flexibility was seen in ways of completing separate modules and the whole training. The training design recognised participants' different backgrounds, life and work situations as well as expectations

and needs. The participants were encouraged to complete their portfolio in the format most suitable for them (e.g., video, blog post, PowerPoint) and to focus as closely as possible on their current work responsibilities, their professional needs, and the needs of their work community.

To ensure active agency in their own learning, the participants first chose the aspect of practice on which they wanted to focus. Then they selected the literature for the learning tasks that corresponded with their chosen perspective, e.g., communicative competence. By providing ready-to-try-out pedagogical models and the opportunity to exchange good practices, the training met the needs of the participants stated in the pre-training questionnaire. For participants who were unable to participate in the face-to-face guidance sessions, there was the option of discussing their progress online.

4.5. Face-to-face guidance

Guidance visits in the participants' workplaces were at the core of this training design. In order to realise this practice, the participants were divided into study groups according to their place of residence and mentored by two educators. The main topic of each guidance session was a current portfolio task and its further development. Additionally, the hosts of the visit had the opportunity to introduce their institution and share good practices. Further, participants were also encouraged to meet and discuss their work outside of these formally scheduled meetings. These face-to-face guidance sessions proved to be an excellent tool for increasing collaboration and the flow of ideas and innovations between participants and institutions. The sessions were also a good arena for giving timely feedback to participants and receiving feedback on the training design and its content from them.

4.6. Motivating students

Some of the previously mentioned good practices, like the study groups and face-to-face guidance, enhanced the participants' motivation to continue with the training, and supported the exchange

of ideas and innovations. Similarly, peer-assessment, modules following a clear structure throughout the training, and the descriptions of modules and tasks getting shorter over time eased operating in the online environment and helped to finalise parts of the modules and the entire training. The first session organised in face-to-face form was of value from the perspective of becoming confident with the course and module structure and working in an online environment. The initial session also allowed the participants the opportunity to get to know each other personally. In addition, the materials used and especially the variety of materials (e.g., videos, texts, presentations, models ready to be tried out) aimed to increase engagement in the learning process. The materials also included multiple voices, such as experts, employees, and immigrant students. In particular, provocative talks, lectures, and interviews were found to work well as inspiration and stimulus for discussion.

4.7. Modules 4 and 5

As an example of the implementation of previously presented good practices, we will highlight modules 4 and 5, *Learning and assessment in a multilingual learning group I* and *II*. The focus in these modules was to give the participants tools for integrating the teaching of basic skills with content and language and to raise their awareness of suitable assessment practices. First, the participants received two reflection tasks. Following this, participants could start the portfolio task, in which they had to design a learning unit to implement in their own teaching groups.

Reflection task 1. The aim of this task was for participants to reflect on their own actions and attitudes related to language and teaching. First, participants watched a video, which addressed two different approaches to language learning: the functional and the formalist approach. Then they analysed their own teaching from the perspective of how these two approaches are visible in their work. During an online discussion with the whole group, the participants then discussed their pedagogical solutions and weaknesses based on the photos and notes taken during the lessons.

Reflection task 2. The aim of this task was to draw attention to opportunities for informal learning outside the classroom. The immigrant students were asked to choose one situation from their everyday life and make a one-minute video based on this situation, which was then viewed in class. The participants' task was to reflect on what kind of basic skills the students' situations demanded. Further, the participants reflected on how these everyday situations can be used as a part of teaching, learning, and assessment.

The portfolio task. The aim of the portfolio task was to implement the teaching model developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005). The model contributes to creating a pedagogy in which the goal orientation of the learning process and the assessment are first designed carefully and according to the learners' needs. To achieve these goals, a variety of communicative exercises was then created. This forced the participants to challenge the traditional mindset in which the planning of a learning unit often begins with finding different and sometimes only loosely connected tasks. The participants designed a learning unit using this model.

Once developed, the design of the learning unit was implemented in classrooms, and it was documented by photos, notes, videos, or audio recordings, and collecting the output and feedback from students. In their portfolio, which could be written text, audio, or video, the participants were asked to reflect on the unit in response to selected questions.

During both modules, the participants repeatedly received feedback from their peers and the educators. The learning units were also discussed in the face-to-face guidance sessions.

5. Challenges and possible solutions

5.1. Participant engagement

As in many other web-based courses and training sessions (see Lee and Choi 2011), we experienced a dropout of 27 participants. The reasons behind quitting were usually related to the changing situations in working and personal life. The participants were preoccupied with their daily duties, and heterogeneous and occasionally changing

student groups added to their workload. Additionally, the participants often had temporary jobs because of the continuous competitive tendering, and they needed to change workplaces from time to time. There were also different practices in institutions concerning the employees' possibilities to participate in training during working hours. Accordingly, it was a challenge to engage and motivate the teachers to participate in long-term online-based training.

Given these obstacles, how can the training be made more attractive for participants? One solution is to further emphasise that the core idea of the training is to support the participants' daily work. Throughout the training, all assignments were connected to the practices in participants' classrooms and individual adaptations were possible and even desirable. The educators did not simply assign rigid topics but offered for example input and affordances to enhance development. The self-direction in the training was underscored, but due to an established tradition of teachers being leaders, it was not easy to adapt to new ways of acting as a learner. This issue was also directly linked to the participants' view of learning which was reconsidered during the training.

As the teacher training pilot aimed to develop new kinds of pedagogical practices, the changes and even conflicts in the conceptualisations of language and learning also posed challenges, as well as the utilisation of new technology and applications. Based on our experience, in order to engage the participants, the types of tasks and counselling need to be carefully planned. It is also important to find a good balance of different activities: the number of tasks should be reasonable, and they should be connected to participants' world of experiences as much as possible. Further, it is crucial to be diplomatic in giving feedback. The feedback should support sharing ideas and broadening the mindsets of the participants and also the educators. It is also important that the educators do not give the impression of being superior to the participants, who are experts in their work and own learning.

Sharing and interaction were the goal and the most successful part of the training – but the blended training and the structure of the modules or the assignments did not always encourage the participants to learn from each other's work in an optimal way. In this case, the question is how to make participants more motivated to participate in

online discussions, so that the discussions would be as interactive as possible, rather than simply presenting one's own views.

One of the key solutions was to make time frames within the training as flexible as possible, meet the individual and shared needs, and frame the discussions as appealingly as possible. This required that the educators were familiar with the field. Peda.net as a platform could also have been utilised in an even more versatile way. Peda.net offers a lifelong personal profile space where one can compile resources, materials, ideas, and links; to keep a journal, share social media updates, follow news of one's own interests or create photo galleries to build one's own expertise. This space could have been utilised more systematically and effectively to support the self-directed studies and to deepen the participants' pedagogical thinking. This could have been one of the ways to strengthen the agency of the participants even more – and accordingly, to engage and motivate them. It would also have been useful to collect and share the innovative practices of all participants throughout the training. This of course occurred within the regional groups, but as the groups worked separately for most of the training, synergy was not always exploited to its full potential. On the other hand, working in groups enabled the tailoring of the training according to the special needs of every regional group and even individual participants. All in all, the training worked in an optimal way when there was more than one participant from the same institution. Peer feedback and support proved to be essential, and this is something that should be taken into consideration during future realisation of the training.

The question is also if fees should be charged for the training, as this might engage some participants. Or should the qualification demands of the teachers be taken into account? If the training provided an official qualification or if the course credits were registered as academic studies, it would benefit the participants even more when applying for jobs.

5.2. Heterogeneity

The design of the training was challenged by participants being a heterogeneous group in terms of their backgrounds and expectations

as well as work and life situations. Participants also expressed different professional interests: some were interested only in teaching language to literacy learners, whereas others were working in integration or vocational training.

There is a risk that the educators – even if they do possess a lot of experience in teaching and connections to the field — cannot fully appreciate the difficulties or the strengths and resources of the participants working in different kinds of institutions. In line with previous studies (e.g., Kärkkäinen 2017), observations done in this project also show that vocational teachers' and language teachers' ideas on immigrant education and integration may differ considerably. Vocational teachers may identify strongly with teaching their subject, which may be a barrier to taking advantage of creative, language-supportive methodologies even though these would greatly enhance immigrant students' understanding of the newly learnt content (e.g., Kärkkäinen 2017).

One of the suggestions for further development of the training design is providing tools for adjusting and transferring of certain practices to different contexts and needs. Furthermore, providing the participants with more opportunities to dialogue on the pedagogical thinking behind some of these practices may be a tool for broadening perspectives on variety of pedagogies and seeing more value in unconventional ways of teaching. To develop the educators' understanding of the current needs, challenges, expectations, and conceptions of the participants, a period of observation and field studies might be useful at the beginning of the training. It would also be possible to have the participants directly involved in designing the model to bridge the possible gap between theory and practice.

6. Discussion

In Finland, there is no established pre- or in-service training system for teachers or advisers working with immigrant LESLLA students. However, based on the large number of teachers who applied for this piloted training, there is an obvious need and demand for this kind of training. Therefore, one of the goals of the project was to fill the gap and to establish a training model that can eventually be included in the

pre-service teacher training system. The innovative, technology-supported structure of the training design, with face-to-face guidance sessions in the participants' workplaces being an integral part of the training enabled us to contribute to upgrading the LESLLA teachers' professional skills nationwide.

The aim of the training was to build a wider understanding of the basic skills and to support effective pedagogical practices. The training equipped participants with ready-to-try-out pedagogical tools as well as new ideas that they can use in their work as such or as inspiration for further development of their teaching. The model can also serve as an example of working towards improvement as part of a common effort among educators, experts from different fields and immigrant students themselves.

Additionally, this project added to a better understanding of the specifics of the LESLLA teachers' professional needs and gave new insight into their professional development. Based on the observations, the training contributed to changing the participants' mindsets mainly thanks to dialogue, collaboration, and openness to trying new approaches, which are at the core of the training design. This thinking was visible in the online learning environment as well as during the face-to-face guidance. Thus, participants developed professionally, and due to the reciprocal structure of the training, the educators got a chance to develop their understanding of the phenomena as well. Developing the pedagogical design was then a continuous and mutual process.

Engaging the heterogeneous group of participants over a long period of time was the main challenge of the training. The heterogeneity of adult learners within a group is usually to be anticipated, though in this group, heterogeneity also related to a variety of conditions, contexts, and ways of implementing education for LESLLA learners. As solution to these differences, we propose rethinking the duration of the training and offering participants the opportunity to complete only individual modules. The participants' professional needs were also considered by allowing flexibility in the choice of readings as well as tasks and the way they were completed. In addition, practices such as division into local study groups, peer feedback, and face-to-face guidance worked well for the purpose of participants' engagement.

The model created in this project can be used in diverse contexts such as universities, open universities, and polytechnics. It can be adapted to both blended, online, and offline. The online assignments can be carried out also face-to-face. However, the shape and the duration of the training should be carefully considered to ensure the maximum engagement of the participants. For the present, the training model is available for free only in Finnish, but we can see its potential also internationally.

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