

## INTRODUCTION

Martha Young-Scholten, Newcastle University

**Low-educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition** (<http://www.leslla.org>) was established in 2005 to provide a unique forum for discussing and adding to what continues to be a meagre body of research on the subset of 800 million non-literate adults worldwide (UNESCO 2004) who migrate to countries where they need to become literate for the first time, but in a new language. 'Low-educated' refers to the background of those adults who are beyond the age of compulsory schooling upon immigration, not to their eventual attainment; the focus of LESLLA is not on basic or beginning literacy *per se* but rather on the individuals who build up oral competence in a second, third or  $n^{\text{th}}$  language while working on becoming literate for the first time in a language in which this oral competence may not yet be well established. Those who fit into the LESLLA category may be found learning the alphabet in UK pre-entry level classrooms or negotiating traffic as shuttle van drivers at US airports.

One of the central goals of the LESLLA forum has been to recruit participants from as many countries as low- and uneducated adult immigrants settle in and are expected to become literate in a new language. The proceedings of the first two LESLLA forum meetings (van de Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten, 2006; Faux 2007) cover LESLLA issues in the USA, the UK as well as in several additional European countries.<sup>1</sup> The present volume represents the welcome expansion of the forum in its inclusion for the first time of researchers from Germany and Australia, and the 2007 LESLLA colloquium additionally included talks on LESLLA issues in Bangladesh and South Africa.

The LESLLA forum has operated from its inception in a firmly bi-directional manner. In one direction, participants share relevant research with practitioners and policy makers. When moving from theory to practice and policy, the LESLLA proceedings provide a window on the motivation behind the forum: where there are common challenges faced by those who work with low-and uneducated adults, there is much to be gained by discussing the approaches taken in different contexts. Resettlement of those who comprise a good portion of the LESLLA population – refugees – begins at a supra-national level, but is then subject to national policies, a comparison of which offers fresh insights. In the reverse direction, LESLLA participants convey to the wider second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics community research findings on a population relatively understudied and as a consequence, poorly understood (see e.g. Tarone et al. 2007). In the present proceedings, researchers contribute to current mainstream SLA/applied linguistics by addressing factors such as working memory, treating phenomena such as deixis in written discourse, referring to issues such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages level progression, and applying research tools such as Conversational Analysis. One sign of a promising research agenda is debate. Do adult first-time L2 readers learn to read fluently? Do they reach near-native linguistic competence in their L2? Kurvers and van de Craats describe in one of their chapters the difficulty of locating successful LESLLA adults, and they conclude that mastery of reading and attainment of high levels of oral proficiency may be extremely rare. Similarly Juffs and Rodríguez propose in their chapter, as did Tarone et al. (2007), that literacy confers a marked advantage in processing L2 input. If it is correct that adult L2 learners cannot reach high levels of spoken language without literacy, this means that the many adults in non-literate societies worldwide who presumably acquire new

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<sup>1</sup>Martha Bigelow, Larry Condelli, Nancy Faux, Tina Fry, Kit Hansen, Randal Holme, Joy Kreeft Peyton, Thorsten Piske and Robin Schwartz generously shared their expertise as chapter reviewers.

languages attain only low levels of proficiency. However, we can only assume this is the case, given the current dearth of empirical studies of non-literate adult learners in the developing world.

In the four years since its inception, the LESLLA forum has begun to add to that small body of research, and it is worth noting how well the contributions made by the 12 chapters in this volume address the list of recommendations made at the close of the 2006 forum in Richmond, Virginia. Compiled by forum participants, these recommendations (paraphrased here; see Faux, 2007: 243-244) begin with a call for research using a range of methodologies/designs (ethnographic, longitudinal, cross-sectional, case studies), from a variety of perspectives (e.g. linguistic, anthropologic, social, educational, neurological) to be carried out by researchers, practitioners and students on

- ✓ Culture specific oracies or literacies among the target population and on the process of L2 acquisition by low and non-literate adults in their own cultures;
- ✓ The role individual cognitive and/or socio-cultural differences in disparities in success rates in learning to read;
- ✓ The processing of print and approaches to text by low and non-literate adults;
- ✓ The oral competence level in the L2 required to support L2 decoding/phonemic awareness;
- ✓ The threshold of native language literacy required for L2 skills transfer;
- ✓ The processing of oral input by low and non-literate adults;
- ✓ The role of specific approaches and instructional strategies.

LESLLA participants noted that whenever feasible, research should be translated into implications for the training and professional development of practitioners, and that relevant research findings should be shared with national and international agencies. All those who are involved in LESLLA, whether through attending a forum, reading the proceedings or visiting the website, are aware that primary schooling is still unavailable to a distressingly high number of humans on this planet. When circumstances – natural or manmade – render regions of the world unfit for basic survival, inhabitants of those regions where basic education is one of many casualties will continue to migrate to safer havens. History will be the judge of whether the current economic crisis weakens the literacy initiatives launched to improve low and uneducated individuals' lives when coffers were brimming.

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