

## **A YEARLY TRADITION: RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND POLICY ON LOW-EDUCATED SECOND LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LEARNERS**

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In 2005, August 25-27, a small international group of researchers and practitioners from different disciplines met at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. Their common point of interest was the language learner with a low level of education and literacy: LESLLA (Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition). At that moment, a new acronym and a new network were born. The symposium in Tilburg was followed by one in Richmond, Virginia, in 2006, and in Newcastle, in 2007. In 2008, the Karel de Grote-Hogeschool (Charlemagne University College) in Antwerp hosted the fourth LESLLA conference, which was sponsored by the Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union), an advisory board with regard to the Dutch language for the governments of Dutch speaking countries. The organising committee was formed by a team from the Karel de Grote-Hogeschool in Belgium, and the Universities of Tilburg and Nijmegen in the Netherlands, reflecting the excellent collaboration between the two Dutch speaking countries.

In those four years the acronym of LESLLA has become the label for a specific type of language learners: those that have a low level of education (at most ten years of education in the country of origin, only primary school or less, or no schooling at all) and often also a low level of literacy. Therefore, authors of several articles in these proceedings write about LESLLA learners, a LESLLA classroom, or even a LESLLA corpus, because they want to emphasize that LESLLA learners behave differently from the group of highly educated language learners, which has been studied much more frequently. In general, their language learning process takes more time and they have less experience with language learning strategies and metalinguistic tasks. Within the group of LESLLA learners, various denominators are used for the lowest group: *non-literate* or *illiterate*. Although LESLLA researchers prefer the term *non-literate* for adults who never went to school and cannot read and write, neither in his/her first language, the standard language of the country of origin or the second language, many others do not distinguish between these terms. The reader should take into account that both terms are used for the same type of learners (without providing any details about the state of literacy of their first language or the about their success at school). The term *low-literate* is used for an adult who has attended school, but has a reading level below the average primary school level. The *functionally illiterate* (or *non-literate*) is an individual that knows how to read and write but is not able to fully understand and use what he or she has read.

This fourth edition of the proceedings shows that LESLLA has a future: not only is the number of people and countries participating in the conference increasing, the number of contributions to the proceedings is also higher and the volume thicker.

Moreover, the similarity of problems as shown, for instance, in the domain of policy, makes clear – more than ever before – how important an exchange of information in terms of solutions to existing problems can be for LESLLA learners all over the world. A shared problem is, for instance, the low status attributed to these learners and their needs. In England, this reflected by ‘the issue of naming the courses, whereas the issue of funding, provision and pedagogy seems more urgent,’ in the US by the ‘one size fits all’ approach, as claimed by *Spruck Wrigley*. The US system of adult education assumes that all foreign adult learners, regardless of degree of proficiency or prior education need more or less the same general life skills. The same holds for literacy: English literacy is the only literacy that counts and the system does not take into account the learners who cannot read and write in any language. *Sunderland & Moon* put it in these words: ‘English educational policies disadvantage LESLLA learners. [...] LESLLA is gathering evidence of policies and provisions in different countries and publishing this on its website. We would like to propose a campaign [for England (eds.)] that promotes positive policies that support LESLLA learners.’ They suggest this campaign to become an international one.

The present volume provides an overview of the majority of the papers presented in Antwerp divided over the three areas that have been highlighted from the very beginning of LESLLA: research, practice and policy, since the goal of LESLLA is to share empirical research findings and information on practice to guide further research on second language and literacy acquisition of the adult immigrant population worldwide. This research in turn will provide, we hope, guidance to the development of best practices and education policy in all those countries in which immigrants not only want to ‘survive’ but also ‘thrive’, as stated by one of the keynote speakers, *Heide Spruck Wrigley*.

Within the three domains, research, practice and policy, the focus of the symposium was on the following themes:

- Bringing the outside world into the classroom or taking the class to the outside world?
- What (literacy) skills are minimally required for entering the job market and how many hours does it take to acquire those skills?
- Assessing the non-literate and low-literate adult learner.
- Language technology in the literacy class.

A certain overlap in the delineation of the three domains cannot be avoided, because they are often in continuous interaction: practice and policy are input for new research and research is applied in policy and practice. Good examples are the contribution by *Jeroen Backs*, who explains a new (research-based) policy in Flanders, which has been applied in two pedagogical projects reported in the contributions by *Els Maton* for the vocational field and by *Ellen Colpaert & Lien Strobbe* for family literacy.

In the domain of *Research* there are five papers: three of them focus on literacy (*Onderdelinden, van de Craats & Kurvers*) and literacy teaching (*Condelli & Crone; Macdonald*), one on teaching the oral skills to non-literates (*Strube*), and one paper explores what language technology can contribute to literacy education (*Strik*).

*Condelli & Crone* present the design of a forthcoming study in the USA, ‘the first ever to evaluate the impact of an instructional approach on LESLLA learners using a random assignment.’ This study will evaluate the effectiveness of a structured language approach to reading instruction (i.e., *Sam and Pat*) on improving reading and speaking

skills of ESL students with little or no literacy in their native language. Direct instruction in phonics, fluency and reading comprehension, as well as cooperative learning and real world tasks are integrated in the new literacy textbook. *Macdonald's* paper is also focused on the role of phonics in teaching English to learners with little or no schooling, this time in the United Kingdom. *Strube's* study, however, relates to LESLLA learners, but is restricted to the teaching of oral skills only. She regularly attended lessons of six literacy classes for one year and studied the patterns of interaction between teachers with students. The paper by *Onderdelinden, van de Craats & Kurvers* is a replication with non-literate adult second language learners of a study that Karmiloff-Smith (1990) and Kurvers and Uri (2006) did with non-literate and literate children. The findings differ from those of both earlier studies and continue the discussion. The contribution by *Strik* makes clear what computer-assisted language learning (CALL) applications can do: the application system reads utterances and students listen and respond. However, automatic speech recognition (ASR) can also recognize the learner's speech and provide feedback to what has been read by the learners. This application can be particularly useful for literacy learners who are trained in phonics or who are in the process of automatizing the reading process.

The domain of *Practice*, is covered by seven papers in this collection: two studies are concerned with the theme of assessment of the non-literate learner (*Vermeersch, Drijckoningen, Vienne, and Vandenbroucke*; and *Dalderop, Janssen-Van Dielen & Stockmann*), three contributions, all three from Flanders, are related to the theme of bringing the outside world into the classroom (*Colpaert & Strobbe; Van Canteren & Vlemingckx*; and *Maton*), and are examples of how the adult literacy classroom has been moved to the school of their children or to the workplace of a cleaning agency. The two remaining papers focus on the teacher herself: what principles should be involved in a crash course for literacy teachers in Minnesota (*Liden & Vinogradov*) and how to write literature for LESLLA learners (*Young-Scholten & Maguire*).

In order to compare the number of non-literates and low-literates in the various countries and to assess how many hours of instruction these learners will need to considered literate adults there must be a consensus on what exactly is 'literate', or to put it differently: what is the cut-off point between literate, low-literate and non-literate, since there clearly is a continuum between the three. *Vermeersch et al.* explore the pros and cons of a standardized instrument to screen literacy learners, be it L1 or L2 learners. *Dalderop et al.* take a more micro-level view when they report on the development of a consistent assessment system. They depart from the view that autonomous learners (to be) feel the need to know whether they progress. The authors present a consistent structure of views on teaching, portfolio methodology and testing instruments fitting in with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). This way of testing fits in well with the teaching of functional language and a content-based approach, whether it is the language of parents or that of the professional cleaner at home or at a cleaning service company. *Maton* explains the principles of such approach applied to non-literate L2 learners.

In the domain of *Policy*, there are three contributions in which the educational policy with regard to low-educated immigrants is explained for three different countries. In his contribution, *Backs*, as a representative of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Labour, explains the ministerial policy that has stimulated the formulation of end terms and the structuring of the curriculum, consisting of different modules, with which slow learners and fully illiterates don't seem to fit in very well. New insights into teaching

and learning a second language are applied in pilot projects such as those reported by *Maton, Colpaert & Strobbe*, and *Van Caunteren & Vlemingckx*. The second paper is by *Sunderland & Moon* who critically review the governmental policy in the United Kingdom, where a core curriculum has been determined. In *Spruck Wrigley's* paper, the policy discussions in the United States are summarized. She advocates a more flexible plan for meeting the needs of both native speakers with literacy needs and non-natives with a low level of literacy in their native language and with limited proficiency in English. Both language education and work force training is necessary for an extremely diverse group, which makes more tailor-made courses necessary in order to guide those groups toward success more quickly and more effectively.

Besides the papers directly related to research, practice and policy regarding the low-literate learner, there was a panel on *African Literacies*, as this theme provides an interesting and important insight into the background of many LESLLA learners: in most African countries it is quite normal to learn how to read and write, not in the mother tongue but in a second language that may be the official language of the country. The four papers presented in the panel by *Beckman & Kurvers* (on Namibia), *Asfaba* (on Eritrea), *Barasa & Mous* (on Keniya), and *Juffermans* (on Gambia) are introduced with some general information about the linguistic and literacy landscape in African countries.

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