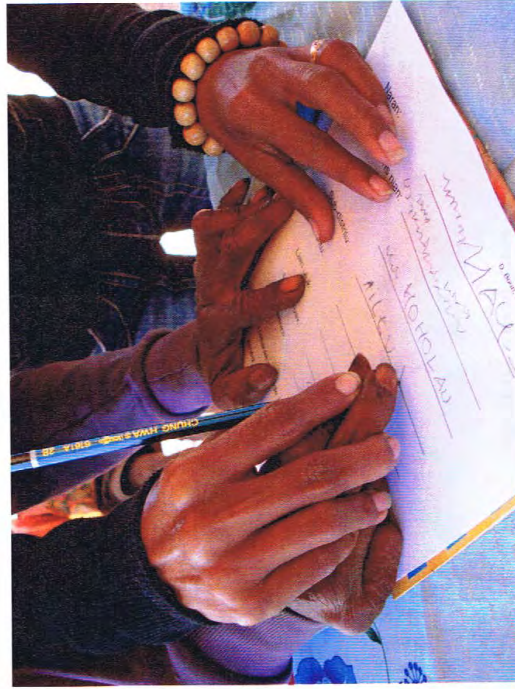


## THE MOVING LESLLA LANDSCAPE

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At the first forum organized in 2005 at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, Martha Young-Scholten coined the term LESLLA – an acronym for Low-Educated (Adult) Second Language and Literacy Acquisition. The meeting was motivated by the fact that nearly all theory building on the acquisition and teaching of literacy thus far had been dominated by research on acquiring the Roman alphabet in monolingual Western societies in the context of formal education, while this only partially covered the contexts in which people become readers and writers (Wagner, 1999; 2004). In many countries, literacy is acquired in a second language and outside compulsory education, for instance in adult literacy and second language learning centers. We had also observed that the studies on adult literacy available up to then were focused on adults who had not managed to learn to read and write properly in elementary school rather than on adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives. Besides this, we noticed that studies on second language acquisition of adults featured predominantly highly educated second language learners (Van de Craats, Kurvers & Young-Scholten, 2006). The L-shaped globe-logo, designed at the American Institutes of Research (L for language, langue, lengua, literacy, lettré, low, laag, lesen, lezen, lire, lectura, learning, leren, lernen) also visualized the sense of urgency we experienced in those days.

By now, the word LESLLA has been firmly established itself and has entered into common use, as a quick Google search (more than 5000 hits) demonstrates. It occurs in combinations like LESLLA learners, LESLLA researchers, LESLLA classrooms, LESLLA education, and in this volume there is one paper reporting on a LESLLA corpus. Not only do we find LESLLA occurring more and more frequently in word combinations like the ones just mentioned, the annual symposiums are also drawing increasing numbers of participants. Six conferences on second language learners with a low level of literacy bear witness to the fact that more and more researchers, practitioners and policy makers are willing to focus on the developmental process and the characteristics of the adult L2 literacy learner or the novice L2 reader. One of the effects of the six conferences so far has been that an effective network of researchers, teachers and practitioners has been formed who can and will collaborate in multi-national projects, such as the EU-Speak program (<http://www.eu-speak.org>). Six volumes with papers on research, practice and policy have contributed to making the under-investigated subject of the adult L2 first time reader less under-researched. The on-line proceedings, the LESLLA website and a mailing list promote discussions and have considerably



Helping an old man to write, Aileu, Timor-Leste, August 2010 (Photo: Danielle Boon)

expanded and improved the available knowledge on the issue of low-educated and low-literate L2 learners.

At the LESLLA conference in Cologne in 2010, we welcomed researchers, teachers and practitioners from Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Iran, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the USA. The second languages involved ranged from English, German, Dutch and Spanish to Finnish and Tsetum (spoken in East Timor/Timor-Leste). The first languages of the novice L2 readers were too many to mention here. In short, LESLLA has proved its right to exist.

But the LESLLA landscape is still moving and new developments in research, changes in educational practices, and transformations in adult literacy and migration policies in several countries have not diminished the urgency of paying attention to LESLLA. Quite the contrary is in fact the case.

Although several authors proclaimed the end of the written word and the literate world after the introduction of the first mass-media (radio, telephone, television) in the sixties of last century (Postman, 1985) and even more so after the introduction of the new social media (the Internet, mobile phones), literacy is more at the heart of everyday life than ever before. Rather than diminishing it, the new media actually increased the use of the written language (in print or in digital form). Literacy is also at the heart of many social concerns: not too long ago labor workers, farmers, house cleaners, nurses or housewives could simply utilize their physical and social competencies to do their daily work and leave the paper work to others. The modern information society requires everyone to be able to access written information. As Resnick & Resnick (1977) already noticed, the 'literacy crisis', as it was called, was not caused by a decrease in citizens' reading and writing abilities, but by an increase in the requirements of modern societies. This is even more true nowadays.

Research on literacy, traditionally the domain of psychologists and educationalists, became a joint enterprise of several disciplines such as psychology, educational science, linguistics, anthropology, history, sociology, neurolinguistics and economics. Recent interdisciplinary research on literacy revealed that there is more to it than just acquiring the cognitive skills of reading and writing, that its relationship with listening and speaking is rather complex (Olson, 1994), that learning to read implies transformation of implicit linguistic knowledge to explicit awareness of features of language (Morais & Kolinsky, 1995; Kurvers, 2002) and that (L2) literacy has to be investigated in the broader context of specific social and cultural practices (Street, 1995; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000).

Research and experiences in educational practices has shown that in order for learners to become competent users of written (second) language, the teaching will not only have to be evidence-based and sound, but will also have to be carried out by teachers who are aware of the specific cultural experiences of the learners. Particularly for adults, it became increasingly clear that instruction and practices need to be embedded in the needs and daily social realities experienced by the learners in the class in order for instruction to be truly successful (Condelli & Spruck Wrigley, 2006; Sticht, 2009). When it comes to LESLLA learners, as Heide Spruck Wrigley kept emphasizing at previous conferences, the notion of 'one-size-fits-all' does not hold water: teachers need cultural sensitivity and learners need tailor-made programs. The proceedings of previous LESLLA conferences already demonstrated how important it is to focus on

variations in learners' needs and social practices on the one hand, and on the basic principles of literacy acquisition on the other, without allowing any focus to claim 'the monopoly on significance' (Olson & Torrance, 2009: xiii).

Recent developments not only show changes in research and instructional and educational practices, but in many countries also in adult literacy policies and in migration and citizenship policies.

In many Western countries, immigration legislation and practice has become harsher. This is the case not so much for knowledge workers, but unfortunately for pre-literate and low-educated migrants in particular, who want to earn a living in an economically more advanced environment. Much of this more restrictive legislation is bound to proving language skills and educational standards. In the Netherlands and in Germany, for example, migrants already have to pass exams on basic oral and written Dutch and on basic knowledge of Dutch society to get an entry permit. And they have to pass a second exam on the same subjects in order to qualify for permanent residency and citizenship. Denmark and the United Kingdom consider taking similar measures or have already done so.

In many countries, adult literacy education policies and second language education policies have become much more focused on accountability, on standards and benchmarks. In Germany, for example, in the more transparent permit-system accountability and benchmarks have become more important. In the Netherlands, the previous immigration law required 'obligation of best intents' to participate in second language programs funded by the government, while the new 2007 law requires passing an exam at the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), with most programs no longer being funded by the government.

*The present volume*

The present volume contains the proceedings of the sixth symposium on Low-Educated (Adult) Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA). It is a selection of papers presented at the annual symposium held in August 2010 in Germany and hosted by the English seminar of the University of Cologne, Germany.

Traditionally, we distinguish three domains - research, practice and policy - which often cannot be disentangled. Practice is input for research and research is applied in policies and practice, as, is demonstrated for instance in the contributions by *Eshwige Crevecoeur Bryant* and *Karen Schramm* and *Diana Feick*, who analyzed video recordings of learner interactions in the classroom and used them for teacher training for L2 literacy programs (domain of *Pratice*).

In the domain of *Research*, there are five contributions covering very different topics. The first paper, by *Danielle Boon*, reports on a project in Timor-Leste where new (adult) readers learn to read and write in Tsetum, the local lingua franca, which for most learners is a second language. Boon presents the results after four months of literacy instruction and confirms previous findings about the influence of learner characteristics such as age and mother tongue.

*Edridge Crevecoeur Bryant* investigates what instructional practices were used in the AELL (= adult English literacy learner) class. She focuses on four research-based instructional practices and tools used by instructors of literacy learners.

*Ineke van de Craats* collected data for a longitudinal study of 15 women. With various levels of schooling and literacy, they form a typical group of LESLLA learners. As a result, the data collection has been named the LESLLA corpus and Van de Craats invites other researchers to contribute and extend this corpus. One of the results that came out of this research is the advantage of being familiar with the script, even at a stage where reading has become automated and the focus is more on L2 acquisition.

In their contribution, *Jeanne Kurvers* and *Elieke Ketelaars* focus on the earliest stages of writing. They compare the strategies used by L1 children at different stages to those used by adult L2 learners. Although the adults seem to display characteristics of several stages at the same time, which is probably caused by the three-fold challenge the students are facing in first time writing in a second language, the spelling strategies also reveal how crucial it is to grasp the alphabetical principle.

Finally, *Taina Tamminen-Laine* introduces us to the Finnish context in which non-literate immigrants have to learn the language and the script. Being non-literate is an almost unknown phenomenon in this highly literate country where the church has required reading skills since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Not being able to read implied that one could not get married. Tamminen-Laine explains the set-up of her longitudinal case study of five non-literate immigrant learners.

The two other papers in the domain of *Practise* are about literacy instruction in Germany (*Christiane Schöneberger*) and about a creative way of providing beginning literacy students with short and simple stories – real books (*Margaret Wilkinson* and *Martha Young-Scholten*). Schöneberger provides facts and figures about literacy skills and goes deeper into the diversity of literacy students by presenting nine learner profiles. She presents a new assessment tool that contains teaching suggestions for classroom practices. Wilkinson and Young-Scholten report on a shared project with university students who were engaged in the task of writing fiction for beginning L2 readers. They were asked to write short stories that are linguistically accessible and have incorporated elements of ‘cracking’ good fiction aimed at adult LESLLA learners. Two of these stories are included in this volume.

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