# LOW-EDUCATED SECOND LANGUAGE AND LITERACY ACQUISITION: TEN YEARS ON

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In August 2014, the tenth anniversary of the LESLLA conference was celebrated at Radboud University Nijmegen. The inaugural workshop in 2005 at Tilburg University did not yet have the LESLLA acronym. This label was established during the second conference in Richmond. It became not only the name and the symbol of a network of researchers, practitioners and policy makers who together succeeded in prolonging this initiative yearly, including the yearly publication of a volume of conference papers, but also provided us with the terms *LESLLA learner*, *LESLLA classroom* and *LESLLA teacher*, particularly in English speaking countries.

The main aims of the LESLLA conferences were to bring the largely ignored group of low-educated second language and literacy learners to the attention of mainstream second language research, to cross boundaries between the different scientific disciplines involved in investigating the LESLLA field and to stimulate and enforce cooperation among researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Although the target group of adult L2 learners with limited or no literacy skills is still an under-researched area, there is a growing interest in this group, as proved by the number of publications in journals, the number of studies and research projects at universities, and the number of participants in the LESLLA conferences and chapters in the yearly volumes of conference papers.

This tenth volume covers a wide range of acquisition contexts and issues from interdisciplinary angles: second language and literacy acquisition by adults and younger migrants, the role of L1 phonology and orthography, family literacy, vocational training of low-literates, teacher competences, teaching experiments, reading pedagogy for adult learners and learner autonomy. Two central issues are highlighted. The first is the intertwining of literacy and cognition and the implications for L2 learning and teaching with regard to unschooled adults. The second central issue highlights the importance of language technology and digital courseware for reading and/or second language instruction, particularly for our target group of alphabetic literacy learners who approach the language learning task in other ways than literate learners (see the opening chapter).

Sharing and exchanging knowledge and establishing cooperation among researchers, practitioners and policy makers is triggered and embedded by the yearly LESLLA conference. The number and contents of the articles in this tenth

volume illustrate the growing interest in LESLLA learners on a world-wide level through the increasing variety of languages and countries: Austria, Belgium, Chile, Eritrea, Germany, Finland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and the United States. Cooperation between researchers and practitioners is becoming stronger and more intensive (see, e.g., the chapter on MALP by Cole and Elson). Theory and practice go hand in hand in the chapter about portfolio methodology (see Feldmeier) and its application in the classroom (see Nuwenhoud). In a similar way, research and practice are intermingled in the DigLin project in which new technology is applied for literacy instruction (see Cucchiarini et al.) and last but not least, the EU-Speak 1 and 2 projects are the results of cooperation between members of the LESLLA network.

So, while several chapters in the *Research* section focus on improving teaching and learning practices, several chapters in the *Practice* section are clearly linked to research. The cooperative character of several chapters made it sometimes hard to assign them to the domains of research or practice. Yet, we have used this classification because it became a tradition in previous LESLLA volumes. The same classification problems apply to the section on Computer-Aided Language Learning (CALL) and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), a promising new branch in L2 literacy instruction. The final section contains the chapters on policy.

**Research**

The volume opens with *Footprints for the future: Cognition, literacy and second language learning by adults* by Kurvers, Van de Craats and Van Hout. Their research review travels from the swinging sixties of the 20th century to the latest neurocognitive studies on the impact of literacy on information and language processing and relates the outcomes of experimental studies to what studies and observations in LESLLA classes revealed about learning L2 literacy and about more or less effective ways of teaching.

In the *Research section*, the literacy and cognition debate is extended by Huettig's account of studies that clearly show an impact of literacy on phonological processing, on predicting speech and even on visual search strategies.

The other research-based articles cover a broad diversity of topics on learning, teaching, literacy materials and attitudes on learning and teaching. Bigelow and King investigated the interaction of asymmetrical paired peers who read a book together. They problematize the effectiveness of asymmetrical pairing of peers.

Maffia and De Meo investigated the impact of two different models of schooling in Senegal on the acquisition of prosody in Italian. The Koranic-

schooled students performed better in reproducing intonation and rhythm, while the French-schooled students outperformed the other group in textual accuracy.

Both Feldmeier and Strube focus on teaching competences in stimulating learner autonomy and scaffolding. Feldmeier sketches the blueprint of a portfolio-based teaching model that aims at dealing with heterogeneity and promoting learner autonomy. He illustrates this blueprint with workplace-oriented literacy exercises. Strube investigated different ways of scaffolding in adult L2 literacy classes. The study revealed how effective and less effective scaffolding in the LESLLA classroom can influence the learning processes. Two other articles in this section investigated attitudes.

Drijkoningen interviewed parents on their opinions about participating in second language classes provided at their children's primary school, which integrated primary school related topics in L2 lessons. Most parents are positive about this approach in contextualizing L2 teaching.

Young-Scholten et al. interrogated LESLLA teachers in several countries on their views on the most important teacher competences. The results show that practitioners focus more on the skills they need to teach effectively than on research and knowledge that could support these skills.

Farias and Cabezas critically analyzed a sample of textbooks used in adult EFL-classes in Chile and conclude that several texts were decontextualized, biased and irrelevant for the intended audience of adult working class students.

**Practice**

Asfaha recounts the process of developing English teaching materials for adult post-literacy programmes in Eritrea and details the compromises they had to find to change the traditional and familiar grammar-based methods to a more use-oriented communicative approach.

Cole and Elson trace the successes and challenges of implementing the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm in four LESLLA classes; their study revealed the usefulness of this paradigm in stimulating self-confidence and learner autonomy.

Nuwenhoud presents a detailed account of her experiences with the set-up and use of a role-based and tailor-made portfolio for a group of non-schooled migrant women in the Netherlands. The article shows the multiple functions of the portfolio as a learning aid, a teacher guide, an instrument of empowerment and a mnemonic device for the learners.

Vinogradov presents what LESLLA teachers learned from experts working with dyslexic children and shows that LESLLA learners might benefit from the

multisensory ("eyes, ears and fingers"), systematic, and direct approach to reading used with dyslexic children.

**CALL and TELL**

The section on *CALL (computer-aided language learning)* or *TELL* (technology-enhanced language learning) opens with Cucchiarini et al.'s report of the Digital Literacy Instructor (DigLin) project that aimed at developing and testing the use of Automatic Speech Recognition technology for the acquisition of literacy in four different languages.. The article presents a detailed account of the development of software and exercises in Finnish, German, Dutch and English and the attempts to optimize feedback from the Automatic Speech Recognizer.

Kennedy describes the challenges LESLLA learners encounter in gaining access to Internet-based information, and recounts how the U.S. Center for Applied Linguistics tried to mitigate those challenges and to promote digital inclusion of this group in the area of consumer protection and financial literacy.

Olshtain et al. present the implementation and evaluation of a computer-based program for second-language instruction targeting adult low-literate immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel.

Vaske's contribution shows how important digital skills are in preventing low-educated adults from becoming marginalised, and outlines two broadly used exercise portals in the Netherlands that were developed for low-educated adults.

In a similar way Sokolowsky presents a learning portal developed for low-literates in Germany that can be used in heterogeneous classes, but also independently, that combines oral and written skills and can be adapted to the individual needs of the learners.

**Policy**

The last section in this volume is devoted to *Policy*. Simpson and Whiteside review the increasingly restrictive and gate-keeping language ideologies and testing regimes behind integration and immigration policies in several western countries and discuss the challenges and implications for teaching and learning practices in adult second language education.

Schuurmans and Van Zundert emphasize the importance of partnership-based learning for the large group of LESLLA learners in Antwerp, Belgium. They show how vocational training programmes for integrated pathways were developed in partnerships between two adult education providers (basic education and second language institutes) and the City of Antwerp.

**Conclusion**

The chapters in the present volume show that the aims of the tenth LESLLA conference phrased in the first lines of this foreword were largely met. The contributions also testify the relentless necessity to continue what was started ten years ago. In many countries this field of research and teaching suffers grossly from increasingly restrictive immigration policies and from serious cuts in funding (see Simpson and Whiteside), whereas the number of LESSLA learners and the problems they have to face keep increasing, given the language competences and literacy demands of modern society. Our ultimate target – provisions for LESLLA learners of the same research-based quality as for literate L2 learners – however, still deserves our joint attention

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