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Exploring The Hidden Challenges for LESLLA Learners in Language Learning Materials

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Abstract

It has been our experience as teacher educators and researchers that teachers new to LESLLA learners often have difficulty identifying the myriad challenges that most learning materials pose for this population (Triulzi et al., under review). We consider how Western-style formal education and knowledge, originating in Western Europe but now found globally, permeate textbooks and other language learning materials and may potentially undermine successful learning on the part of Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) learners. We describe three common obstacles for LESLLA learners in conventional language learning materials: (1) literacy as starting point for learning; (2) lack of immediate relevance to learners' lives, experiences, and knowledges; (3) extensive use of decontextualized tasks and school ways of thinking. Our goal is to help all stakeholders—teachers, teacher trainers, administrators—develop an awareness of these largely invisible obstacles in pedagogical practices. To this end we have developed a checklist, which we present here, to use in the evaluation of language textbooks and learning materials.

Keywords: LESLLA learners, adult L2 learners with emergent literacy, decontextualized learning tasks, relevance

Introduction

Extensive research has been conducted on second language acquisition, motivation, pedagogy, and language learning; however, most of this research has been done on literate learners in the developed world. This group represents a relatively small portion of the world's population and not the diversity of people and their experiences (Andringa & Godfroid, 2020). A key question in evaluating language learning materials is how much of this research applies to Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) learners and how much of its material writers can draw upon in creating language learning materials. This question goes well beyond the scope of this article. However, drawing on our earlier work, we can address it in part by examining what roles literacy, school ways of thinking, and prior learning experience play in shaping how LESLLA learners approach learning and how these differ from how material writers and teachers steeped in the perspective of Western-style education, approach learning.

According to the LESLLA organization (leslla.org), LESLLA learners are learning to read and write, often for the first time, in their new language. We suggest that this definition be expanded to include those who have some literacy skills. LESLLA learners, like all learners, are not a homogenous group. Their prior literacy and formal educational experiences should be viewed as ranging along a continuum from those with no literacy in any language and no prior formal education to those who have some basic literacy, although it may be in a writing system different from the Latin alphabet. Moreover, LESLLA learners can also be characterized by an overall unfamiliarity with the educational practices of Western-style formal education, a type of education originating in (Western) Europe and now found globally (Baker et al., 2005; Cole, 2005; Kim, 2019; Mino & Heto, 2020; Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). Going forward, we will be referring to Western-style formal education simply as 'formal education,' although we recognize that there are other types of formal education (Reagan, 2018).

Textbooks and other instructional materials feature prominently in curricula and pedagogy and are fundamental tools of formal education (Fuchs et al., 2014). These learning materials are generally produced by commercial publishing companies interested in producing for as large a market as possible. Although precise numbers are unavailable, it appears that overall LESLLA learners represent a small fraction of adult language learners in their host countries.

Furthermore, content for language learners is likely to have been developed by materials writers unfamiliar with the LESLLA population. Materials writers must also at times adhere to curriculum requirements mandated by policy makers who frequently do not understand the needs of LESLLA learners.

Teachers of LESLLA learners do not always have a say in which textbooks and support materials to use. Conventional language learning textbooks and materials are generally unsuitable for LESLLA learners because they have not been specifically created for this population (Triulzi et al., under review). In some countries, basic literacy courses for LESLLA learners may be offered with specially designed materials for this population. In Germany, for instance, pre- or non-literate migrant learners have the option of enrolling in a 1000-unit basic literacy course. Yet, even in instances when such courses are offered, LESLLA learners may find themselves enrolled in beginner level language courses together with other language learners who are not emergent literacy learners and where conventional language learning materials are being used (Harris, 2022).

When teachers do have a say, they may struggle to find learning materials suitable for their LESLLA learners. At times, teachers may find themselves resorting to materials designed to teach basic literacy skills to children, which are generally neither age nor culturally appropriate. In all

cases, teachers need to have the insights/tools to assess which learning materials will work with their learners, which will not, and why, and, when confronted with less-than-ideal learning materials, know how to best adapt them.

Three Common Obstacles for LESLLA Learners

We begin by describing three common obstacles for LESLLA learners in conventional language learning materials: (1) literacy as starting point; (2) lack of immediate relevance to learners' lives, experiences, and knowledges; (3) extensive use of decontextualized tasks and school ways of thinking, i.e. the types of learning activities and ways of thinking used to build and demonstrate mastery in classrooms. We then explore a framework to help teachers evaluate textbooks and learning materials for their appropriateness for the LESLLA population and present a Checklist as a guide in doing so.

Literacy as a Starting Point

LESLLA learners, by definition, are different from other language learners in that they are adult emergent literacy learners who must develop initial (or greatly improve) literacy skills in a language not their own. In the world of LESLLA learners, literacy has not been essential in their lives. Yet, in their new host countries, literacy is essential to function well in society (van de Craats et al., 2006). And in education, literacy plays a central role. Information, knowledge, and expertise are exchanged, promoted, and demonstrated via the written word while oral skills are relegated to a secondary or support role, even in second language instruction.

Language curricula, textbooks, supplementary materials, assessments, and learning standards (objectives) are literacy-based. Language pedagogy, even when oral skills are emphasized, is predicated on literacy and primarily based on theories of second language acquisition or beliefs about how languages are best learned and taught (Pettitt et al., 2021). This is a cultural bias since second language research has, like most social science research, been conducted primarily in Western developed countries and on educated, generally middle-class populations (Blum, 2017; Heinrich et al., 2010). Likewise, most language strategies and techniques developed for these populations presume learners have familiarity with at least basic literacy practices (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). Even when the focus is on speaking and listening, print is commonly used to introduce, support, and reinforce learning. The Common European Framework (CEFR) level descriptors and the U.S. WIDA English Language Development Standards regard reading and writing as fundamental abilities; the CEFR assumes literacy on the part of learners, even at the lowest level, A1, yet the LESLLA population includes emergent literacy learners who do not have age-appropriate literacy skills in any language (Janssen-van Dieten, 2006). In 2022, in recognition of this, the Council of Europe sponsored a project to prepare descriptors specific to LESLLA learners who are both emergent literacy learners and learners of a new language. The project has resulted in the LASLLIAM reference guide (Muniz, et al., 2022). Nevertheless, current language pedagogy largely remains rooted in research on and assumptions from the learning paradigm of formal education (DeCapua & Marshall, 2022).

Learning materials not specifically created for LESLLA learners assume familiarity with print and print conventions and do not teach or review basic literacy *per se*. The expectation is that learners have at a minimum functional literacy in their preferred language, i.e., the ability to engage in tasks that require literacy for effective functioning in one's sociocultural context (UNESCO

Institute for Statistics, 2021). For example, conventional language textbooks and learning materials expect that adult learners will know how textbooks are organized, with a title page and table of contents, numbered units, and numbered and lettered lesson sections. Commonly used graphic symbols are regarded as universal, such as a drawing of a pencil to represent a writing activity or the drawing of an ear to indicate a listening activity. For LESLLA learners, completely or almost completely new to literacy or those who have had some exposure to very different writing systems, these will not be familiar; hence confusing and even incomprehensible (Altherr Flores, 2017).

Similarly, many language learning activities depend on learners' metalinguistic awareness of linguistic and grammatical concepts such as syllable distinction, grapheme-phoneme correspondence, or the recognition of language as consisting of discrete structural units, (e.g., nouns, verbs, sentences). Since such metalinguistic awareness is strongly influenced by literacy, LESLLA learners struggle with learning activities that expect them to be able to engage in these unfamiliar ways of thinking about language (Goswami, 2018; Kolinsky & Morais, 2018; Minuz et al., 2022).

Lack of Immediate Relevance

LESLLA learners come from informal ways of learning, learning that takes place outside of the structure of formal education with its standardized curricula, literacy demands, and content based on a formalized canon of accepted knowledge. In the context of informal ways of learning, learning is concrete and pragmatic, concerned with immediate needs and focused on the here and now. Literacy is not essential nor necessary (Watson, 2019). Knowledge is shared orally (Thigpen, 2020) and learning follows the mentor model whereby observation, imitation, feedback (primarily via demonstration), more observation and imitation dominate (Maynard et al., 2015). Having primarily – if not exclusively – experienced learning in this context, the learning paradigm of LESLLA learners centers around immediate relevance to daily life, relationships among people, orality, and pragmatic tasks with direct, tangible results (DeCapua & Marshall, 2023; Minuz et al., 2022).

Formal education is removed from daily life and future-oriented, preparing learners for life after school or a training program. Formal education is literacy-based with fixed curricula and designed to impart knowledge separated into discrete disciplines and to develop school-based ways of thinking. Students practice and demonstrate mastery of knowledge through decontextualized tasks, and in large part, are expected to do so on an individual basis, especially on assessments. Decontextualized tasks, the *sine qua non* of classroom instruction, are tasks that are based on abstract, conceptual, and logical thinking and that are removed- disconnected- from everyday life and experiences. These types of tasks stand in contrast to contextualized tasks that rely on pragmatic, concrete, real world life and experiences (Romstad & Dehn, 2024; Flynn, 2007). For example, true /false questions are a common decontextualized classroom task. Yet, in the real world of life, one does not point to an object such as a flower and ask another person, “This is a tree, true or false?”

In formal education, conventional textbooks and learning materials, while they strive to incorporate relevancy to learners, do so from a top-down approach, i.e., material writers deciding what they think will be (or should be) relevant to learners and creating pre-determined unit and lesson topics. For conventional learners, this approach can – and often does – work satisfactorily, but for LESLLA learners it often does not. For them, relevance is tied to how content and

information relate to them personally (Minuz et al., 2022). Conventional learning materials present language in the context of imaginary characters, scenarios, situations, and so on assumed to be relevant to learners. For example, materials may present a family, their home, their daily lives, and activities to introduce vocabulary and sentence structures. While the topic may well resonate with LESLLA learners, textbook presentations not designed for LESLLA learners often do not. For example, the depicted home may appear well-appointed with various appliances and a family likely to be middle-class and nuclear, perhaps with a grandparent or two. This may differ considerably from the living and family situations of LESLLA learners. Likewise, LESLLA learners often question why they are reading and talking about people to whom and situations to which they have no personal connection (See, e.g., Triulzi et al., under review; DeCapua & Triulzi, 2021; van Nieuwenhuysse, 2014). Literacy, in addition to the capability to exchange meaning via print, also encompasses the ability to abstract from oneself and one's personal experiences to the imaginary and intangible world of print (Ardila et al., 2010).

Use of Decontextualized Tasks and School Ways of Thinking.

In the classroom, the extensive use of decontextualized tasks and associated school ways of thinking to promote and demonstrate mastery constitute a major challenge for LESLLA learners. Common decontextualized tasks include answering true/false questions, completing forms, filling in and interpreting tables, reading maps, and drawing and interpreting graphs, and graphic organizers. School ways of thinking are learned in formal education and often differ from other ways of conceptualizing the world and environment (See, e.g., Jukes et al., 2024; Minuz et al., 2022; Baiocchi et al., 2019). These school ways of thinking include labeling, sorting, categorizing, ordering, comparing and contrasting, predicting, and analyzing (Anderson et al., 2001). For example, when learners are asked to decide whether food items are vegetables, fruit, meat, or dairy, they are engaging in the school-way of thinking of categorization based on certain shared characteristics. These tasks and ways of thinking are also used extensively outside of school in contemporary society. In and outside of the classroom, they are challenging for LESLLA learners because they are not only largely unfamiliar types of tasks, but also because they require literacy and cognitive pathways that are different from the those that they have developed through their prior learning experiences outside of formal education.

For example, a language learning activity may show a table representing a week's worth of daily activities that the characters engage in on different days and at various times. Using the information on the table, learners are instructed to write or say (or both) sentences about who does what when and on which day. To engage in this activity, aside from linguistic and literacy issues, learners must first understand what a table is and then understand how this table is organized to interpret the given information, i.e., connect the day, the time, and the activity with a particular person. Since decontextualized tasks and school ways of thinking are introduced and practiced in the earliest years of primary school, the assumption is that adult learners already know what these are, and they do not need to be taught how to engage in such tasks. For LESLLA learners, however, these decontextualized tasks and school ways of thinking are new and do not reflect familiar learning processes. In many cases where teachers believe the problem is a linguistic one, it is very possible that the problem lies with learners' unfamiliarity with the tasks and associated ways of thinking. To support learning, these decontextualized tasks and school ways of thinking themselves must be explicitly taught to help LESLLA learners successfully engage in them (see Triulzi et al., under review; DeCapua & Marshall, 2023 for examples of how to do so).

Evaluating the Appropriateness of Learning Materials for LESLLA Learners

To support teachers in their evaluation of learning materials, we have developed the “Checklist for Learning Materials Evaluation for LESLLA / SLIFE learners” (see Appendix A.). This Checklist is intended as a tool to identify key issues in materials. We are teacher educators and trainers who have worked extensively with current and prospective teachers unfamiliar with and/or struggling in their teaching of LESLLA learners. The development of the Checklist emerged from a need in our work and from teacher feedback for a systematic analytical framework to assist in the evaluation of language learning materials. We created the Checklist based on a combination of theoretical underpinnings, our own experiences, and our research (Triulzi et al., under review). The conciseness of the Checklist makes it a time-efficient and manageable tool. Its use is not limited to teachers of LESLLA learners but can also be used by teachers of adolescent emergent literacy learners in secondary school settings, often referred to as SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education). To use the Checklist effectively, teachers should be familiar with LESLLA learners, their needs, and their prior learning experiences (for in-depth discussion, see DeCapua & Marshall, 2023; DeCapua & Triulzi, 2021; Marshall & DeCapua 2013).

During the design phase, we gathered the expertise of practitioners from teacher educators and teachers in Germany, Italy, and the United States. Based on feedback, we revised the Checklist to ensure its accuracy, clarity in meaning, and applicability in different pedagogical contexts, such as university courses in language pedagogy for future teachers or professional development workshops in sites providing language classes for refugees and migrants. We also translated the Checklist into German (Appendix B) and Italian (Appendix C). We chose these three languages because each of us is a native speaker of one of these languages and have access to educators to field test the Checklist.

Some essential questions to ask when using the Checklist include:

- How are LESLLA learners’ oral skills leveraged to help them develop literacy?
- Do learning activities allow LESLLA learners to leverage their (multilingual) oral skills consistently?
- Do the lessons and activities:
 - have immediate relevance to my learners and their lives from their perspective?
 - draw from learners’ prior experiences and “funds of knowledge”, i.e., their non-school skills, competencies, and cultural knowledge (González et al., 2005).
 - encourage learners to learn more about each other and become part of an interconnected community of learners?
 - offer opportunities for pair / group work?
- What is the decontextualized task learners are being asked to do?
 - What is/are the school way(s) of thinking demanded for this task?
 - How is the task scaffolded so that it is accessible to LESLLA learners?
 - Is the task using familiar language and content when learners are asked to engage in tasks and school ways of thinking new to them?

Working with the Checklist

The Checklist is primarily designed to raise awareness in teacher training courses about the challenges for LESLLA learners (and SLIFE) that can be found in language learning materials. It can also be used in professional development workshops for in-service teachers. In addition, there is potential for in-service teachers to use the Checklist to evaluate the materials they use in their classroom.

Here we offer suggestions on integrating the Checklist into teacher training:

Provide Theoretical Grounding

Before engaging with the Checklist, users should have a strong understanding of the characteristics and goals of teaching materials, the principles of learner-centered lessons planning, and specific considerations related to literacy and LESLLA learners.

Complete the Checklist

Identify and discuss challenges. The statements within the Checklist are designed to highlight challenging aspects of the materials for LESLLA learners. Indicating "strongly applies" or "somewhat applies" about a statement suggests that the material may not be well suited to LESLLA learners. Different approaches can be used when working with the Checklist. Group activities, such as analyzing different materials or units within a material, can reveal systematic or unsystematic implementation of approaches suitable for LESLLA learners.

Central to the effectiveness of the Checklist is the facilitation of discussion. This involves identifying observations made through the Checklist, understanding challenges and recognizing considerations that may not have been apparent previously.

Acknowledge positive aspects. The Checklist includes an open-ended section for additional personal observations on positive aspects of the materials. Acknowledging the strengths of the materials is important for a comprehensive analysis.

Reflect on the Checklist. Since the Checklist is a dynamic tool rather than a finished product, users should reflect on their own experiences in using it. This reflective process contributes to ongoing discussion and development.

Address and overcome challenges. Following Checklist analysis and discussion, users can focus on managing identified issues, such as generating lesson planning ideas while using existing teaching materials to create tasks suitable for LESLLA learners. For example, textbooks frequently introduce vocabulary and grammar through dialogues, stories, and photos using imaginary characters and imagined contexts. This is not immediately relevant in the same way that using the members of the class and their personal to initially introduce the same information. To take another example, instead of a worksheet or page depicting feelings such as happy or sad, learners can produce posters or drawings or take photos of themselves expressing different emotions. As another example, certain tasks or activities may be meaningless to them, such as writing a grocery

list to practice food vocabulary. Learners instead could make lists or charts or find photos on the internet of such vocabulary and organized them according to different criteria, e.g., vegetable or dairy, breakfast or dinner food, and so on. For additional examples, we refer readers to DeCapua & Marshall 2023, , 2020, 2019). These materials offer extensive suggestions for adapting materials not specifically targeting LESLLA learners.

Strengths and weaknesses of the Checklist. Because the Checklist is based on the three common challenges presented here, it is a valuable tool in assisting teachers to identify these hidden challenges in learning materials. Yet, while the Checklist appears easy to understand, using it effectively requires careful thought and reflection to step outside one’s own paradigm of learning and teaching.

One suggestion is for teachers to evaluate continuously their teaching by asking themselves what is working with their learners and what is not, using the Checklist to guide these reflections. For instance, are learners unmotivated because the material is not immediately relevant to them from their perspective of how it connects to their own lives and experiences? Or is the activity that they are having trouble with demanding a school way of thinking with which they first need to become comfortable before they can engage in it? Has there been adequate modeling and practice of what learners are expected to do? These are only a few questions to consider when learning to use effectively the Checklist. In addition to such personal evaluation and reflection, it is invaluable to discuss the Checklist with other teachers of LESLLA.

Conclusion

In sum, we have outlined three major challenges present in language learning materials not specifically designed for the needs of LESLLA learners. In so doing, we have provided readers with the background to enable them to use the “Checklist for Evaluating Language Learning Materials for LESLLA Learners”. We expect that this article and the Checklist will prove useful to teacher trainers, as well as others (relatively) new to the world of teaching LESLLA learners.

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