



19th Annual Symposium | September 6-8, 2023

Providing an Online Space for Interaction and Co-reflection during International Modules for LESLLA Practitioners: How Research(ers) can Serve LESLLA Teachers

Eva Malessa

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

University of Turku, Finland

Martha Young-Scholten

Newcastle University, United Kingdom

University of Washington, USA

Abstract

Many LESLLA practitioners face challenges in participating in professional training and development courses. In this paper, we first discuss potential barriers they face in gaining access to relevant training and development. We then explore the benefits of remote professional training development by describing EU-Speak online modules (courses), which have been running since 2015 and have attracted the worldwide interest of teachers and tutors. EU-Speak modules provide an online space for interaction and co-reflection for LESLLA practitioners and are an alternative to in-person training and development. Based on practitioner-participants' feedback and comments, we consider whether these affordable and relatively short (six-week) online modules can provide a stimulating space for participants to engage with each other and benefit from training and development. Participants' comments show they can, along with emphasizing the need and necessity for training and development grounded in evidence-based research on adult late literacy development in a second language which the modules provide.

Keywords: online professional development, teacher training, adult basic education, LESLLA, adult L2 learners with emergent literacy

Teacher training and professional development for LESLLA practitioners

In most countries LESLLA practitioners lack access to official, national, LESLLA-specific teacher training and/or continued professional development (CPD) options focusing on adult second language basic literacy (see e.g., Naeb & Young-Scholten, 2019). As a result, their training and professional development needs are not met. In this paper we present online CPD¹ as one solution to provide an accessible space for practitioners' interaction and (co-)reflection. In some countries such as Italy (Love & Kotai, 2015), the UK (Cowie, 2021) and the USA (Vinogradov & Liden, 2009), educational support of LESLLA learners involves volunteer assistants and tutors (often one-on-one) who may lack qualifications in language teaching or may even completely lack teaching qualifications. They will typically not have access to training or CPD. The situation seems to be changing in some countries. For example, prior to taking up teaching activities, LESLLA practitioners in Germany are now required to obtain a second language/literacy teacher training certificate and a confirmation from the Federal Office of Teaching and Learning for the course providers of so-called integration courses (BMF, 2024). That said, Schroeder et al. (2022) suggest that greater consideration needs to be paid to the topic of LESLLA in university-based German as a second and foreign language teaching courses.

The Nordic network for adult learning (NVL)'s Language Council noted in February 2024 that "there are no specific competence requirements for teachers educating adult second language learners in basic literacy" (NVL, 2024), and opportunities for professional development remain scarce (NVL, 2023). In Finland, however, the need for professional development for LESLLA practitioners has now officially been recognized and the National Agency for Education funds annual intensive professional development (12 ETC, 324 hours of study) with in-person sessions facilitated by various experts (Helao, 2023). At the European level, the reference guide on *Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants* (LASLLIAM) (Minuz et al., 2022) focuses on LESLLA teaching and tutoring. LASLLIAM provides an extensive set of guidelines for professional training and development for those who work with LESLLA learners (see Minuz & Kurvers, 2021). Recently, the Council of Europe (2024) launched the Language Support for Migrants (LSM) Toolkit, comprising practical guidelines and language support activities, some of which are specifically designed to address LESLLA learners' needs. The EU-Speak modules we describe below add to what is available to provide those who work with LESLLA learners the knowledge and skills they need.

In the rest of this paper, we first outline the barriers and their effects that LESLLA practitioners may face in receiving training and on-going professional development to inform their practice. We then highlight the potential of online CPD by describing a LESLLA-specific online training program, *EU-Speak*, whose modules have been regularly offered since 2015. Based on practitioners' feedback on their EU-speak online module participation, we consider whether these affordable and relatively short (six week-long) online modules foster practitioners' engagement with LESLLA-relevant research and co-reflection with other practitioners participating in a module.

The effect of barriers to training and professional development for LESLLA practitioners

When it comes to cutting-edge research that could inform LESLLA teaching/tutoring practice, it is important to note availability of and access to the outlets where research findings are

¹ The modules were however not restricted to those who have experience teaching LESLLA learners, but also functioned as teacher training for some participants.

published (see Malessa, 2023). Reports on studies are primarily available in research publications, written mostly in English and available via institutions of higher education. Practitioners without an academic background - typically gained through undergraduate or postgraduate study - and without adequate scholarly (English) language skills, might find it difficult to access scholarly publications (Rosen & Vanek, 2017, p. 56). While instructional guides exist for self-study for LESLLA practitioners (e.g., DeCapua, 2019), they cannot replace interacting with those in a similar situation, be it during training and development (when it exists) or during professional events such as conferences. To address this lack of opportunities, LESLLA was founded, starting with an annual symposium with presentations by both practitioners and researchers and with accompanying proceedings (see Young-Scholten, 2021). Recently, LESLLA has also started to provide online live webinars (coffee breaks) to convey research in a practitioner-friendly way. Symposia make an important contribution to practitioner training/CPD through inspiring keynotes, talks, posters and workshops, and equally importantly, networking. Unfortunately, not all practitioners are able to attend LESLLA symposia as many practitioners and tutors lack the means to attend a symposium, limiting their opportunities for international networking with researchers and with other practitioners.

In addition to the lack of available courses and access to them, in many places, LESLLA practitioners face time and/or financial constraints to participate in professional development events. These issues raise important questions regarding practitioners' access to professional training: Do practitioners get time off for professional development? Are they covered by supply staff? In case no supply teaching is provided, do they have to arrange self-study options for their learners, or do they have to make up later for their absence by providing further contact teaching? Are expenses paid for attendance at conferences that would provide development opportunities? Are practitioners reimbursed for travel and/or accommodation? A crucial issue here is whether practitioners' participation in a LESLLA symposium or other type of professional development event increases their workload and impinges on their free time, thus impacting their well-being.

To sum up the above, LESLLA practitioners lack access to relevant training/CPD to inform their practice due to the non-existence in many countries of LESLLA-specific training and professional development, the difficulty of accessing research findings in English-dominant academic journals as well as a lack of funding to participate in-person in relevant events including the annual LESLLA symposia. Therefore, complementing in-person events, remotely conducted professional development courses could provide an accessible space for practitioners' interaction and (co-) reflection.

Remote training and development for LESLLA practitioners: Providing an accessible space for engagement and reflection with the EU-Speak modules

The EU-Speak programme has since 2015 been filling a training and professional development gap for those who work with LESLLA learners (see Young-Scholten et al., 2015; Peyton & Young-Scholten, 2020). The course creators aimed to share in six modules seminal and cutting-edge research findings relevant to practitioners to inform their practice and better support their learners (see Figure 1). Rather than rely on the academic publications themselves, module designers (all experts on the topics addressed by that module) were asked to write in accessible language ideas in these texts and to relate ideas to classroom practice. To address language access, the modules are not only in English but also Finnish, German, Italian, Spanish and Turkish (see

EU-Speak, n.d.-a). Ideally modules would be in more languages and EU-Speak welcomes the contribution of translations into addition languages such as Dutch, French and Greek.

EU-Speak Modules

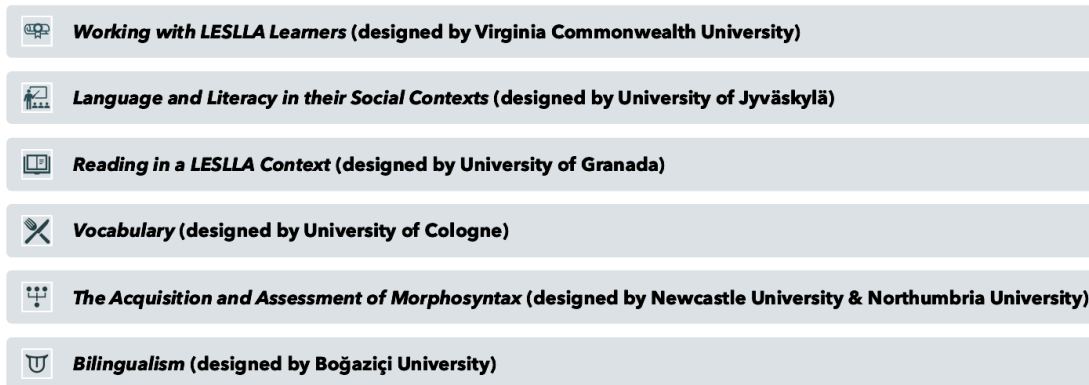


Figure 1. Module titles and EU-Speak project partner designers

From 2015 to 2024, more than 2,000 teachers and tutors from over 20 countries have taken at least one of the EU-Speak modules. While previously in-person activities shifted to online during the recent global Covid-19 pandemic, the EU-Speak modules had since 2015 already been exclusively online. During pandemic times starting in spring 2020, remote participation in this online training/CPD programme began to increase significantly.

A key characteristic of practitioner training/CPD is interaction with others who will be or are already in the same professional situation. An integral part of EU-Speak modules is a Discussion Forum with prompts in the form of questions and activities to carry out and report on to fellow participants for co-reflection. The Forum is intended for responses in any language in which a module participant wishes to post something. To receive an optional Certificate of Module Completion, participants are asked to answer three questions about their interaction on the Discussion Forum, one question about an activity they carried out and a final set of questions on the content of a particular module (three for the 2023 module and four for the 2024 module).

Below we look at evidence from two recently delivered modules, *Language and Literacy in their Social Contexts*, which ran from January to March 2023 and *Reading in a LESLLA Context*, which ran from January to March 2024. Participants were located in various countries worldwide: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They straightforwardly and knowledgeably answered the final sets of the following four questions at the end of the module:

1. Did you share the details of your teaching/tutoring situation in the module introduction?
2. Describe in the teaching/tutoring details of another participant.
3. Did you post something on the Discussion Forum at least four times? Please describe what you posted.
4. Which activity did you undertake?

Their responses show that participants noted they encountered ideas that were new and valuable for them in their pedagogical practice. This indicates that they understood and found the presentation of seminal and cutting-edge research findings in the modules' readings relevant. Responses to the four questions are shown below, both verbatim and paraphrased. The participants' comments show what they discovered among the participants on their module. They noted the similar learners they teach but highlighted that they come from varied educational and professional backgrounds: "La verdad es que vi a muchas personas que tenían un contexto más bien diferente" [I met many people who had a rather different context] (C. from Spain). Practitioners including not-in-service and novice practitioners such as N. from Spain were seeking peer support and professional development opportunities online:

There were some students from USA whose students were from very different backgrounds and countries. Some other people stated that they did not have many years of experience in the field and then, there were others, like me, who were not teaching while doing the module.

Participants often also mentioned those at quite different professional levels and institutions, highlighting the heterogeneity in LESLLA education as well as the reliance on volunteers: "I think the main difference between me and many other participants was that I was volunteering, while they taught in a more organised setting and had more specific objectives." (M. from Italy).

While participants around the world differed in teaching contexts and backgrounds, they commented on how they shared what LESLLA has long recognized as common among practitioners: heterogenous LESLLA teaching experiences with multi-cultural, multi-education level, multi-age, multi-need classes. It was recognition of these commonalities that led to the idea of EU-Speak modules open to anyone anywhere who works with LESLLA practitioners. The Discussion Forum provided participants with an online space to share their LESLLA-specific observations and engage in interaction and co-reflection with other practitioners on common issues in LESLLA teaching, such as the lack of adequate LESLLA-specific learning material: "I remember posting about the difficulties finding appropriate reading material for adult learners in English. Often the materials that exist are intended for children, and this can be seen as infantilizing." (A. from Israel)

The following comment by participant R. from the UK, illustrates how sharing common classroom experiences ignited interaction between practitioners on students' motivational levels and restrictions (note that the starting point was reading about research findings relevant to working memory):

I recall posting about working memory overload. I remember this because the post generated a small discussion with B. We shared about some of the instances of working memory overload that we have seen in the classroom, but also raised the

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issue of “desirable level of difficulty” and students who have high motivation and desire to meet their goals despite all the challenges and demands on their time.

This online interaction provided participants with an outlet to share their own experiences and expertise often in detail, and in turn with the opportunity to benefit from the implicit mentoring of their fellow practitioners and a resulting reflection, as illustrated by practitioner P. from the UK:

I found the posts of my peers to be extremely helpful as they outlined their challenges i.e. C – discussing the cultural differences in her learners and also the women in her class who are expected to learn alongside their family commitments. L’s struggle with large classes with different needs also reflects my own experience.

Peer interaction can take the form of scaffolding where more experienced peers support less experienced peers. We have observed in the Discussion Forum that, with rare exceptions, this is done in a collegial manner, in keeping with LESLLA’s non-hierarchical structure and supportive ethos. Participants’ reflective posts in this online module show how sharing similar experience can foster online bonding regardless of specific regional contexts and create a feeling of team spirit and empowerment, in participant P.’s words: striking “a chord with myself regarding the learners I am teaching. I found reading all the introductory posts to be very interesting and informative as to what is happening in other countries who are tackling the same challenges as myself”.

Question 4 asked which activities, such as developing lessons plans, participants had carried out. These practical activities were perceived as beneficial. In their answers to this question participants also reported that the provision of more theoretical (research) content, e.g., on phonological awareness, along with a webinar-based activity gave them valuable insights into the challenges faced by their own learners. The following comments further illustrate how participants reflected on their professional development during the EU-Speak module participation.

For text comprehension to occur, many components must come together for learners -- syntax, morphology, real-world knowledge, position and function of words, interpretation, etc. I have learned that LESLLA learners need much longer than educated learners to move from decoding to text comprehension and fluent reading. (C. from the UK)

I enjoyed the presentation about the different writing systems e.g., logographic (root sign with phonetic component), syllabic system (as I understand my Eritrean students use), hybrid systems and our own alphabetic system. I am surprised that it took many years before I realised how many writing systems there are and that we aren't/weren't made aware of this in our language curricula in Belgium. (M. from Belgium)

Participants’ reflections highlight, on the one hand, the importance of a solid theoretical understanding of adult late literacy development in a second language as expressed by the above participants and illustrate, on the other hand the practitioners’ needs, demand, and desire for professional development. With respect to our main topic, participants’ reflective comments, it is evident that online CPD programs such as the EU-Speak modules can complement in-person

training and CPD events as they can also provide a shared space for engagement and (co-) reflection and are regarded as beneficial by practitioners.

Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed that remotely conducted professional development courses such as the presented EU-Speak module can provide accessible spaces for practitioners to share their experience, (co-)reflect on it, and engage with others and LESLLA-relevant research findings. Although modules were designed during the 2015-2018 funded project, each module has a regularly updated common folder (for all languages) with resources that are relevant to each module, ranging from website links to the publications on which module texts are based and to presentations and videos. Modules can delve more deeply into topics than symposium presentations might and also provide the background that proceedings articles might not, see module syllabi, on the EU-Speak website (EU-Speak, n.d.-b). Participants can ask module designers about module content at any time during the module. The latest module *Reading in a LESLLA Context*, which ran in spring 2024, also included live webinars that were recorded for the participants. In the future there might be synergies for module participants and the annual symposium:

- Module participants could be awarded their certificates at symposia.
- Links could be made between the symposia and the modules: e.g., module designers' presentations or pre-conference workshops or coffee breaks.
- In-person meetings could take place at the LESLLA symposia where online participants could meet in person (e.g., as in Portland, Oregon in 2017) and be awarded certificates and have a pre-conference workshop, etc.
- LESLLA's live coffee breaks could more often link to modules.

Ideally, researchers and practitioners collaborate in innovative ways to provide practical and evidence-based professional development tailored for and with LESLLA experts. Unfortunately, many project-based professional development courses and their availability are limited to the project duration. While EU-Speak module participation is not free anymore (as they were during the 2015-2018 funded project) due to administrator/technician support, the registration fee is reasonable and is waived if a participant cannot afford it (this has only occurred three times since EU-Speak began to charge for modules in 2019). To keep project-based professional development opportunities alive and to enable updates to them, module maintenance needs to be considered and requires human and financial resources.

Lastly, based on the participants' positive responses, presented in our practitioners' perspectives from the field, it seems evident that online training and professional development courses such as the EU-speak modules constitute an accessible and appreciated professional development opportunity for LESLLA professionals.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank those who contributed to the presentation at LESLLA 2023 include EU-Speak board members, listed with their institutions: Enas Filimban, Umm Al Qura University; Belma Haznedar, Boğaziçi University; Egle Mocchiari, Masaryk University; Rola Naeb,

Northumbria University; Joy Peyton, Center for Applied Linguistics; Marcin Sosinski, Granada University.

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