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Reflections on the Session ‘Tracing the L2 gains of LESLLA learners in adult L2 literacy classes’

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Abstract

In this contribution, we reflect on the topics discussed during the session we organized at the LESLLA conference 2023 in Barcelona, Spain. The goal of the session was to discuss (conditions for) gains in LESLLA learners participating in L2 literacy courses, and how to accurately measure them. The session focused (i) on the instruments needed to measure gains in different languages, and (ii) on the outcomes of the measurements, and the variables that might help to explain any gains measured, or not measured. A common thread throughout the session was the conceptual and empirical gap between mainstream SLA research and LESLLA-focused research, and how to bridge them.

Keywords: L2 gains, L2 assessment, L2 instruction, L1 literacy, L2 literacy, LESLLA learners

Instructed L2 gains and LESLLA learners: what evidence can we build on?

While research in second language acquisition (SLA) and Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) share common ground, they have largely operated as separate fields. SLA research has primarily focused on understanding how an L2 is acquired effectively through instruction, with most studies conducted in university settings (Ellis, 2021; Ortega, 2005). A number of SLA studies have addressed a pattern of sampling bias where research participants did not include LESLLA learners (Andringa & Godfroid, 2020; Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Tarone, 2010).

The establishment of the LESLLA community in 2005 fostered collaboration among scholars worldwide dedicated to investigating L2 learning and literacy development in this vulnerable demographic. Several studies in the LESLLA domain revealed stark differences in language processing and learning between LESLLA learners and their university-educated peers (e.g., Bigelow et al., 2006; Kurvers et al., 2015), confirming that literacy is an important factor that should not be overlooked in SLA research. Others, in contrast, found no or limited differences in the developmental path of morphosyntax acquisition between non-literate LESLLA learners and those with some L1 literacy (Vainikka et al., 2017), nuancing these findings.

Recently, SLA research has shifted towards acknowledging and including LESLLA learners into the discourse. This renewed attention is evidenced by efforts to replicate studies with LESLLA participants (e.g., Ryan et al., 2023), and by the development of language proficiency frameworks such as the Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM) Framework (Council of Europe, 2022). However, despite these advances, integrating findings from SLA and LESLLA research remains challenging due to their distinct traditions. Bridging this gap is essential for advancing our understanding of (instructed) L2 acquisition –as underscored by the central questions driving the session:

- (1) What are the components of tools for measuring gains in LESLLA learners?
- (2) What contributing variables can L2 measurement instruments to trace gains in LESLLA learners identify?
- (3) How different is the L2 development of LESLLA learners from that of the mainstream SLA population?

Tools for measuring L2 gains and their contributing variables in LESLLA learners

Bridging the gap between SLA and LESLLA research involves developing instruments to measure L2 proficiency and longitudinal L2 proficiency gains in diverse L2 learner samples. Indeed, if SLA research is to include LESLLA learners as research participants alongside university-educated L2 learners, measurement instruments should be valid for use across a wide educational and social continuum.

Christine Czinglar and her team devised multilingual instruments to assess literacy gains in LESLLA learners of German in the project ELIKASA (*Entwicklung literaler Kompetenzen durch kontrastive Alphabetisierung im Situationsansatz* / The development of basic literacy skills by contrastive literacy education). The *Basic Technical Literacy Skills Test* assesses basic technical reading and writing skills in L2 German and in the first languages (L1) of Arabic, Farsi-Dari and Turkish at three levels: letter/grapheme, word, and text (see Czinglar et al. 2022). In addition, oral

L2 vocabulary (A1) and other predictors were assessed, and participants were interviewed about their education, L2 input, motivation etc. in their respective L1.

One of the ELIKASA assessment tools presented in more detail is a spelling inventory in the sense of Bear et al. (2020), which was adapted to German (Do Manh et al., 2021) and which measures basic writing skills in LESLLA learners. The *Spelling Inventory German* contains 30 A1-level words and includes 69 orthographic feature points, thus tracing gains beyond the word level. The features can be grouped into three layers, which mirror developmental strategies: the alphabetic, within-word-pattern and morphological meaning layers. Rasch modelling confirmed that the results of the *Spelling Inventory German* conformed to psychometric criteria of test quality.

A qualitative analysis of the gains from LESLLA learners with L1 Arabic in L2 German vocabulary and writing skills highlighted extensive variation, which may reflect the L2 literacy development in a population of LESLLA learners. Additionally, variation was observed in the L1 assessment results among LESLLA learners, which did not always match their school experience. This corroborates the importance of L1 assessment. Apart from oral L2 vocabulary and L1 literacy, gains in writing skills also hinge on factors such as input, motivation and trauma. Hence, it is important to look at as many factors as possible, when evaluating gains.

Similar in L2 Dutch, Marieke Vanbuel and Bart Deygers (under review) developed a smartphone-based test to measure reading and listening proficiency gains in Dutch L2 learners covering a wide spectrum of educational backgrounds and literacy profiles. The test is based on the LASLLIAM (Council of Europe, 2022) framework and aimed to mitigate education bias. Quantitative analyses revealed no item-level education bias, but there were performance differences among LESLLA learners and between L2 learners with diverse educational backgrounds. The qualitative analysis of interviews with LESLLA participants showed that these differences primarily reflected disparities in L2 proficiency and test-taking strategies.

Combined, the studies discussed in this section emphasized the importance of including LESLLA learners during the design and validation phases of measurement instruments, and underlined the necessity of triangulating quantitative and qualitative research methods in test validation and analysis.

L2 gains in LESLLA learners and adult L2 learners with diverse educational backgrounds

Another approach to bridging a research gap between mainstream SLA research and LESLLA research, is by conducting studies on L2 gains that encompass a diverse sample of L2 adult learners, including LESLLA learners. Existing research on LESLLA has identified several challenges, including limited or slow-paced L2 gains and the need for extensive instruction to reach basic proficiency levels (Kurvers, 2015; Kurvers & Stockmann, 2008). However, a longitudinal study by Gijswijt & Vanbuel (2023) that was presented in the session nuanced this narrative and demonstrated that LESLLA learners benefit from L2 instruction to an equal degree as other adult learners. Their assessment of L2 reading and listening skills among LESLLA students—who completed alphabetization courses or had six years or fewer of primary education—and learners with higher levels of schooling in the home country (ranging from lower secondary education to a PhD), revealed that the magnitude of the gains made by LESLLA learners over the course of four months is comparable to the gains made by highly educated L2 learners. Nonetheless, because of stark and significant initial differences in L2 proficiency between

LESLLA students and their highly educated peers, the ultimate achievement levels remained distinct.

Discussing the study design and results among the session's speakers and participants led to a few recommendations. First, LESLLA researchers should consider replicating studies of this kind to neutralize contextual differences and include broader samples of LESLLA learners. The LESLLA learners in the study had all completed alphabetization courses, potentially representing a specific subset of the LESLLA population. Second, future studies in the field should adopt longitudinal research designs to examine performances and gains in L2 learners from diverse educational backgrounds.

Bridging the SLA-LESLLA research gap and advancing LESLLA-focused research

Heide Spruck Wrigley, a researcher and teacher educator with Literacywork International, as well as an original member of LESLLA served as the discussant; she reflected on the advancements made in understanding LESLLA learners' L2 gains in the years since the groundbreaking 'What Works' study (Condelli et al, 2008). Wrigley highlighted the importance of the findings presented in the session for future research on LESLLA participants. As recent studies by LESLLA authors show (Simpson & Whiteside, 2015; Wrigley, 2015), an emphasis on low literate adult learners is moving the field beyond the traditional focus on bilingualism and biliteracy for children on the one hand and second language acquisition in college and university students on the other, providing a broader social context for research and practice.

To further advance LESLLA-focused research, Wrigley underscored the need for continued research, including large-scale cross-cultural multilingual LESLLA studies, case studies targeting subgroups from varied socio-cultural backgrounds, meta-analyses of studies on subskills including morpheme awareness and word recognition, and explorations of how different L1 orthographies may influence L2 literacy development. Of note, assessments used for gate keeping purposes (i.e., citizenship tests), should be empirically contested due to the cognitive challenges of written multiple-choice tests.

In expanding the field to new populations largely ignored in conventional SLA studies, LESLLA research also has the potential to strengthen connections between research and practice. In closing, Wrigley advocated for better tailoring professional development better to LESLLA issues, and creating platforms where researchers and teachers can jointly discuss and share practices, research methodology and findings.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper reflected on (the investigation of) L2 gains in adult learners with diverse levels of L1 schooling. The importance of bridging the gap between mainstream SLA and LESLLA-focused research was underscored, thereby emphasizing the development of valid measurement instruments and inclusive research designs. Additionally, we provided recommendations for future research on integrating LESLLA learners into SLA studies to better understand their L2 learning processes.

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