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## **Learning inside and outside school. Adult migrants' experiences of language and literacy learning in differently institutionalized environments**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates how adult learners use and value different environments and resources for language and literacy learning throughout their learning trajectories. Learning inside and outside school has been a topic of interest in both studies of literacy and additional language learning, yet research into learning environments of adults who simultaneously develop both has been limited. I contribute to this body of work through findings from an ethnographic study on adult learners' language and literacy learning trajectories within and across different environments of Antwerp, Belgium. Analyzing stories of three adult learners, I discuss how they undertake language learning practices across a variety of environments in- and outside of school, yet value the environments and the resources present there differently. These learner experiences highlight the value attributed to school as a learning environment, as well as the importance of literacy strategies and support from others in the learning process. I argue that in-depth engagement with lived experiences and practices of learners themselves help us understand what is valued and understood as learning.

**Keywords:** learning environments, learner experiences, ethnography

## Introduction

Learning inside classrooms as well as in a variety of spaces outside school has been a research interest for some time, when it comes to both literacy and language learning. Literacy studies have been concerned with ways to bridge the gap that some learners experience between school-based learning and outside-school practices (Hull & Schultz, 2001; 2017). Studies on additional language learning have indicated how learning emerges in a variety of contexts (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016) and benefits from a combination of instruction with naturalistic exposure and interactions (Benson, 2011).

Some adult migrants develop new literacies while learning an additional language as part of their arrival in a new country or region. Yet, the interplay of both language and literacy learning has not been studied much (Bagga-Gupta et al., 2019). Studies of learning beyond the classroom have mostly looked at higher education students (Kusyk et al., 2023), with the notable exception of Norlund Shaswar and Rosén (2022). In the field of Literacy Education and Second Language Learning of Adults (LESLLA) there have been studies that investigated possible cultural dissonance between school-based learning and informal learning (DeCapua, 2016). These studies have focused mainly on classroom settings and pedagogical ways to bridge both types of learning (e.g. Frydland, 2019; Lypka, 2019; North, 2017). Only a handful of studies have focused on adults' individual practices and experiences of language learning outside the classroom.

This paper addresses that gap by reporting on an ethnographic study on adult learners' language and literacy learning trajectories across different environments of Antwerp, Belgium. After a brief discussion of previous studies and my own conceptualization of learning inside and outside school, I present findings from this study through the stories of Irma, Aba and Fahema. All three were adult learners of Dutch: Irma and Aba attended Dutch conversation tables, while Fahema currently waited to continue in school-based Dutch courses. Their stories show how learning can happen in many environments, yet some environments, particularly school, might be valued above others due to the resources for language learning they contain.

## Theoretical Background

In both studies of language learning and literacy there is growing recognition of language and literacy as social practices that involve the dynamic use of semiotic resources available to people in any given communicative situation (Bagga-Gupta et al., 2019). The ways people not only use, but also learn language and literacy are increasingly recognized as mobile – related to movements through time and space that go beyond homogeneous communities and result in negotiations of 'social and linguistic action in the face of minimal common ground and maximal semiotic demands' (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 23). As people move through time and space, across different communities and situations with various people and things, they pick up bits and pieces of languages and a sense of how to use them. Through structured and intentional action or happenstance, these become a collection of resources available to them for communication and joint action. Blommaert and Backus describe this as 'repertoire' and 'such repertoires reflect the polycentricity of the learning environments in which the speaker dwells' (2013, p. 20). This increasing attention to mobility and complexity has underlined the need to understand how 'connectedness' or 'disconnectedness' between learning language and learning literacy are

constructed and play out inside, outside and across institutionalized education' (Bagga-Gupta et al., 2019, p. 20).

Many terms have been used to distinguish between different learning environments and practices, including *instructed* and *naturalistic*, *in* and *beyond the classroom* or *formal* and *informal* (i.a. Reinders & Benson, 2017, Rogers, 2014, Schugurensky, 2000). These distinctions indicate extremes of a continuum rather than a binary opposition, and a variety of attributes (e.g. location, presence of curriculum, intentionality) have been used as distinctive features (Benson, 2011; Colley et al., 2003). Rather than a typology of learning environments, my interest is to ethnographically explore the spaces individual learners navigate, the resources present and what learners think about how those contribute to their language learning. I use Benson's terminology of language learning environments to indicate how learning happens dependent on the space, the resources present and how those are experienced (Benson, 2021). While these environments can be analyzed both in terms of geographical areas and individual pathways, I focus on the latter as 'the ways in which learners assemble the where of language learning in space and over time' (idem, p.3). For the purpose of this study I follow the local distinction between 'school' – as courses taking place in a state-recognized educational institute that follow a curriculum leading to official certification – , 'Language Practice Opportunities' – as activities organized with the explicit aim to learn and practice language outside of school –, and self-directed or incidental practices that take place in the everyday lives and social activities of adults outside a setting organized for learning. As characteristics of institutionalization (e.g. curriculum, certification) arose as distinctive and consequential for different settings, I talk of experiences across differentially institutionalized environments.

For adults who simultaneously learn new literacies and an additional language, the interplay between language, learning and literacy across differently institutionalized environments is particularly relevant, yet scantily studied. While the field of LESLLA research has shown interest in a social practices lens and how it can inform classroom practice, less attention has gone to learner practices across spaces and how they are experienced as inter- or disconnected. Tammelin-Laine and Vaarala (2020) explored digital practices of adults in literacy education inside and outside the classroom to discover needs and opportunities. Norlund Shaswar (2022) provided an analysis of literacy practices for the everyday situation of passing a driver's test to make visible small-scale literacy learning and its role in migration processes. Monsen (2022) and Steien (2022) captured the experiences of adult migrants to investigate practices and resources for learning language and literacy, how they developed differently (Monsen) and shifted according to spaces and resources available (Steien). Additionally, studies of learners' perspectives on classroom learning and previous learning experiences (Bultynck & Vanbuel, 2017; Naif & Saad, 2017; Vogl, 2019) generated insights into practices of learning and their value, their relation to learner identities (Al-Dhaif et al., 2022; Kaiper-Marquez, 2020), and sense of competence or success (Court, 2017; Gonzalves, 2012; Rydell, 2018). These studies described various practices, yet indicated that learners do not always find opportunities or support to learn outside an instructed setting. Moreover, they ascertained that learners often associate learning with school-based learning and can self-identify as difficult learners due to their limited school experience. However, little attention has gone to the environments these learners navigate over time and their role in language learning. That concern was the starting point for an ethnographic exploration of adult migrants' language learning practices. The aim of this article is to report on the findings for three adult learners to showcase how different environments for learning are experienced and valued differently.

## Context and Method

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork regarding language and literacy learning practices of adults in Antwerp, Belgium.<sup>1</sup> A major city in the north of the Flemish region, Antwerp accommodates a large population of (young) adults who have moved to Belgium (Doyen & Buyschaert, 2022; Statbel, 2024). It holds an extensive network of institutions and projects that aim to support them in learning the official language Dutch, including the Agency for Civic Integration, schools for adult (basic) education, and non-profit neighborhood centers or social work projects that offer community-building and brokering activities. Since the early 2000's there has been an impetus by policy makers in Flanders, particularly in the domain of integration and citizenship, to promote initiatives that provide language learners with opportunities to practice Dutch outside school. These initiatives are called "taal oefenkansen" or "language practice opportunities" (LPO's) and span a variety of activities, including conversation tables, language buddies and reading groups. LPO's aim to increase the learners' exposure to Dutch and facilitate transfer between school and language use outside the classroom.

From the summer of 2021, I followed groups of adults in five settings that offered some Dutch-learning activity:

- 1) a certified A2-level course in a school for adult basic education (ABE)
- 2) an uncertified Dutch-for-work project taught by an ABE-teacher in a neighborhood centre
- 3) a volunteer-led conversation group by the Agency for Civic Integration in the library
- 4) a volunteer-led conversation group by a charity organization in their neighborhood centre
- 5) lessons on household administration taught by an ABE-teacher in a neighborhood centre

These settings each combined different attributes of in/formality, such as location, certification, type of instructor and didactical approach, but only the first setting is considered 'school' in the sense that it follows the curriculum issued by the Flemish government and leads to certification. The groups brought together a variety of participants in terms of gender, age (18 to 60+), migration status (refugees, migration for work, family reunification, with or without Belgian nationality, ...), and certified language level. However, all groups focused on participants with less than 10 years of schooling and paid particular attention to learners who had difficulties succeeding in certified courses, sometimes to the point of being labeled 'no longer progressing' (Dutch: *uitgeleerd*) by the school. Schools can assign this status to learners who make no more noticeable progress in school, often after repeated courses, and who are considered to have reached the limits of their language learning abilities.

For one school year (2021-2022), I joined these groups weekly for participant observation and documented practices and conversations through fieldnotes, photographs and artefacts (e.g. handouts, letters). During this time I carried out unstructured observations and talks with both teachers and learners, in group or one-on-one. During a second school year (2022-2023) I met some of the learners regularly outside of the group setting, in their homes or nearby places. While I spent time talking to men and women in the group settings, women in particular seemed comfortable with me and open to spending time one-on-one outside the group setting. These encounters included me brokering administrative tasks or practicing Dutch with them, as well as many observations and conversations around their language learning practices, trajectories and

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<sup>1</sup> Part of my PhD research that takes place within the research project [reference to project and project website]

experiences. In addition to documenting those encounters in fieldnotes, photographs and documents, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants on their learning trajectories past, present and aspired future.<sup>2</sup> Eight interviews were recorded, one participant refused, but allowed for detailed notetaking. The language of these encounters depended on shared repertoires and often took place in a combination of Dutch with either English, French or Spanish. Since these languages were not always the ones we were most fluent in, it might have affected the depth and detail of our conversations. However, these were the repertoires through which we had built a relationship and, given the interest in practicing conversational Dutch, I felt it important to respect the participants' legitimacy as language users (Rydell, 2018). As a consequence, my ethnographic activities at times became incidental opportunities for language learning and I myself a resource.

Data analysis required an iterative process that moved back and forth between coding for broader analytic themes across fieldnotes and interview transcripts, and writing commentary on specific incidents documented in the different data sources (Emerson et al., 1995). Through memos, I elaborated on themes as well as specific incidents to arrive at analytic arguments centered around the learners' stories. I will offer the stories of Irma, Aba and Fahima to show three different learner trajectories that illustrate common themes. I choose their stories because these women talked most extensively with me about their learning experiences. Moreover, they were each in a different position in their trajectories and their stories highlight communalities as well as contrasts found more broadly in the fieldwork. When I asked about the how's and where's of learning Dutch, participants' foremost answer was school. Drawing mainly on learners' own words from recorded interviews, complemented by informal observations and conversations documented in fieldnotes, I explore how school-based learning is not merely top-of-mind over other practices, but holds particular value to these learners. I argue that attention to lived experiences deepens understandings of what learning inside and outside school means to learners and what potential they hold for them.

### **Learner practices and perspectives**

#### **Irma**

I met Irma, a 60+ woman from El Salvador, at conversation groups that were organized in a local library by the Agency for Civic integration. Outside the library we talked on the phone and met in the local cafeteria or her apartment, where her husband cooked for us. In Antwerp for a little over 10 years now (2022), she lived with him in an apartment building close to the library. When she heard that I spoke Spanish, she immediately sought me out. Spanish is the language she is most fluent in, both orally and written. Also part of her linguistic repertoire was conversational Italian, which she learnt from her husband and his family.

After her arrival in Belgium, Irma had taken Dutch courses at the ABE centre. Even though she had been to school for nine years and had considered continued education, she was oriented towards alphabetization courses. I learnt that she had the status of *uitgeleerd* in her integration dossier, which meant she was considered no longer progressing despite all efforts and could no longer access certified courses. However, Irma assured me that the reason she had switched from school to an LPO was not difficulty in learning, but the concern of her social worker in Covid

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<sup>2</sup> One participant was interviewed twice (Feb 2022 and June 2023) and there was one dual interview with two participants. Interviews were semi-structured through a preplanned list of questions, such as *where did you learn Dutch*, that we also moved away from.

times. She was unsure, but suspected that, given Irma's age, the social worker suggested Open House as a more practical and medically safe alternative to walking to and from school.

Despite her status of 'no longer progressing', Irma did not remember particularly struggling in school. According to her, Dutch courses went slowly but surely and she received a Breakthrough or A1 certificate. This did not mean that Irma had no challenges with learning Dutch. From early on, she would tell me repeatedly that she could feel stuck ("me bloquee") trying to talk or the words would escape her ("se me va"). Practicing in the library would help, but mostly it kept her from sitting at home all day with only her husband. In terms of potential for learning, however, the conversation groups had a different value to Irma as compared to school.

**Me:** *Is it similar? Is it different?*

**Irma :** No, the school is different, because in school you have to write and it like stays with you more when one writes, rather than just be like...

**Me:** *Talking*

**Irma :** Yes

**Me:** *Yes*

**Irma :** Yes, that you feel better.

**Me:** *Hm*

**Irma :** So, in school, because you go, what they are explaining you, and you are writing, it is staying with you how it is written. However like this... You forget how it is written, more so us, more so me, who is..

**Me:** *Uhu, knowing how to write it*

**Irma :** Yes ... school is good, I like it, I like Nederlands [Dutch]. I would like to be able to do it like... I like it.

**Me:** *Yes*

**Irma :** But I find it hard.

**Me:** *So in school you have the sense of progressing more? More than now?*

**Irma :** Yes, yes, because there practicing, ... that they explain to you, that things start staying with you and you are writing

(interview Irma, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2023)<sup>3</sup>

To Irma school held more potential for learning for a couple of reasons. For one, the classroom is a place where she can practice and also have things explained to her. More than that she referenced writing as an important practice in school, since it was a way for her to retain what she learnt.

Writing practices were thus an important benefit of school-based learning for Irma, but literacy practices also formed part of her learning outside of school. The first time I asked her about practices apart from the conversation group, she told me she sometimes tried to learn and pulled out a freezer bag with a Spanish-to-Dutch dictionary in it. During our encounters she would also ask me repeatedly to write down useful phrases for her to study, specifically concerned with contacting the police or hospital in case of emergencies. When I compared these learning practices

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<sup>3</sup> For reasons of space, I present interview excerpts only in English as translated by myself, see appendix for excerpts in the original languages.

for Dutch to the way she had learnt Italian, she would explain that not only is Italian very similar to Spanish, but her resources for learning were also different.

**Me:** *Well, it is interesting, because you learnt Italian then in a way, ...  
Well, by doing it, by using it and at the same time you were learning  
Dutch, but more like, in class, by*

**Irma:** Nederlands [Dutch], yes, in class, because there I didn't have anyone to help me.

(interview Irma, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2023)

Although she had experience with learning another language without organized learning activities, Irma needed school to learn Dutch due to the lack of people to help her. One exception to this was the restaurant she used to have with her husband, which she mentioned as a place where she did learn Dutch. She attributed this to the help of customers to translate and model for her, which confirms the importance of others as a resource for language learning.

### Aba

The role of literacy and other people as resources for learning also emerge in the story of Aba. I met her in the same conversation group as Irma. Also a 60+ woman, she came to Belgium over 20 years ago from Ghana. Aba told me she was most fluent in Twi and that her English was not really good, but we talked rather fluently in a mixture of English and Dutch. When she first came to Flanders and encountered Dutch, she had asked herself “what kind of language is this?!”, but she took different Dutch alphabetization courses. Her switch from school to the conversation groups were due to a medical issue that made it hard for her to travel for classes. She saw the conversation groups as an alternative to sitting at home, as well as less stressful than courses that involved reading or writing.

Aba in her own words “can't read”.<sup>4</sup> She expressed it like this, even though I saw her on numerous occasions using e-mail, navigating her phone, extracting meaning from some documents and taking notes (e.g. of passwords). When I pointed out these practices, she would say she can do “small things” (Dutch: *kleine dingen*) but not everything or write longer texts. She regretted not being interested in school as a child and linked her limitations with regards to literacy to her learning abilities (together with her age):

**Me:** *And are there more things you still want to know or learn?*

**Aba :** I want to learn more. I can maybe buy a book, if I want to learn, but I “can't read”. See, at school you have a book. Others can go home, you have someone for help, children or grandchildren, maybe, or someone to help you, but I am alone. You need someone to help, to know how. Example. On my phone or computer for pay I can't do it, but a friend show me 2 times, 3 times and now I know. Also the lock, I wanted no lock before but no, now I put it.

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<sup>4</sup> Aba opted not to have her interview recorded, but allowed me to take notes during the interview, which I typed out in more detail immediately after the interview. My report of what she said thus comes from these notes, but any words between quotation marks (“”) are literal quotes jotted verbatim during the interview.

**Me:** *And because you think reading can help, do you want to learn that or you don't want to go to school anymore?*

**Aba :** You need someone to help you with the book, the school. "If I know reading", I can do it. "It's too late, now I can't do nothing, I am old" [laughs] Example. School I did long time, don't know, 2 or 3 years, but I had no help. My friend now, but he does not speak *Nederlands* [Dutch]. He can maybe help a little, but he is 74 years. My husband before, the white man, he was Belgian. It was better to help. But you see, school before in Ghana, I mean long before even me, with my parents you had to go to school. If you did not as parents send your child to school the police would come and take the child put it in school (\*grasping gesture\*). But for me, school it was something "if you like", you go, if not, you don't go. I did not want to go, children want to go play more than school, you don't know better when you are young. If I knew how to read I could read, do things, work with the computer but now I can't read

**Me:** *And now you come here, does that help?*

**Aba :** Yes, here to talk not read or write. I come always here, no stress.

(from interview notes Aba, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2023)

Since learning required books, Aba reasoned, and she could not read due to her limited schooling, she could not learn. Meanwhile, she offered examples of ways she learnt without any books or school, through the help of friends. However, she lacked people in her life to support her language learning. While she tied her competence in literacy to her language learning abilities, she felt she could stand her ground in the store, at the police station and in the street.

### **Fahema**

Associations between learning, school and literacy, as well as the importance of other people, did not only emerge as topics in the conversation group at the library, nor was it only older women raising these issues. Fahema was a 32-year old woman who came from Afghanistan eight years ago and now lived in Antwerp with her eight-year old son. She was most fluent in Dari and knew some Pashtu, but told me she could not read or write in either language. She regretted not being allowed to go to school as the only one of her siblings. She liked school as an adult and was told by teachers she did well. She liked being able to read and write and to the confusion of her family members sometimes messaged them in Dutch, because it is the only language she could write in.

We met at a Dutch-for-work course that combined language classes with job orientation activities. After the course ended, we talked via chat and met at her house. Some months after the course, Fahema was not employed, nor learning in a group setting. While she expressed a desire to work and was offered an opportunity, her social worker advised her to learn more Dutch first. She had already obtained the A1 level after alphabetization courses, but had been waiting for two or three years now to continue in an A2 course. When I asked her why, she said she did not know, that is what they told her, to wait. She repeatedly told me sitting at home is no good for her and that she had forgotten much of her Dutch. However, she attempted to do as much as she could in Dutch, insisting on it with others and even texting in Dutch with an Afghan friend as practice. With her husband abroad she ran the household mostly on her own and had learnt to handle medical

appointments, grocery trips, bills, whatever needed fixing around the house and her son's school. As she often described it, she "tries and tries" and asked people to talk slowly. However, when asked explicitly about learning from this use of Dutch, Fahema associated learning rather with reading.

- Fahema:** I try a lot. Maybe everything wrong, I don't know, but I try a lot talking. But I don't know: Good? Not good?
- Me:** *Yes*
- Fahema:** I try a lot, yes.
- Me:** *Try a lot, yes.*
- Fahema:** Yes
- Me:** *And do you learn from it? I mean, just from trying? Does that help to know a little bit more Dutch?*
- Fahema:** At home, yes, read a little, not understand either. For the g... Yes, read, but do not understand it
- Me:** *Yes*
- Fahema:** Yes. I read quickly, but do not understand it.
- Me:** *Yes*
- Fahema:** What is that? What is that? For what?
- Me:** *What should I do?*
- Fahema:** Yes, so difficult.
- Me:** *Yes. Yes, that is...*
- Fahema:** Of the four months I, of training, go to training, is very good. I talk, I ... The teacher says 'yes, good Fahema'. Try, try, I uhm is good, is quick read, but now I forget, is not
- Me:** *Yes, now you forget it, even if you try? At school or uhm?*
- Fahema:** Yes, at school too. Try a lot. I talk, they uhm, the letter comes, what is that? I good, calm. I say 'talk calmly', I write it quickly. I forget now. Do not understand. Yes

(interview Fahema, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2023)

Fahema would give me many examples of her language use and the strategy of "trying". She would take advantage of interactions in her daily life to practice Dutch. However, she explained how she had no way of receiving feedback on her practice – were her attempts any good? This highlights the need for others, not just to interact with, but also to support the learning process. When asked about learning explicitly, Fahema talked about a different practice and associated my question with self-directed reading. These practices were still difficult and she had the sense that she had forgotten much. Similar to Irma, Fahema contrasted these practices at home with school, where she would receive feedback and use literacy practices to learn.

## Discussion

These learners had followed different trajectories inside and outside school, but all were no longer in certified courses before reaching an A2 level of Dutch. They experienced their exit from school less as a result of struggles with learning and more as a choice to follow the advice of

their social worker or doctor. When I asked about their Dutch learning, they would associate learning strongly with school, although they all mentioned learning practices outside school. Irma had learnt Italian from her husband and his family as well as some Dutch from patrons at their restaurant, while Fahema would try to practice her Dutch during service encounters. Aba mentioned how friends would show her how to use her phone. Both Aba and Irma saw the LPO at the library as useful, but most of all a way to stay busy rather than alone at home.

The central place school took in their learning may have to do with the understanding of 'learning' as 'school learning' rather than any way to expand one's linguistic repertoire (Steien, 2022, p. 40). However, beyond this top-of-mind association, these women indicated why they valued school learning. Their stories highlight two specific resources of the school environment that they did not feel they had outside: literacy practices for learning and help from others. For one, literacy received an important role in their understanding of learning. In all cases, these language learners had a conception of language learning in mind that was strongly associated with reading and writing, both as a goal and a didactic means. Aba, particularly, tied her self-proclaimed inability to read to a difficulty to learn language, given she saw language learning mostly as book learning. This seems in line with other studies that showed how learners associate their sense of literacy competence to their identities as language learners (Al-Dhaif et al., 2022; Kaiper-Marquez, 2020; Norlund Shaswar, 2022). Both Aba and Fahema regretted not having gone to school as children, because of the importance they attribute to literacy in their understanding of learning (see also Bultynck & Vanbuel, 2017; Vogl, 2019). While Fahema mentioned self-directed reading, the role of literacy was most explicit in the case of Irma. She felt that school offered more literacy practices that help her retain what she learnt.

In these women's experiences another key to learning was support of others: *you need someone to help*. Learning was seen a process that required the regular support of others, not an uncommon finding (Monsen, 2022; Norlund Shaswar, 2022; Steien, 2022). Others helped explain or show what was not yet understood and provided. However, this required frequent contact with people they considered more advanced language users. These learners did not easily find this outside of school and reported feelings of isolation and sitting at home often. This lack of an important resource can influence how learners are able to learn (Naif & Saad, 2017; Steien, 2022). Recommendations to improve Dutch through courses before participating in other spaces (e.g. work), as in Fahema's case, can thus be counterproductive and lead to isolation or defeat (see also Vandermeerschen et al., 2020). While they had access to Dutch interactions, Irma, Aba and Fahema distinguished school from other spaces as offering more frequent contact and clearer feedback on their language competence. No longer in school and often at home, learners like Irma and Fahema would mention forgetting what they learnt. Meanwhile, all three learners were still taking up language learning practices and felt able to often act independently in their everyday lives. In this study as well as previous research with adult learners (Bultynck & Vanbuel, 2017; Gonzalves, 2012; Rydell, 2018), such independence was identified as an important experience of success, especially for those who had lived experiences of learning to take care of themselves more than ever before (Court, 2017).

## Conclusion

This article underlines the importance of investigating which environments and resources learners use and value for learning. Analyzing the experiences of learners offered insight into their perspectives on learning an additional language and literacy as adults who simultaneously work

on both. Their stories showed how they took up practices of learning beyond school, as well as the limitations of those practices. They associated learning with school and literacy strategies, but, beyond mere association, appreciated schools for their unique resources that were not easily found elsewhere. These findings have implications for how to support learning: they underline the importance of literacy practices for language learning, the need to provide support and feedback in settings outside school and the risk that recommendations to learn language ‘first’ increase feelings of isolation and stagnation. The findings also confirm that literacy practices outside of school should be encouraged and built upon inside classrooms. Moreover, learners can benefit when teachers foster strategies that enhance their learning outside of school.

These stories do not aim to be representative for all adult learners, but I argue that in-depth engagement with experiences such as these help us understand what learners value and understand as learning. For one, such engagement can serve to reflect with learners on what learning can mean, including practices that they might not consider themselves. Secondly, for both research and practice the challenge of connecting practices across environments to improve learning, lies not in cure-all solutions. It requires consideration of learners’ perspectives and their appreciation of environments and resources. These inquiries also open future avenues for more detailed study of how these experiences of differently institutionalized learning environments relate to gender, identity and language competence and progress.

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### Appendix: interview excerpts in original languages

#### Interview Irma, 14th July 2023 – excerpt 1

- Me:** *Is it similar? Is it different?* *¿Es similar? ¿Es diferente?*
- Irma:** No, the school is different, because in school you have to write and it like stays with you more when one writes, rather than just be like... No la escuela es diferente, porque en la escuela tienes que escribir y como que se queda mas, cuando uno escribe, que solo estar así ...
- Me:** *Talking* *Hablando*
- Irma:** Yes Si
- Me:** *Yes* *Si*
- Irma:** Yes, that you feel better. Si, eso se siente mejor
- Me:** *Hm* *hm*
- Irma:** So, in school, because you go, what they are explaining you, and you are writing, it is staying with you how it is written. However like this... You forget how it is written, more so us, more so me, who is.. O sea, en la escuela, porque uno va, lo que le están explicando y uno esta escribiendo, se le esta quedando como se escribe. En cambio así ... Se olvida como se escribe mas nosotros, mas yo que soy ...
- Me:** *Uhu, knowing how to write it* *Uhu, saber escribirlo*
- Irma:** Yes ... school is good, I like it, I like Nederlands [Dutch]. I would like to be able to do it like... I like it. Si ... es bueno la escuela, a mi me gusta, me gusta el Nederlands. Yo quisiera poderlo hacer a .. Me gusta.
- Me:** *Yes* *Si*
- Irma:** But I find it hard. Pero me cuesta
- Me:** *So in school you have the sense of progressing more? More than now?* *¿Entonces en la escuela tienes la sensación de progresar mas? ¿Que ahora?*
- Irma:** Yes, yes, because there practicing, ... that they explain to you, that things start staying with you and you are writing Si, si porque ahí estar practicando, ... estar que te explican, que le va quedando uno y estar escribiendo

#### Interview Irma, 14th July 2023 – excerpt 2

- Me:** *Well, it is interesting, because you learnt Italian then in a way, ... Well, by doing it, by using it and at the same time you were learning Dutch, but more like, in class, by* *Bueno, es interesante, porque entonces aprendiste el italiano de manera ... bueno, haciéndolo, utilizando lo y en el mismo periodo estabas aprendiendo el neerlandés, pero como mas de manera en clase, de manera*
- Irma:** Nederlands [Dutch], yes, in class, because there I didn't have anyone to help me. Nederlands, si porque ahí no tenía quien me ayudara.

**Interview notes Aba, 13th March 2023**

Conducted primarily in English

**Interview Fahema, 21st June 2023**

- Fahema:** I try a lot. Maybe everything wrong, I don't know, but I try a lot talking. But I don't know: Good? Not good?  
Ik veel proberen. Misschien alles fout, ik weet het niet, maar ik veel proberen praten. Maar ik weet niet: Goed? Niet goed?
- Me:** *Yes*  
*Ja*
- Fahema:** I try a lot, yes.  
Ik veel proberen ja
- Me:** *Try a lot, yes.*  
*veel proberen ja*
- Fahema:** Yes  
*Ja*
- Me:** *And do you learn from it? I mean, just from trying? Does that help to know a little bit more Dutch?*  
*En leer je daarvan? Allez, gewoon van te proberen? Helpt dat om een beetje meer Nederlands te kunnen?*
- Fahema:** At home, yes, read a little, not understand either. For the g... Yes, read, but do not understand it  
Thuis, ja, een beetje lezen, ook niet begrijpen. Voor de g[sm]... Ja, lezen, maar begrijp het niet.
- Me:** *Yes*  
*Ja*
- Fahema:** Yes. I read quickly, but do not understand it.  
ja, ik snel lezen, maar begrijp het niet.
- Me:** *Yes*  
*Ja*
- Fahema:** What is that? What is that? For what?  
Wat is dat? Wat is dat? Voor wat?
- Me:** *What should I do?*  
*Wat moet ik doen?*
- Fahema:** Yes, so difficult.  
Ja, zo moeilijk
- Me:** *Yes. Yes, that is...*  
*Ja. Ja, dat is...*
- Fahema:** Of the four months I, of training, go to training, is very good. I talk, I ... The teacher says 'yes, good Fahema'. Try, try, I uhm is good, is quick read, but now I forget, is not  
Van de vier maand ik, van opleiding, ga naar opleiding, is heel goed. Ik praten ik ... De juf zegt 'ja goed Fahema ja'. Proberen, proberen, ik euh is goed, is snel lezen, maar nu ik vergeten, is niet
- Me:** *Yes, now you forget it, even if you try? At school or uhm?*  
*Ja, nu vergeet je dat, ook als je probeert? Op school of euh*
- Fahema:** Yes, at school too. Try a lot. I talk, they uhm, the letter comes, what is that? I good, calm. I say 'talk calmly', I write it quickly. I forget now. Do not understand. Yes  
Ja op school ook. Veel proberen. Ik praten, ze euh, de brief komen, wat is dat? Ik goed, rustig. Ik zeg 'rustig praten', ik schrijf het snel. Ik vergeet nu. Niet begrijpen. Ja