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Classroom-based Research in LESLLA Contexts: Methodological Challenges and Affordances

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Abstract

Classroom-based research (CBR) in second and foreign language education takes place in authentic classroom settings, where researchers have limited control over variables. Unlike laboratory-based studies, CBR focuses on real-world learning environments and has evolved into a systematic field of inquiry. It encompasses both learner-focused studies, which explore learning processes and outcomes, and teacher-focused studies, which examine pedagogy, practices, and beliefs. In the context of Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA), CBR provides valuable insights into language learning, literacy development, and social participation. Despite growing interest in this area, methodological approaches remain underexplored. This article reports on four studies conducted in Canada and Australia illustrating different research designs within the CBR framework. The different research designs and their contributions to LESLLA scholarship are discussed and analyzed, followed by a discussion of lessons learned through implementing CBR in diverse contexts. By reflecting on research experiences, we highlight methodological strengths and challenges, offering insights to support the advancement of evidence-based practices for LESLLA learners and educators.

Keywords: Classroom-based research, LESLLA, learner-focused research, teacher-focused research, methodological designs

Introduction

To mark the 20th anniversary of LESLLA, a special online event was held in which members of the research community were invited to showcase their work within different thematic stands. The classroom-based research (CBR) strand featured two presentations: one by Playsted, presenting findings from her doctoral study utilising CBR in the Australian context, and another by Fortier and Beaulieu, who discussed various types of CBR they conducted in their French-Canadian context. When the call for proposals for the anniversary symposium was announced, we saw an opportunity to bring our complementary perspectives together in order to offer a more comprehensive reflection of CBR—its methodological challenges, practical affordances, and relevance for the LESLLA context.

Classroom-based research involves “research carried out in second and foreign language classrooms, whether by the teachers in those classrooms or by external researchers” (Gass & Mackey, 2007, p. 164). Unlike laboratory-based research, CBR occurs in authentic instructional environments, where researchers cannot as easily manipulate variables or control external factors. Over time, CBR has evolved significantly, transitioning from intuitive, experiential approaches to more systematic investigations grounded in solid empirical methodologies (Hinkel, 2005). Various methodological designs can be exploited within the CBR frame, from quasi-experimental studies which compare the outcomes of a given teaching approach while trying to keep consistent certain classroom conditions to better understand what may be influencing student learning (see Piccinin & Dal Maso’s 2021 review), to more naturalistic, less intrusive approaches such as observational studies, which aim to document classroom practices as they unfold in real time (e.g. Bigelow and King, 2015).

More generally, Ellis (2012) categorizes CBR into two primary strands: learner-focused studies, which examine learning processes and/or learning outcomes, and teacher-focused studies, which address pedagogy, practices, and beliefs. Despite differing emphases, both strands share core research characteristics—they address specific problems, rely on rigorous data collection and analysis, and yield insights that contribute to both theoretical knowledge and practical improvements in second language education (Mackey, 2017).

Within LESLLA contexts, CBR offers a valuable avenue for exploring the intersection of language acquisition, literacy development, and social and professional participation of teachers. Interest in this area appears to be steadily growing. For instance, Young-Scholten (2021), in her review of 418 presentations at LESLLA symposia between 2005 and 2018, noted that 28% of these talks described practices, while 18% involved action research or small-scale classroom studies. However, it was beyond the scope of her review to examine the methodological designs adopted or their contributions to understanding learning and teaching processes in LESLLA classrooms. This underscores the need to further discuss the methodological and contextual considerations required to deepen our understanding of effective, evidence-based practices for LESLLA learners and their instructors.

By connecting the broader principles of L2 CBR to the LESLLA context, we examine both learner-focused and practitioner-focused research conducted in our respective LESLLA contexts, Australia and Canada. Our aim is to explore how different study designs contribute to the development of LESLLA scholarship, with particular attention to the design choices and practical implementation of these methods in LESLLA classrooms. Drawing on lessons learned from our collective experiences, we highlight the strengths and limitations of these approaches, offering insights to support the continued advancement of CBR within the LESLLA community.

Focus on LESLLA Learners

Researchers have long emphasized the importance of CBR with LESLLA learners. In their 2005 paper, Condelli and Spruck-Wrigley acknowledged the scarcity of CBR involving this population and reviewed research from adjacent fields—such as adult basic education and adult ESL—that could inform future LESLLA research. They concluded with a strong call for more intervention-based studies in this context.

To address this gap and better understand the effectiveness of specific teaching interventions, researchers have often turned to pre-experimental and quasi-experimental designs. The approaches examine how instructional practices influence learning outcomes (or the product of learning), learning processes, or both (Ellis, 2012). Because random assignment is rarely feasible in authentic classroom settings, pre-experimental designs—such as single-group interventions—can offer preliminary insights, although they lack comparison groups, limiting the strength of causal claims. Quasi-experimental designs, in contrast, typically include non-equivalent comparison groups, providing stronger internal validity while still respecting classroom realities.

These studies are typically led by external researchers who design and implement interventions, sometimes in collaboration with classroom teachers (Loewen et al., 2023). They differ from larger-scale experimental studies involving larger populations of L2 learners, which are often conducted in more controlled instructional settings and aim to isolate specific variables in L2 development (e.g., Condelli et al., 2008, Kurvers & van der Zouw, 2007). While the overarching goal of such studies is to generate insights that contribute to evidence-based pedagogy (Stapleton & Shao, 2017), quasi-experimental and pre-experimental designs differ in their methodological scope and the types of conclusions they allow researchers to draw.

To illustrate how a quasi-experimental design can be implemented with LESLLA learners, we turn to a study conducted by Carl Laberge as part of his master's thesis and reported in Laberge, Beaulieu, and Fortier (2019), summarized in Table 1. This study examined the impact of implicit teaching strategies on oral comprehension skills among three groups of LESLLA learners assigned to either the experimental condition or the control group, which participated solely in testing phases. Initially, the study was designed to measure learning gains using a pretest/post-test design. However, analysis of the participants' test results revealed no statistically significant gains, though the researcher noted what appeared to be noticeable improvements in the interactions of some participants during the intervention. This prompted a closer and more systematic examination of the learning processes at play—specifically, the participants' use of listening strategies, as observed in their oral interactions, during the treatment phase.

Collaboration with the participants' teachers played a key role in participating in recruitment and oral consent of the participants, designing the intervention, ensuring alignment with the teachers' instructional planning and validating the reliability of the testing instruments.

Table 1 Summary of Laberge, Beaulieu & Fortier (2019)

Study feature	Description
Participants	37 LESLLA learners of French (2 experimental groups + 1 control group).

Research question	Does implicit teaching of listening strategies and metacognition help foster oral comprehension of adults with low levels of education who are learning French Lx?
Design	Quasi-experimental, process-product study, with pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test measures, as well as observations during the treatment phase.
Materials	Instructional materials adapted from Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) to target implicit comprehension strategies. Pen-and-paper multiple-choice test to measure learning gains in listening comprehension.
Results	Product: No significant effects observed on the reading comprehension test. Process: Overall improvement in comprehension strategy use, despite challenges for some participants in applying strategies independently.

As this study involved the adaptation of a study originally designed for literate learners to the LESLLA context and as it was the authors' first CBR conducted with LESLLA learners, it presented significant challenges that offered valuable lessons and insights for future research.

First, challenges emerged regarding the reliability of the measurement instruments initially designed. The use of pen-and-paper multiple-choice tests proved unsuitable for many LESLLA participants, as later corroborated by Altherr Flores (2020, 2021). Shifting the focus to learning processes provided more meaningful insights into what LESLLA learners could achieve, particularly through their task performance, which were better aligned with the study's objectives.

Methodological challenges were also met in terms of group constitution: the diversity of LESLLA learners in each classroom meant that the control and experimental groups were not comparable. Additionally, the small number of LESLLA participants per classroom restricted the types of statistical manipulations that could correct for group non-equivalence (for an in-depth discussion on conducting research in heterogeneous classrooms, see Ranta & Zavialova, 2022).

As for the impact of the research, some challenges were faced in terms of pedagogical uptake. Despite the intervention, there was little evidence of changes in teachers' practices related to listening comprehension pedagogy after the study concluded. This may be attributed to the teachers' limited involvement in the research process. While teachers were consulted during the study's preparation phase and were of great help in reshaping the original study's heavily print-reliant approach to better align with the needs of emergent readers, their role was primarily advisory rather than participatory. Furthermore, the mixed results of the intervention may have been perceived as less promising than anticipated. Greater collaboration with teachers throughout the research process could foster stronger engagement and facilitate the integration of findings into pedagogical practices (Van den Branden, 2016).

Yet, despite the methodological constraints, the study generated important insights that informed both teacher education and methodological practices in our LESLLA context. The research findings were integrated into a teacher training course (*Didactique de l'oral en français langue seconde* [Teaching oral comprehension and production in French as a Second Language])

enhancing pre-service teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in teaching within LESLLA contexts (Ranta & Beaulieu, 2023). The study also supported the refinement of research protocols—notably for obtaining oral consent during recruitment and for measuring the efficacy of pedagogical interventions—thereby strengthening both research training and the foundation for subsequent phases of our research program.

The challenges encountered in this quasi-experimental study—including measurement reliability, group heterogeneity and limited pedagogical uptake—highlighted the need, for the research team, for an alternative research design. To address these limitations, Beaulieu and Fortier adopted a pre-experimental design, allowing the study to serve as a proof-of-concept for testing the feasibility and viability of specific interventions before scaling them up.

In Beaulieu and Fortier's (2024) study, the objective was to implement a pedagogical sequence of input-based tasks targeting household items and plural marking. The research sought to assess the viability of input-based tasks as an addition to LESLLA pedagogy by observing the extent to which these tasks provided opportunities to make form-meaning connections. To foster conditions conducive to pedagogical transformation, the study involved a close collaboration with a LESLLA teacher who actively participated in all stages of the study design and implementation. The following section provides an overview of this second study, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Beaulieu & Fortier (2024)

Study feature	Description
Participants	One intact LESLLA classroom French L2 (N=13)
Research question	To what extent do input-based tasks provide opportunities for form-meaning connections in an intact heterogeneous LESLLA classroom?
Design	Pre-experimental design with focus on learning processes.
Materials	Input-based tasks designed to encourage form-meaning connections of common household items as well as number marking.
Results	The findings indicated that input-based tasks allowed LESLLA to make form-meaning connections during task performance, with learners displaying varying patterns: some relied primarily on interactions with others, others focused on internal verbalization, and some combined both strategies.

Although a different study design was adopted to work more closely with a teacher so as to address the challenges encountered in Laberge et al. (2019), this study came with its own set of challenges.

First, methodologically, designing a coding scheme to reliably capture the learning processes in which LESLLA learners engaged proved to be time-consuming, as existing schemes in CBR research are primarily designed for learners with print literacy and more advanced oral abilities (e.g., Qiu & Cheng, 2022). Nevertheless, shifting the focus from learning outcomes to learning processes offered significant advantages. It enabled the research team to adopt a non-deficit perspective on LESLLA learners, emphasizing their skills rather than their limitations.

Concretely, in this study, it was observed that LESLLA learners could treat language as an object of analysis, provided they perceive a practical reason for doing so.

The research team also encountered unmet expectations with the outcomes of pre-experimental design, as it does not yield robust conclusions about the effectiveness of interventions. While the participating teacher expressed initial enthusiasm when observing how her learners engaged with the input-based tasks, she later expressed disappointment due to the lack of concrete insights into the learning outcomes. Similarly, within the broader Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) research community, pre-experimental studies often face skepticism, as they are perceived to lack the methodological rigor required to establish causal relationships. One promising avenue to circumvent this issue is the preregistration of studies, that is, the practice of submitting research plans—including research questions, methodology, and planned analyses—for review before data collection begins (Huensch, 2024). By clearly outlining these elements in advance, preregistration can help align expectations and strengthen the credibility of proof-of-concept findings.

Similar to the observations in Laberge et al. (2019), this study did not result in immediate changes to the participating teacher's instructional practices. This may be attributed to her belief that her existing methods were as effective as the intervention she piloted. Nevertheless, the study successfully convinced the centre's pedagogical advisor to promote the approach among other LESLLA teachers. This initiative led to the development of new instructional materials, which are now accessible to teachers in the centre. However, the extent to which the other LESLLA teachers have adopted and make use of these materials remains uncertain.

While research focusing on learners has the potential to contribute valuable insights into language learning processes and outcomes, it may fall short in addressing the immediate concerns of teachers in the classroom (Ellis, 2012). In contrast, practitioner research offers an alternative approach by empowering teachers to develop reflective awareness about their own situated practices and contexts (Yuan, 2024). The following section explores teacher-led practitioner research as an essential complement to learner-focused studies in LESLLA classrooms.

Focus on LESLLA Practitioners

Prior to the emergence of practitioner research in LESLLA contexts (e.g., DeCapua et al., 2018), much of the work on teachers focused primarily on the observation of classroom practices (e.g., Strube et al., 2013), with little attention to the underlying beliefs that inform those practices (for exceptions see Colliander et al., 2018; Ollerhead, 2012). However, research in teacher cognition has emphasized that understanding what teachers believe about language, learning, and their learners is crucial to interpreting what they do in the classroom.

Practitioner research refers to research conducted by teachers within their own classrooms, guided by principles from action research, reflective practice, design-based experiments, or Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Yuan, 2024). Action research appears to be the most established forms of practitioner research and involves a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Burns, 2006). It empowers teachers to investigate specific challenges in their own classrooms with the dual goal of improving practice and generating professional knowledge. However, critiques of action research point to its tendency to prioritize problem-solving over deeper reflection, and its often-limited sustainability in teachers' everyday workloads. To respond to these limitations, Allwright (2003) proposed an alternative model of practitioner research: Exploratory Practice (EP). Rather than focusing on fixing perceived problems, EP emphasizes inquiry as a regular and sustainable component of classroom life. It

encourages teachers—and learners—to explore what they find puzzling about teaching and learning, with the aim of understanding rather than solving. As Hanks (2017) notes, EP is a flexible methodology that aligns with the goals and constraints of real classrooms, supporting research that is meaningful to those directly involved. These approaches are inherently pedagogically driven, aiming to address immediate instructional concerns faced by teachers or to foster a deeper understanding of classroom dynamics and the quality of life in L2 learning environments (Ellis, 2012).

In Maynard, Beaulieu, Fortier and Laberge (2024), an action-research study was conducted in four intact LESLLA classrooms, supporting teachers in transitioning from predominantly form-focused practices to a more balanced approach to literacy instruction that incorporated greater emphasis on meaning-focused practices. The details of this study are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Summary of Maynard, Beaulieu, Fortier & Laberge (2024)

Study feature	Description
Participants	LESLLA teachers of French in two adult education centres (N=4)
Research questions	The study examined the initial meaning-focused literacy activities used by the participating teachers and how they responded to implementing a new meaning-focused activity after discussions with the research team.
Design	Action research conducted collaboratively with teachers over multiple instructional cycles.
Materials	Classroom observation and reflection tools.
Results	The findings showed that teachers rarely used meaning-focused literacy activities initially but responded positively to implementing a new activity, with varying levels of adaptation.

A key methodological challenge encountered was a deviation from the foundational principles of action research, which emphasize collaborative inquiry driven by issues identified by practitioners themselves. Rather than centering the study on concerns raised by the participating teachers, the research team defined the focus of the intervention—namely, the perceived overreliance on code-focused strategies as a pedagogical issue requiring resolution. While this decision was informed by prior research and aligned with broader discussions in the field, it limited the extent to which teachers were fully engaged as co-constructors of the research process.

This misalignment created a delicate situation: directly critiquing their established teaching methods risked undermining their professional identity and potentially eroding their trust in the research team. As a result, translating research findings into actionable steps that the participating teachers could meaningfully integrate into their practice proved challenging. To overcome that tension, the research team adjusted their approach. Instead of emphasizing externally validated "best practices," new activities inspired by observations of the participating teachers' meaning-focused teaching strategies were introduced. This iterative and context-sensitive communication strategy ultimately facilitated progress: the proposed activities were not only aligned more closely with the teachers' immediate contexts, but they were also perceived as opportunities for

experimentation and innovation. The participating teachers responded with enthusiasm and willingness to implement these activities. However, the resulting uptake appeared to be driven more by openness to trying new ideas than by a deep engagement with the underlying pedagogical principles. This outcome underscored the inherent tension in reconciling research-driven recommendations with the practical realities and professional identities of practitioners.

Another significant challenge inherent to the project was its time-consuming and resource-intensive nature (stemming from the iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, see also Burns & McPherson, 2017). In this context, these challenges were mitigated in part by the availability of provincial funding, which played a crucial role in addressing logistical and operational barriers. This funding allowed to cover transportation costs for out-of-town participating teachers and university researchers, ensuring they could attend professional workshops in person. Additionally, it provided the means to hire substitute teachers, enabling the participating teachers to attend these workshops without disrupting their regular classroom responsibilities. Despite these supports, the action research process remained resource-intensive, requiring significant coordination, time, and effort from all parties involved. While the funding alleviated some of these challenges, the need for ongoing resources to sustain such initiatives highlights a broader limitation of action research in contexts where financial or logistical support may not be as readily available.

While the high involvement of the research team in financial and logistic support facilitated the teachers' full engagement in all stages of the research, it also raises questions about the sustainability of the changes observed. Although the study fostered reflection and innovation in teaching practices, there is no guarantee that these changes in beliefs and practices will endure over the long term once the external support is withdrawn. This brings into focus one of the broader critiques of action research: its reliance on intensive collaboration and resources, which may not always be feasible or sustainable in typical teaching contexts.

These limitations—particularly those related to sustainability, power dynamics in research agendas, and the time-intensive nature of action research—highlight the importance of exploring alternative approaches to practitioner inquiry that are more adaptable to the constraints of typical LESLLA teaching contexts. One such approach is EP, which guided the study conducted by Playsted and colleagues (2024). Drawing on data gathered through a broader doctoral study, this research included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, and focused on the theme of teachers' puzzling practices across four EP sessions.

The phase of the study reported here examined the theme of teachers' puzzling practices across the four EP focus group sessions. Here, teachers and the researcher explored understandings and practices of teaching pronunciation to LESLLA learners in an Australian adult migrant English program through the EP process of 'puzzling' (Hanks, 2017). In the first focus group session, the researcher introduced teachers to the EP principle of QoL (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and the concept of praxis as "morally committed and oriented" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 25) teaching practices that support the overall good of students' language learning and communication goals. In the second EP group session, teachers and the research reflectively discussed and made notes relevant to what 'puzzled' them about pronunciation teaching practices in their teaching context. These topics informed discussion and planning for the third focus group, in which additional discussion and planning was undertaken to address teachers' challenges in teaching pronunciation. During this session, teachers were introduced to the EP concept of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activities (PEPAs) (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and explored ways to incorporate a pronunciation focus into their existing classroom activities. The final focus group involved

discussion and reflections about the six-month research process. Table 4 provides an outline of the study.

Table 4: Summary of Playsted, Thomas & Wilkinson (2024)

Study feature	Description
Participants	4 LESLLA teachers of pre-level adult EAL students
Research question	The question sought to examine teachers' understandings of pronunciation teaching practices in the pre-level adult EAL context
Design	Exploratory Practice (Phase: Puzzling)
Materials	Four EP focus group sessions with teachers of pre-level adult EAL in an urban Australian teaching context over a period of six months
Results	<p>Teachers' understanding of pronunciation teaching practices was influenced and limited by TESOL training discourses, early childhood literacy teaching and the policies and frameworks of the national EAL program.</p> <p>The process of puzzling helped teachers develop their own localized understandings and tailor pronunciation teaching practices to their specific contexts.</p> <p>During sessions, teachers' puzzles often evolved from questions about pronunciation teaching practices and broader inquiries about constraints on their teaching and professional learning practices.</p> <p>The puzzling process, initiated by the researcher in the first session, was embraced by teachers in subsequent sessions and promoted a praxis-oriented approach to learning valued by teachers.</p>

The study faced significant systemic and pandemic-related challenges in gaining access to the research site. Beyond the inherent policy constraints within the language program, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 introduced substantial disruptions and uncertainty for educators in Australia. These circumstances compounded the difficulties of conducting qualitative, in-person research, as public health measures and institutional restrictions led to delays in securing the necessary ethical approvals and access to participants.

The research timeline was also impacted by both the logistical complexities of the pandemic and the broader systemic limitations within the framework of the national language program in which it was conducted. Given the time-defined nature of a doctoral study, it was

difficult to allow adequate time to introduce teachers to new concepts of EP within the timeframe constraints of a PhD study. These challenges are not limited specifically to the LESLLA context. However, when considered alongside ethical complexities of research in LESLLA settings, they highlight the complexity of conducting practitioner-based research as doctoral research.

Ethical considerations were paramount in the study, particularly given the sensitive nature of in-person, qualitative research involving LESLLA students. While such methods provided rich, detailed data, alternative approaches such as online methods or surveys could have mitigated some ethical concerns by creating a degree of distance from sensitive observations of classroom practices (Malessa, 2023). Conducting research on teachers' practices as part of a doctoral study, while simultaneously mentoring them in investigating their own practices, also necessitated a high level of reflexivity from the researcher. Playsted drew on narrative approaches to complement data gathered through interviews, group discussions and recorded classroom observations. Such first-person accounts can offer valuable insights but require careful and ethical consideration to ensure the integrity and sensitivity of the research process.

Similar to Beaulieu and Fortier's (2024) findings, Playsted et al's (2024) study found that expectations and realities of classroom teaching and professional learning were important issues to navigate in EP research with practitioners. EP is underpinned by principles of valuing the mutual development of understanding as a goal and, as Lyra, Fish and Braga (2003) found when establishing EP projects with teachers in Brazil, the introduction of new EP practices of puzzling was initially unsettling for teachers with expectations of 'finding solutions for their classroom problems' (p. 152). Taking time to focus on the process, not only the 'outcome' of a classroom intervention was a goal that researchers and teachers need to regularly revisit in discussions.

Reflections from the LESLLA 20th Online Anniversary Event

The LESLLA 20th Anniversary virtual celebration in October 2024 provided an opportunity for us to share insights gained from research and practice in different contexts. By coming together as researchers from different parts of the world, we were offered a unique opportunity to reflect on context-specific affordances, limitations and potential of CBR in diverse LESLLA educational settings. Across the different contexts, while researching CBR in adult educational centres for French and English as additional languages we encountered similar ethical and systemic challenges. We faced challenges in gaining system access, building trust, and balancing research goals with classroom realities. However, our research nevertheless highlighted the importance of Exploratory Practice, teacher collaboration, and reflective methods of research. Management and support played crucial roles, involving pedagogical advisors and school directors. The research also advocated for more inclusive language teaching, challenging traditional grammar-focused approaches. Government policy impacts were discussed, particularly cuts to French programs in Quebec and funding and policy changes in the Australian adult EAL program. Future directions for CBR were also discussed, including the continuation of the research-action project in the form of a Human Library event (inspired by [this project](#)), and further research involving EP's role in LESLLA contexts. Overall, the studies underscored the importance of flexibility, support, and advocacy in evolving language education practices.

Despite the challenges encountered, findings from the studies presented here suggest that a diversified research approach that centres on the voices and experiences of LESLLA learners and teachers has the potential to make a valuable contribution to educational research. By foregrounding LESLLA teacher and student perspectives, combining various methodologies and

fostering collaborative, classroom-based studies, researchers can better support LESLLA learners and contribute meaningfully to this field of scholarship.

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