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LESLLA Practices in Spain

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Introduction

Social cohesion, the refugee crisis, and the challenges of immigration have been “hot” topics in the last decades. Each year, hundreds of people are forced to abandon their countries due to wars, violence, or persecution. The Syrian Civil War, the Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas conflict are just some examples. According to Eurostat (2024), in 2023 Spain was one of the most popular destinations for immigrants from both the EU (148,000) and outside the EU (860,000), receiving a high number of first-time applications for international protection (160,000) and granting 549,000 residence permits. In the same year, Spain had one of the largest numbers of foreign-born residents from other EU and particularly non-EU countries (8.2 million in total). The successful integration of these immigrants and refugees into the host society and culture, as well as the maximization of human potential, can be more easily achieved when they acquire a satisfactory literacy level in the language of the host country. In addition to learning the target language, immigrants and refugees in Spain may face a number of other challenges such as a lack of knowledge regarding job searching or the labor market in Spain, limited income and lack of

access to adequate housing, and low education or literacy levels not only in the target language but also in their first language (Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado, 2017). Immigrants and refugees' reality is not easy, but through the years, educational services and policies in Spain have established guidelines aiming at facilitating their adaptation to Spanish society and culture.

This paper examines the landscape of language and literacy education for adult immigrants with limited literacy skills (LESLLA) in Spain. It begins with a discussion of the terminology used to refer to LESLLA learners, highlighting the general tendency to avoid negative terms. Then, it outlines the policy framework governing education for immigrants in Spain and the available educational services, including programs designed to support language acquisition and cultural integration as well as improvements in teacher training. Different approaches and educational methods employed in teaching literacy and innovation in teaching materials on refugees and immigrants, including the use of contextualized exercises and authentic materials to enhance learning, are briefly discussed. This is followed by a summary of research conducted in this field and its influence on LESLLA teaching, particularly with regard to the professionalization and innovation in teaching Spanish as a second language to immigrants in Spain. Future lines of research and policies are also highlighted.

The Term LESLLA in the Spanish Context

In the Spanish context, there is no single way to refer to LESLLA students. In fact, there is a general difficulty in referring to students who receive language and literacy classes. Non-specialized definitions from the Dictionary of the Spanish Language published by the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española, 2025) are accepted as valid.

- *Extranjero* ('foreigner'): Native of a foreign country.
- *Inmigrante* ('immigrant'): Derived from the verb 'to immigrate', which refers to a person who arrives in a foreign country in order to settle there. It also refers to people who move to a different place within their country of origin in search of better living conditions.
- *Refugiado* ('refugee'): A person who is forced to seek refuge outside their country of origin due to wars, political revolutions, or persecutions.
- *Migrante* ('migrant'): Derived from the verb 'to migrate', meaning to move from one place of residence to another.

It should be noted that the difference between the terms "foreigner" and "immigrant" is rather diffuse and subjective. For example, the Spanish National Institute of Statistics uses exclusively the term "foreigner." By contrast, the term "refugee" has a clearly defined meaning, as it refers to an administrative status granted by the government. On the other hand, the term "migrant" has become particularly popular, especially over the last decade.

Related to the above, expressions such as *español para inmigrantes* ('Spanish for immigrants') or *español para inmigrantes y refugiados* ('Spanish for immigrants and refugees') are preferred over, for example, *español para extranjeros* ('Spanish for foreigners'). Moreover, the term *español como segunda lengua* ('Spanish as a second language', when teaching takes place in an immersion context) is used in opposition to *español como lengua extranjera* ('Spanish as a foreign language').

Regarding the specific denomination of LESLLA students, a variety of terms are currently being used. It is common to avoid the term *analfabeto* ('illiterate') due to its negative connotations and to employ the more inclusive term *personas no alfabetizadas* ('non-literate individuals').

Other descriptive terms include: *inmigrantes adultos no alfabetizados* ('non-literate adult immigrants'), *inmigrantes adultos con un bajo nivel de instrucción formal* ('adult immigrant students with a low level of formal education'), *migrantes adultos con poca o ninguna instrucción formal* ('adult migrants with little or no formal education') or *alumnos inmigrantes que necesitan alfabetizarse* ('adult immigrant students who need to become literate'). There are also specific terms such as *ágrafa* describing a person that comes from a community that does not use a writing functional system, *neolector* ('emergent reader'), *semialfabetizado* ('semi-literate'), *anaflabeto de retorno* applied to those who have learnt basic literacy but have lost it, or *analfabeto funcional* ('functionally illiterate person'). It is worth noting that the term *alfabetización* ('literacy') refers to both the ability to read and write and the process of acquiring these skills, and its synonyms are *lectoescritura* ('reading and writing') and *adquisición de la lectoescritura* ('reading and writing acquisition').

Educational Services and Immigration Policies in Spain

Educational legislation in Spain is based on the Organic Law 2/2006 (LOE), amended by the Organic Law 8/2013, and the current Organic Law 3/2020 (LOMLOE). These laws address the evolving educational challenges, aligning with the EU and UNESCO goals for 2020-2030. Key modifications include emphasizing global citizenship education, peace, human rights, and intercultural understanding while focusing on personalized learning for all students. The law requires educational programs to help immigrants learn the Spanish language and, when applicable, other co-official languages, thus facilitating their integration.

The teaching of Spanish to adult immigrants is usually carried out by third-sector social entities, adult education centers and local associations that offer various types of activities within the framework of regional grants. It is important to clarify that different autonomous communities have established specific programmes for late-entry students with significant linguistic deficiencies. These programmes, commonly known as *Aulas de Enlace*¹ or *Aulas de Acogida*, aim to support language acquisition and introduce immigrant students to the host culture. Both the length of these classrooms and teacher training requirements vary across autonomous communities. For example, whereas some communities require teachers to have completed studies in Spanish as a foreign language, others do not. The educational framework, conceived as compensatory education², has faced criticism for focusing on deficiency rather than recognizing immigrant students as multilingual individuals, often segregating them based on linguistic challenges.

¹ Since 2002, the Community of Madrid has implemented *Aulas de enlace* (also known as *Aulas de acogida*; Welcoming/Adaptation classes) in public schools that are supported by public funds. The aim is to promote the incorporation of foreign and immigrant students whose knowledge of Spanish is limited, or they are lacking a high literacy level in their first language, or they are students who have joined the Spanish educational system late (i.e., after grade 3).

² Compensatory education (*educación compensatoria*) is an educational approach that offers specific resources to students in a situation of social disadvantage (i.e., those who face language barriers due to social, cultural or ethnic factors) to help them access and remain in school. These students usually come from ethnic minorities, immigrant groups, and families with socioeconomic difficulties and have school problems due to irregular classroom attendance. Compensatory education aims to promote equal educational opportunities, help students develop their communication skills, as well as mutual respect between each other regardless of their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic background.

The organization of educational services for adult immigrants and refugees has not changed much in the last 20 years. However, the training of asylum seekers and refugees has undergone significant organizational improvement in the last decade. Adult individuals who access the international and temporary protection system have a different administrative status. Specifically, these individuals are assisted by accredited entities authorized to provide services in the field of International Protection. These entities are funded by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (FAMI). The programs developed by these agents include individualized plans aiming at facilitating immigrants' gradual autonomy and social and labor integration into Spanish society.

Moreover, the increase of EU funding has made it possible to organize Spanish as a second language classes for asylum seekers in a more homogeneous way. Social entities that provide reception programs through concerted action offer Spanish as a second language classes. The Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (MISSM, 2024) establishes guidelines regarding the number of hours that an average student must attend. Thus, Spanish as a second language courses at the A1 level must have a minimum of 15 hours per week in the reception phase and 10 hours per week in the preparation for autonomy phase; level A2 requires 10 compulsory hours per week and level B1, 5 hours per week. The other levels are not compulsory, although three-hour weekly B2 and C1 level courses are considered optional. There is also the possibility of organising literacy groups. The ratio is usually between 10 and 15 students per class.

In the Community of Madrid, training courses, workshops, and other types of services aiming at facilitating the integration of immigrants into society and the labor market are organized by the Immigrant Participation and Integration Centers (*Centros de Participación e Integración de Inmigrantes*; CEPI). These centers receive funding from the European Social Fund of the EU and the General Directorate of Social Services and Social Integration. Access to these courses is free but capacity is limited. In addition to Spanish language and literature courses, a wide range of other activities is offered, such as legal and psychosocial advice, career guidance (e.g., how to prepare a CV, job searching, computer skills courses), informative sessions on how to start a business, activities for minors such as school support and camp). In all regions, there are social centers similar to those in Madrid, most of them funded by local government.

Refugee Reception Centers (*Centros de Acogida a Refugiados*; CAR) constitute another type of public establishments that receive applicants for international protection who lack sufficient economic resources to maintain themselves and their families. These centers provide refugees with accommodation, maintenance and psychosocial support, as well as other social services, including guidance for incorporation into the educational system and courses to learn the Spanish language.

Besides public centers, there are currently 24 different entities that provide services and activities through concerted action and prioritise the teaching of Spanish as a second language. Some of these entities, such as *Accem* whose delegations can be found in 14 autonomous communities throughout Spain, have specialized and trained staff, while others have developed their own materials to teach Spanish literacy, such as the *Manual de lectoescritura Conecta(R) para personas migrantes y refugiadas* at levels 1, 2, and 3 created by the Spanish Commission for Refugees (CEAR). There are also entities that do not have their own teaching staff but rather hire private language schools' services and staff to teach Spanish; in some cases, classes are also taught by volunteers.

Educational Methods for Teaching Spanish to Immigrants and Refugees

In Spain, both analytical and synthetic methods are used for literacy teaching. Analytical or descending methods focus on meaning and pursue reading comprehension from the initial stages of second language acquisition. These are also known as *global methods* or, depending on the chosen basic unit, *narrative methods*, *phrase methods*, *word methods*, *generative word methods*, etc. In all of them, complex elements such as sentences or words are initially presented as whole units and later broken down into smaller components like syllables and letters. This top-down approach ensures that learners engage with meaning first and prioritize comprehension throughout all stages of the process. Analytical methods have the additional advantage of considering literacy in its social context; for example, they emphasize different types of textual genres (e.g., posters, documents, prints, forms, announcements, recipes, product packaging). In the Spanish context, more or less flexible applications of the generative word method are widely disseminated. Generative word refers to the idea that emergent readers produce the words that are used in the literacy acquisition process.

In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) promoted his analytical method with first language Spanish and Portuguese adults, and today this method is applied in classes with adult immigrants, through the use of contextualized exercises that address relevant themes for this population (work, greetings, and administrative issues, among others). Additionally, in order to promote critical literacy, authentic materials or realia are used. Students are encouraged to reflect on the functions of each text, its purpose, and the physical context of its use. In this way, the process of language learning relates to life outside the classroom, and the teacher uses words to introduce activities aiming to teach phonological awareness, graphomotor skills, and phoneme-grapheme correspondences. *Oralpha* (Associació Comissió de Formació, 2018) constitutes an example of a textbook that follows the analytical method.

Other analytical approaches, such as the pedagogy of multiliteracies or the approach of linguistic experience, are also applied in Spain but to a lesser extent. These methods use students' life experiences as a context to initiate teaching. This involves joint activities such as shopping, visiting relevant places (e.g., a bus station, a museum, a community health center) or watching images or a movie. It is also worth noting that materials have been developed for extensive reading or reading for pleasure in classrooms with LESLLA students (*Libros para neolectores (inmigrantes)*, n.d.).

Synthetic methods emphasize the teaching of letters, phonemes, and syllables. All these elements, which initially lack meaning, serve as the starting point for building (or synthesizing) larger units. Synthetic methods are linguistic in nature and assign great importance to the mechanical aspects of reading and writing, as well as the development of phonological awareness. These methods are applied in a classical way. The basic elements are first taught in a decontextualized but systematic manner through sound imitation, sometimes with the help of gestures or movements. Once the inventory of these key elements is learned, they are combined into meaningful units. An example of a textbook that uses the synthetic method is *INTEGRA Manual de alfabetización para inmigrantes* (Capilla et al., 2022).

Lastly, we cannot overlook the need to develop digital literacy skills in the current education context. In fact, applying both the analytical and synthetic methods involves the use of computers, keyboards, mobile phones, etc. An example of digital synthetic activities that aim to develop immigrants' phonological awareness can be found in *Diglin parte española* (n.d.). Digital

skills are explicitly considered in the new reference guide of the Council of Europe, *Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants* (LASLLIAM) (Minuz et al., 2022), which has been translated into Spanish and is being progressively disseminated.

Teaching, Curriculum Development and Materials for LESLLA Students in Spain

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the sharp rise in immigration in Spain (see Introduction) prompted actions to boost the teaching of the Spanish language to newcomers. However, this led to stereotypical views of immigrants and the teaching process itself, often seen as involving deficiency and exclusion. Despite these beliefs, the reality is quite different. The teaching of Spanish as a second language to immigrant students has become a dynamic and innovative field, with significant progress in professionalizing and dignifying the profession.

The evolution of the bibliographic production on Spanish language teaching for immigrants corresponds to the stages of public debate on immigration (Hernández Corochano, 2010). It was after the 1990s when the first manuals on Spanish as a second language for immigrants slowly appeared, and this trend was consolidated into a more organized academic production in the 2000s. Examples of key monographs include those by the Ofrim supplement on Education and Immigration, in which Villalba Martínez and Hernández García (1999a) published *La enseñanza del español a inmigrantes y refugiados adultos*. In the same year, the authors presented *Orientaciones para la enseñanza del español a inmigrantes y refugiados* (Villalba Martínez & Hernández García, 1999b), which offered methodological options based on a communicative approach, task and project analysis, and strategies for skill development. It also addressed the differences between second language acquisition and learning based on first languages and life stages and provided work and organization proposals, materials, and resources for different age groups. These pioneering guidelines remain a key reference for anyone researching Spanish language teaching for immigrants.

The development and professionalization of teaching Spanish as a foreign language (*Español como Lengua Extranjera*; ELE) for immigrants in Spain has been supported by a series of key research studies and events. In 1995, the Complutense University of Madrid organized the first conference on teaching Spanish to immigrants and refugees. Since 1997, ASELE (*Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera*) conferences have included panels and presentations on this topic. In 2004, the International Menéndez Pelayo University in Santander hosted the first Specialists' Meeting on teaching ELE to immigrants, where the Santander Manifesto (*Manifiesto de Santander*) was drafted. Subsequently, in 2006, the Alicante Proposals (*Propuestas de Alicante*) were published, emerging from the second Specialists' Meeting at the University of Alicante, and in 2008, the University of Granada hosted a third meeting that focused on second language teaching programs and evaluation. In 2010, the University of Alcalá de Henares organized the 1st International Congress on Language and Immigration. Another important reference is the journal *Segundas Lenguas e Inmigración en red*, launched in 2008, which has compiled 1300 studies on second language teaching to immigrants in Spain so far. This publication marked the first monographic volume dedicated to a crucial issue in Spain: teaching a second language in communities with two official languages, a topic that had not received the attention it deserved.

Over the years, various publications, monographs, and insightful manuals have also been published, such as the *Guidelines for an Emergency Course* by the Instituto Cervantes (2006), which presents a curriculum for an “urgent” Spanish course (30 hours in duration) and includes

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methodological guidelines for teaching Spanish to immigrants, highlighting areas of the curriculum such as the development of strategies, the role of the teacher, grammar, teaching materials, and assessment. The ultimate goal is to help immigrants develop their communicative competence in the public and professional spheres. The curriculum is intended for small, multilingual, and multicultural adult groups, although it makes some recommendations that are not always easy to achieve given the usual idiosyncrasy of these classes. For example, it suggests groups should be homogeneous in terms of literacy skills and education, but this is far from reality. The introduction explains that it was created to address the shortage of resources available to Spanish teachers for immigrants, and although some of the recommendations are no longer up to date, they are clear, simple, useful, basic, and adaptable to any second language teaching and learning situation; above all, they are designed for teachers who are new to the subject or for non-professional volunteers. Another relevant work is *Investigaciones sobre la enseñanza del español y su cultura en contextos de inmigración* by Bravo-García et al. (2014), which is the result of the collaboration between the University of Seville and the University of Helsinki and explores various aspects of teaching Spanish in immigrant contexts. It demonstrates how the academic field surrounding Spanish for immigrants has evolved from novelty to consolidation, with greater recognition and professionalization of the discipline, as evidenced by postgraduate training offerings in Spanish teaching.

Textbooks for Spanish at the beginner levels or guides for the inclusion of newcomers, such as the *Guía para la inclusión lingüística de migrantes* recently published by the University of Salamanca (Marcilla et al., 2022), represent some current efforts to move the field forward. Despite the lack of institutional support, it seems that the proposals reflected in the Alicante proposals and the *Manifiesto of Santander* have been applied and remain relevant, especially within universities and among NGO educators. As a result, over the years we witness an increasing number of bachelor and master's dissertations, as well as action research that resulted in doctoral theses and monographs on LESLLA learners (Chao & Mavrou, 2024; Llorente-Puerta, 2020). For example, Chao and Mavrou's (2024) work focused on the communicative competence, linguistic accuracy and writing strategies used by a group of migrant learners of Spanish from different backgrounds (Morocco, Ukraine, Philippines, Romania). Llorente-Puerta's work shows an action research project on Spanish literacy as a second language for a group of people belonging to ethnic minorities from Eastern Europe.

The Future of LESLLA Teaching, Research and Policies

In the complex world we currently live in and as it has been previously highlighted, low-literate and immigrant students are faced with many challenges. Despite conscious-raising attempts, migration policies put in place and calls for equality, diversity and inclusion, discrimination, stereotypes, and hate speech are common phenomena affecting these minorities. Regarding the future of LESLLA research, Simpson and Chick (2024) advocate for a critical participatory approach that should be adopted by research oriented towards the promotion of social justice so that all people's voices are heard. Whether LESLLA and migrant people manage to speak the language of the host country "perfectly" shouldn't become an obsession. Instead, promoting multilingual practices and finding a way to allow different languages to harmoniously coexist should be the ultimate goal. This is also reflected in Simpson and Chick's (2024) words:

In policy circles, adult migrant language education is co-opted into a discourse of homogeneity (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998) informed by a monolingualist or one-nation-one-language ideology (Joseph, 2006; Piller, 2015) which sees the learning of the dominant language as something required for integration, and its use as a gatekeeper for immigration (Simpson & Whiteside, 2015, Simpson, 2021). Conversely, the failure of a migrant to learn that language points to an unwillingness to integrate, a corresponding failure to repay the proper ‘debt of hospitality’ (Vigouroux, 2017) owed by migrants. This relates to a political history in much of the global North and West where people’s multilingualism is seen as a problem, and their belonging as contingent on their competence in the dominant language. (p. 137)

After all, language is not the only obstacle that these minorities need to overcome. LESLLA and migrants’ histories of social exclusion, the stigma they carry, and their emotions and feelings should also be heard. For example, these individuals may look for friendship and bonds, which could be another source of language learning and interaction for them, but instead they face different degrees of out-group discrimination. Therefore, future research should try to disentangle the emotions experienced and the emotional language these minorities have acquired or are able to use in the language of the host country (see, e.g., Mavrou et al., 2023), their L2 linguistic and cultural identity, and most importantly their sense of belonging. Since language is a powerful tool for shaping emotions, studying the emotional competencies of these minorities in relation to their L2 skills is another promising line of enquiry (see, e.g., Martín Mateo & Mavrou, 2025).

From a didactic perspective, it is worth mentioning methodological innovations that seem to be gaining ground in the field of language teaching/learning and literacy within the LESLLA context, such as the introduction of the concept of multiliteracies and the implementation of the Council of Europe’s reference guide, *Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants* (LASLLIAM) (Minuz et al., 2022).

Decision-making and ethics are also promising areas of enquiry. We barely know how LESLLA and migrant people make decisions (at least from a linguistic point of view, that is, beyond decisions to move to a different country or those related to career choices and job seeking which are usually the focus of attention of economic research), what they perceive to be right or wrong and how their knowledge of the language of the host country may influence their decision-making. Moreover, broadening the conceptual frameworks we use and re(de)fining key terms, such as migrant, are more necessary than ever. For example, a heritage speaker of Spanish may have a good command of oral skills but a low writing ability in Spanish; however, that person is not LESLLA. Therefore, future theoretical accounts should try to clarify the fine lines between concepts such as LESLLA, migrant, third culture kid, heritage speaker, bi-/multilingual, and so forth and to embrace a more complex view of individuals based on their language but also their socioemotional family background.

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