

Special issue on  
**Second Language and Literacy Acquisition of  
Low-Educated Adult Immigrants**

**Guest editors:**

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ISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä

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<http://apples.jyu.fi>



## Editorial

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Forms, paths, and challenges of language learning on one hand, and literacy on the other, are two of the footings of the discipline called applied linguistics. In this volume of Apples the research of language learning and literacy come together. The focus is on people who did not have the opportunity to learn to read and write in their first (or any) language at the age when it is expected in Western cultures. When moving to a country where the whole functioning of the society is dependent on literacy skills these people face the tough challenge of having to learn a new language and acquire literacy at the same time.

For most researchers such a situation is totally beyond their realm. It is hard for us even to imagine how one could learn a language without the possibility of taking notes, seeing words in written form, or reading texts. And how do you learn to read if you do not know the language in which you must read? The relationship between language learning and literacy appears like the-chicken-or-the-egg dilemma. Nor do we often come in contact in our daily lives with the people who struggle with this puzzle. Yet, across the world, over 775 million people over the age of 15 are non-literate. When these people for one reason or another move to societies based on written language, they encounter many difficulties.

Motivated by this fact, the first Low-educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) annual symposium was held in 2005 in Tilburg, the Netherlands. The main aim of the symposium was to establish an international forum on research and classroom issues concerning the second language acquisition and literacy development of adults with little or no native language schooling and literacy skills. Since then, the symposium has rotated between an English speaking country and a non-English speaking country, and it has been held in the UK, Belgium, Canada, Germany, and the USA.

In 2012, the 8th annual LESLLA symposium was hosted by the Language Campus of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. In Finland adult non-literacy has been virtually non-existent until recently when immigration from countries with low literacy rates has increased. Now approximately 1300 non-literate immigrant adults participate in language and literacy training every year. The number is small when compared with many other Western countries but it is predicted to grow in future, due to the immigration from countries like Somalia and Afghanistan with very low literacy rates. Consequently, research-based knowledge and experiences of adult literacy education are much in demand.

From August 29 to September 1, 2012 LESLLA symposium brought together nearly 90 educators and researchers from 10 countries. Plenaries, workshops, paper sessions, poster sessions, and research projects on display, as well as pre-conference visits to LESLLA classrooms in Jyväskylä, took place over four intensive days. The main themes of the symposium were 1) learner placement and assessment of progression, 2) instructional methods and techniques, and 3) teacher professionalization. The articles in this Special Issue, reviewed and accepted by anonymous scholars in the area of literacy acquisition, second

language development and language testing, and the editors of this volume, are mainly based on studies presented at the LESLLA 2012 described above.

The literacy education in a second language context wavers between the written and the oral approach. The former is firmly based on the tradition of teaching reading and writing to children in their first language, using ABC-books, starting with the letter A, often even using materials intended for young children. The latter starts by helping the learners first to acquire orally some basic vocabulary and phrases, which then act as the first reading materials, allowing the learners to understand the words and later the texts they read. Only later do the reading skills become a way of acquiring new linguistic items.

Regardless of the approach, a key concept in literacy education seems to be awareness. This is present in all the articles in this volume. In the contribution of Jean Marrapodi it appears in the form of phonemic and visual awareness. The insight that words are made up of smaller particles is a prerequisite for reading, as in most writing systems these particles, phonemes, are (more or less systematically) represented by letters. To recognize letters one must be able to pay attention to the visual shape and orientation of these little squiggles on paper or screen. Only then can reading begin. This is the basic result of Marrapodi's evaluation of the teaching methods traditionally used in English speaking countries in relation to LESLLA learners' cognitive and educational foundation. She explores the pros and cons of these methods in instruction of this particular group of learners. Using task analyses, Marrapodi suggests some existing gaps between the predictions embedded in the methods and the realistic skills of LESLLA learners. She also makes some recommendations to benefit the literacy instructors in their work.

Raichle Farrelly bases her study of the teaching worlds of literacy teachers on Engeström's Activity Theory. She explores the relationships and tensions the teachers experience in their working context. The study brings forth the need of in-service training and highlights the necessity and benefit of promoting professional collaborative learning opportunities for LESLLA teachers. In her work, awareness translates into recognizing the special needs of adult literacy teachers by the policy makers particularly at the institutional level: quite often those who make the decisions on what teachers should spend their time doing are not aware of the what the work actually requires and do not allow resources for collaboration and in-service training.

Learning to read and write is based on oral skills and this is what the learners – children – in the traditional approach already have and what the LESLLA learners lack: it hardly makes sense to read words or phrases one does not understand. Developing oral skills is the theme of Susanna Strube's, Ineke van de Craats', and Roeland van Hout's article. They make the readers aware of the differences between classes, not only between individual learners. They find notable differences between the classes in achievement on many areas of language learning and look for explanations by comparing learner characteristics, classroom hours and attendance, and classroom practices between the classes. The age of arrival and the use of the computer prove to be of significance.

Raising the awareness of the problems of testing the linguistic and communicative achievement or proficiency of low-educated learners is the target of Jane Allemano's article. In language testing research it is common knowledge that if the test method or situation itself makes it impossible for some

participants to give evidence of what they can do, the test is not valid. This, however, is not always clear in the minds of policy makers. Allemanno addresses the fundamental and difficult-to-solve issue of testing a skill which itself is involved in the testing process. At very low levels of literacy reading the instructions and test questions may involve a higher level of reading skills than reading materials in the test itself. Even when test writers are aware of this dilemma and do their best to overcome this problem, the test taking situation itself may not be familiar enough for the participants. The test tasks are of necessity decontextualized: the test takers are not functioning in their real-life role and environment where the same text might make sense to them and they could actually function in a relevant way, while in the test situation they often answer in an inappropriate way, basing their answers on their knowledge of their own situation, rather than the content of the texts.

The last article in this volume, by Mirja Tarnanen and Eija Aalto, leads us to the Finnish school system and to immigrant pupils with low writing skills in the Finnish lower secondary school. The authors are concerned about how these pupils can show their knowledge and skills in a school, which is very much based on literacy skills as a medium of both learning and demonstrating learning. However, a closer look at writing tasks written by these poor writers suggests that the CEFR scale (Common European Framework of Reference) does not fully acknowledge the pupils' writing skills, since their texts seem to include varying combinations of properties mentioned only on higher CEFR levels. This obviously calls for further discussion of assessment methods. What is highly promising in this final article is that despite the low ratings on the CEFR scale these pupils did use their writing skills in various ways in out-of-school contexts, drawing the readers' attention to the importance of the awareness of the context of language use.

The writers of this issue are concerned about the people whose language learning they describe and explain. This is true of people working in applied linguistics in general: not only the theoretical issues but also the connections and applicability of the results in real life are in focus. Research questions, albeit expressed within a theoretical framework, often arise from the experiences of the researchers or their students. This is visible also in this issue: the writers care. This may show as more space given to practical applications than is customary in research articles, or as an overall attempt to make the theory-based reasoning behind the decisions concerning the research design, data and materials accessible also for the practitioners who might benefit of the results in their work.

This Special Issue of *Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies* would not have been possible without the unpaid labour of all the anonymous reviewers. We cannot list here your names but nevertheless want to extend you our warmest thanks for your valuable contribution! Many reviewers, albeit principally concerned about the scientific quality of the articles, as they should be, also called for improvements in ways the design, data and methods were described and the results presented, with the less academically experienced teacher-reader in mind.

Finally, the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies deserve thanks for making it possible for the LESLLA symposium 2012 to take place and this Special Issue to be published. The University provided the human resources for planning and organizing the event

and editing this volume. The Federation of Finnish Learned Societies grant payed for the costs of the invited speakers and also helped to fund the publication of the proceedings: With the permission of the authors and the Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies the articles in this Special Issue have also been published in print format in *Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities*, together with four additional articles.

Jyväskylä, June 12, 2013

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