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International training of teachers of low-educated adult migrants

Abstract: The project “European Speakers of Other Languages: Teaching Adult Immigrants and Training their Teachers” has from 2010 to now been tackling, at an international level, the improvement of the educational outcomes for non-/low-educated migrants.¹ The current project (“EU-Speak 3”) is the culmination of efforts to test the effectiveness of on-line teacher training and development.

Résumé : Depuis 2010, le projet « Locuteurs européens de langues étrangères : enseigner aux migrants adultes et former les enseignants » observe l'évolution au niveau international des résultats d'apprentissage des migrants illettrés ou ayant un faible niveau d'éducation. Le projet actuel (EU-Speak 3) marque l'aboutissement des mesures prises pour tester l'efficacité de la formation et du développement de la formation en ligne des enseignants.

1 Introduction

Since 2010, the training and development of the teachers of Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) learners has been addressed by a three-phase project, “European Speakers of Other Languages: Teaching Adult Immigrants and Training their Teachers (EU-Speak)”. From 2010 to 2012, the eight project partners shared ideas about a range of topics relating to the educational support of adults with little or no literacy in any language upon immigration. At the final workshop, a subset of the larger group agreed to take teacher training and development forward for the next phase. Below we discuss the evo-

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lution of the project from its inception through EU-Speak 2 during which the set of knowledge and skills needed by teachers was agreed to EU-Speak 3 which involves design and delivery of six on-line modules.

2 Assumptions about LESLLA learners

We know from research over the last decade that adult immigrants with little or no formal education or home language literacy take up to eight times longer than educated adults to reach A1 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) in second language (L2) reading (e.g. Schellekens 2011). Studies since the 1970s on adult immigrants indicate that neither age nor lack of schooling are barriers in acquisition of morphosyntactic competence in an L2 (Hawkins 2001), nor is age a barrier to learning to read for the first time in an L2 (Kurvers, Stockmann, and van de Craats 2010; Young-Scholten and Strom 2006). Given their potential, LESLLA learners' slow progress is likely due to external factors. This prompted EU-Speak to consider how best to address LESLLA learners' slow progress. Well-qualified teachers are key (Condelli, Cronen, and Bos 2010), yet there are reports of teaching which fails to meet quality standards (Paget and Stevenson 2014; Schellekens 2011). This is a sector which includes not only full-time but also part-time and unpaid volunteer teachers. Sub-standard teaching is also connected to pervasive lack of specific training or continued professional development available – particularly striking when one considers how much those who teach young children reading or a L2 to educated learners receive. In all countries, the economic downturn has impacted funding and in turn retention of skilled, knowledgeable full-time teachers. In some countries this has led to a major shift to provision of basic skills teaching for LESLLA learners by unpaid volunteers (e.g. England) where this was not already the case (e.g. Spain).

The EU-Speak project's starting assumption was that training/development should ideally be offered internationally given the similarities of LESLLA learners and poor educational provision for them in most of the countries in which they resettle. This also meant offering training/development not only in English but also in learners' target languages since those who teach their native language might not need and might not therefore have sufficient academic English to participate in training/development in English.

3 EU-Speak 2010 – 2012

Project partners at the Workers' Education Association (UK), Funen Further Education (Denmark) and the Universities of Amsterdam, Cologne, Granada, Leipzig, Newcastle and Stockholm held intensive workshops in each country to discuss similarities and language, culture and political differences in all aspects of basic language and literacy provision for LESLLA learners, from initial resettlement and placement to innovative materials, classroom techniques, teacher training and citizenship. These seven workshops confirmed that while there are differences among European countries ranging from highly commendable and innovative practice to unfortunate policy (under-funding in the UK; unrealistic expectations in the Netherlands), there are fundamental commonalities across countries, the most prominent of which is little or no specialist training/development in teaching LESLLA learners.

4 EU-Speak 2013 – 2015

A subset of the partners (Universities of Amsterdam, Cologne, Granada, Jyväskylä and Newcastle along with US partners Virginia Commonwealth University, American Institutes for Research, and the Center for Applied Linguistics) set out to agree a set of knowledge and skills LESLLA teachers need.

4.1 Survey on knowledge and skills

The first of two surveys was disseminated to teachers, trainers and programme managers and several hundred responses were received from partner countries as well as beyond. Respondents were asked to report on the knowledge and skills they felt were important to help them support their LESLLA learners. The results fed into a lengthy list of skills and knowledge/understanding and were then whittled down to a top ten:

Skills: Ability to use ...

- (1) teaching methods that facilitate learners' active participation in a classroom environment and that allow them to contribute their own knowledge and experience;
- (2) authentic conversational situations in teaching that reflect learners' daily experiences;

- (3) materials that low-educated immigrant adults encounter in their daily lives;
- (4) methods to teach oral language skills (pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics and vocabulary) to non-/low-literate migrant adults;
- (5) multimodal materials for literacy and modify them to meet learners' needs in their daily lives and work-related situations;
- (6) and the ability to guide learners in the process of developing reading and writing strategies that they can apply independently outside the classroom and in situations involving written language;

Knowledge

- (7) understanding of learners' backgrounds, current situations and learning potentials and consideration of these when planning and teaching LESLLA learners;
- (8) awareness of current teaching materials suitable for developing LESLLA learners' oral language and literacy skills;
- (9) awareness, when planning and teaching, that learners' competence and skills in their mother-tongue/first language affects literacy development in the L2;
- (10) awareness of the kinds of written information that learners encounter and use in their daily lives.

4.2 Survey on opportunities for training/development and to corroborate the top ten

LESLLA experts in the partner countries and beyond were consulted, they agreed with the top ten, and made additional suggestions. The first survey did not include attitudes but, based on the experts' suggestions, the second survey did. Again several hundred responded to the second survey (some the same as the first survey) about their views on the top ten and about their opportunities for training/development in relation to their LESLLA teaching. The results indicated that the majority of respondents had fewer than 75 hours of specialist training or development and also showed that the content was not always relevant to their teaching.

The project team then designed and piloted a five-week module on vocabulary learning motivated by the Jyväskylä team's research pointing to vocabulary as a serious bottleneck in LESLLA learners' reading development (Tammelin-Laine and Martin 2015) and supported by the Cologne team's expertise on an aspect of incidental vocabulary learning by beginners (fast mapping; Rohde and Tiefenthal 2000). The module was translated from English into the additional

project languages – Dutch, Finnish, German and Spanish – and made available via Moodle to LESLLA teachers around the world. Teachers were recruited from Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, the UK and the USA. The module included ideas and activities for teachers to try out with their learners and a discussion forum in each language. Participant evaluation suggested that the module contributed to their knowledge and skills, irrespective of their amount of teaching experience. The evaluations also confirmed the expectation that international on-line provision would succeed. One participant from Spain commented that she “had taken courses online before, but never on this scale. [She] could interact with people from other European countries and even other continents, which I find absolutely rewarding. This is what really characterizes distance learning: people who are many kilometres apart and are interested by a common theme and share their knowledge.”

The project team then met to design a curriculum for LESLLA teacher training and professional development based on the set of agreed knowledge/understanding and skills along with attitudes and on the success of the pilot of the vocabulary module.

5 EU-Speak 2015 – 2018

The final phase of EU-Speak, EU-Speak 3, is rolling out the curriculum in the form of six on-line modules. Although the modules comprise a curriculum, they are self-standing. Each module is designed by a project partner and these now include the Universities of Cologne, Granada, Jyväskylä, Newcastle and Virginia Commonwealth University, with the Universities of Northumbria and Boğaziçi as new partners. Northumbria is responsible for social media, module evaluation and human-technology interface/computer-assisted learning. The University of Amsterdam, American Institutes for Research and Center for Applied Linguistics partners are now members of an advisory board whose key function is, along with an independent evaluator, to check module content before it goes live. Module participants are mentored through the discussion forum in each partner language. Modules are:

- Working with LESLLA Learners, February–March 2016
- Bilingualism and Multilingualism, May–June 2016
- Language and Literacy in their Social Contexts, October–November 2016
- Reading from a Psycholinguistic Perspective, February–March 2017
- Vocabulary Acquisition, May–June 2017
- Acquisition and Assessment of Morphosyntax, October–November 2017

The project team is evaluating the success of each module through a combination of pre- and post-module tests (of the knowledge participants are expected to gain), of uptake of module activities as shown in the discussion forums, of participant evaluations of the module, and of mentor self-evaluation. The project is currently investigating ways to encourage participants to share evidence of their learners' language and literacy progress in response to participants' new knowledge and skills.

These modules will each be delivered a second time in 2017 and 2018. The project welcomes offers to translate (at their own expense) modules into languages in addition to English, Finnish, German, Spanish and Turkish, and has the capacity to include more languages on its Moodle site. Contact the authors for further information.

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